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VENETIA
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DREAMTIME

VENETIA WELBY



CROMER

For Charlie

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ALSO BY VENETIA WELBY

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LIGHTS

ARIZONA, USA. September 2035.

‘So, where is he then, your dad?’ Carter’s hand is creeping towards her bony hip. Very illicit. ‘Won’t he come to your Family Week?’

Sol does not answer. She thinks about how Carter sold his house to pay for this – if that were true. Would it be worth it? This sober life?

Carter lights another cigarette, squinting. It’s still standard to chain-smoke through rehab, just as it is to treat deeply personal questions like they’re in any way acceptable. Smoking real tobacco in retro papers is something of a statement these days: we who have lived on the front line of life do not vape.

‘Meds!’ a voice yells out from the squat white complex that houses both Detox Unit and Pharmacy.

Sol watches the inmates swarm to the call. One by one they swoop in to pick up their fun-size plastic pot of drugs. Once upon a time I was like you, she thinks – but now her sad little pill pot contains only probiotics. Detox is complete and there’s no going back to the downers they gave her in the first month. She takes a drag of Carter’s cigarette instead.

‘What’s up next?’ he asks her now, his fingers tracing the line of her hip with growing insistence.

Sol looks at his kindly face, wolfish beneath the greying eyebrows. She recalls the languid way he removed her skirt in one of the dangling Meditation Pods by the pool last week.

Not today. Today, the end is actually in sight. Her three months are nearly up and she has to meet Belinda in a few minutes. Carter, though he's been a lifeline, is not worth an extended sentence.

Disentangled, she walks alone past the palm-tree-fringed pool to Belinda's office. Like everyone else on the programme, Sol has a personal psychotherapist assigned to her. Belinda – they're all on first name terms only – is supposed to be some sort of mentor. 'Appropriate Reparenting' is a popular phrase.

Lights would look like a holiday resort, with its pristine villas and manicured tropical gardens, were it not for the heavies who patrol the place like a pack of dogs, muttering intelligence into walkie-talkies. Constant vigilance, their only mission to prevent escape and inappropriate touching. The first one's a waste of manpower. If anyone did fly off through the Sonoran Desert that extends around them for miles in every direction, how far could they get? The snakes, the spiders, the scorpions ... the sun! Even the goddamn sun, her namesake, is lethal. As with all the more affluent places in Tucson now, the outdoor spaces in Lights are in fact indoors, air filtered and conditioned beneath heat-reflecting structures of Perspex and steel. The carbon footprint of this place is off the scale. If they must go outside, people tend to drive from dome to dome, park beneath the ground in vaulted caverns of cooled air.

Arizona is a bad place to be homeless.

This is meant to be the best rehab in the western hemisphere. It's certainly a successful business, with an army of clients so satisfied they want another round. It costs a Tucson bungalow to be here, but for Sol this stint is instead of a jail sentence.

Ultraluxe rehab centres have sprung up all over America for the rich, louche and disaffected; meanwhile prisons bulge with the drugged-up poor, a situation only

inflamed by the climate refugees. These inner states may be baked, but land still uncompromised by sea is all too desirable. Sol is a fortunate beneficiary of the latest pro-equality initiative: the state-sponsored rehabilitation of local reoffenders within these plutocratic shrines – an effort by the new government to draw the two cliffs of the abyss closer.

She'd found the first couple of weeks unspeakable, that much is true, toxic waste seeping from her green complexion, intangible horror hopping from muscle to muscle. Worse than that, having to wake up at dawn, at least half a day before her usual call to action. She hadn't much liked the tests they'd done on her either. The hit of relief, though, was spectacular: the all clear after a small lifetime of rolling the dice.

Above all, of course, she'd missed Kit. Sol had been waiting interminably for him to visit, yet here no one comes in and no one goes out, except for Family Week. And that approaches – for now Sol is steeped in a new language of Step-based recovery. She leaks pseudo-Eastern philosophy bound by Western capitalist ideals. There's still an aimlessness within her; she knows it, she fears it: the void that threatens to empty her from the inside out. All these years alive and so little to show for it, just track marks and fallout. And she's about to turn thirty, for god's sake. It's a miracle she's made it so far, frankly.

Belinda is lying in a tie-dye hammock outside the therapy room; the great UV lamp at the top of the glass dome – a gentler substitute sun – glances off her silver toe ring and anklet, the henna swirls on her tanned foot. She skips out, bird-like, and hugs Sol. Hug Therapy is a big thing here – hugging meditation, tree hugging, horse hugging. Sexual hugging is not a thing.

Belinda gestures for Sol to take the hammock and she hops in, feeling the warmth of the lamp rays on her face. Sol swipes her short hair forward into prickles and begins to talk, freely associating word after disassociated word as she has been encouraged to do since she arrived – ‘to warm up the unconscious’.

Sol’s warm-up always starts the same way: ‘Uh ... Percocet ...’

‘Good, Sol. Go on.’

‘OxyContin ... Percocet ... uh ... fentanyl ...’

Taking therapy in the hammock is a privilege she has attained through persistence with Her Recovery. She must say ‘My Recovery’ a thousand times a day.

Better than jail.

As she talks, Belinda manoeuvres her body into unnatural shapes on the sand, illustrating Sol’s post-hammock routine for today. She teaches a dawn yoga class here too. They are super keen on dawn stuff here – sage-smoke rituals with an eagle quill, prayers to the animal spirits, ancestral dances ... You name it, dawn’s the time for it and an elder appears from what’s left of the Cocopah Reservation to give it. They dine at four in the afternoon and the evening, a time not of spirituality but of wickedness, holds only sleep. This has been tough for a night bird like Sol, but on the other hand boredom is a great soporific, and sleep a great propeller of time.

‘Well done, Sol. That’s enough now.’ Belinda extracts a slender limb from the pretzel she has become. ‘Are you in enough of a safe space to assume your vulnerable position?’

Sol gets out of the hammock and Belinda, now fully unravelled, slips back in. Sol breathes and bends over, palms on the ground, into Downward Dog.

Ass venerating sunlamp, it’s still hard not to feel a little shaken up. How Phoenix used to love it when she posed like this!

There's a lot about Lights that transports her to Dreamtime, not least the constant rehashing of her years there in 'Trauma Processing'. Phoenix's place, the commune where she and Kit spent their childhood, was also a secluded desert camp ticking to its own time. And Dreamtime, it occurs to her now, also aped the rituals of displaced native peoples. Way less regimented there though. Unlike Lights, that set-up understood the draw of getting high. The whole thing, apart from the occasional worship of Phoenix, was geared for transcendence, he and his women always seeking the Dreamtime, the Everywhen. His wide Rasputin eyes would soften when he talked about the Australian outback, his supernatural experiences there. Even his beard seemed to slacken its grasp on his chin.

'It's an Aboriginal thing,' he used to tell his kids. 'It's like a time out of time. An eternal time. Oh, you'll get it when you grow up. Now buzz off.'

And then the rites would continue.

'OK, Sol,' Belinda says. 'Well done. Sit up.'

Sol finds she is panting.

'Now' - Belinda fixes her with a laser eye - 'why don't you tell me about you and Carter?'

Sol can't detect any threat in her voice, but wariness is second nature. First nature. So much time spent surviving. 'Well, we've become friends here. He's nice, looks out for me, you know?'

'Would you like there to be something more going on?'

The bruisers in charge make that pretty tricky, but upped stakes were ever an aphrodisiac. Sol shakes her head convincingly. 'No way. He's sixty-five. He's old enough to be my father.' Or grandfather, it occurs to her.

'Carter has suggested to us that there may be a problem, Sol. He is concerned that you're, uh, flirting with him and interfering with His Recovery.'

She is speechless. Carter has been chasing her since she arrived, his lust undeterred by the skeletal wreck she had been.

Belinda takes advantage of her silence to press on: 'You compared him to your father ... I feel that's significant. Tell me what you mean by that.'

'No, I just said he's old enough to be my father ...'

'And we know, don't we, *we have established* that that's been part of the draw in the past. You lost your father at such a young age.'

Losing implies a kind of carelessness. Her father left in the night, that's all Sol knows. Like a fox stealing out of a chicken coop. And then what? Phoenix, and the sad parade of pseudo dads that came after. Life in foster care is bleak; the stretches in between are worse.

Her father's vanishing has been absolute – astonishing now that the whole world is instantly accessible, trackable, visible online. Sol has been trying to locate him for as long as she can remember, even at Dreamtime when there was no online to help. She'd drag Kit along on brave forays into the desert – all they knew – to hunt him down. Her mother Janet refused to tell her anything she could use later in life. The details Janet let slip on a comedown – 'Jo Jackson, no, not from here, I don't know, he did some carpet fitting at one point, dark hair' – did not narrow down the list of North American candidates she found when, at eleven, the vast virtual world of the internet was revealed to her.

Still, Sol persisted.

She figured Jo must have skipped Tucson long ago. Hadn't Janet said that he'd left town when he left her? But it was always at the back of her mind, a little thrill of fear and ... something else, harder to define, when she escorted a new client to a dinner or a party. What if this time, this one was her father?

Belinda clears her throat. 'Look, Sol, I'm not gonna lie. You only have another couple of weeks. You're well on track and I feel confident that you have a strong relapse-prevention programme in place.' She raises her head from the hammock and looks Sol in the eye. 'But you deserve better than this ... this pattern that's brought you to rock bottom. If you want that shiny new life, I'd encourage you to keep working on your relationship with your father.'

How the fuck can she do that? 'He's not here.'

'I'm talking about therapy, Sol. Your dad doesn't have to be here with you, bodily, for you to heal.'

He does. Find him, break the spell, save her life, save the world.

First get the big B off her back. 'I'm glad you reached out,' she says. 'I got this.'

'You got this!' agrees Belinda.

Surviving this place has involved a lot of guesswork - knowing what to say, what to hold back, how to make it clear that progress is being made. The phrases that work. Same as surviving Dreamtime, except here she's alone. No Kit to keep her sane. It's funny, all her life she's been running from institutionalised life. And all her decisions have led her back to it. As if whatever it is you think you're looking for, you can only find what you already know. Sucks.

'I think Family Week's gonna help you a lot,' says Belinda.

'Really? Will Kit be there?'

'I think let's keep the whos and whats a surprise. Anticipation will only get in the way of the process, you know?'

Sol coughs. Historically, family surprises have not been all that.

The sound of a cymbal interrupts: Gong Bath time. Sol can see the savage sun sinking behind the glass and is

thankful she can't feel its obliterating heat. Carter told her part of Lights had melted before they had the Perspex fitted. They should have rebuilt it underground. *Homo subterraneus* – the Survivalist bunkered future.

Funny name, Lights. It's meant to inspire hope and illumination, but it reminds Sol of the feathery lungs of crabs, the 'lights' Phoenix called them. Lights and 'dead man's fingers' – the grey gills. All of it had to come out.

It was the only trip they'd ever taken from Dreamtime, driving west across the desert to San Diego, now under water of course. The group had set up camp on the beach: Phoenix, his enchanted women, their offspring. That was the first time she'd seen the sea; she knew freedom when she saw it. The red desert feels like death. She dreams sometimes that she is eating fistfuls of its dry sand, choking on dust.

Those barbecued crabs tasted so sweet.

The sunset Gong Bath sometimes takes place outside the glass dome so inmates may commune with the hiss and hum of the desert. But it's a hundred and twenty-five degrees today, so they will be washed clean by a tsunami of bells, Himalayan singing bowls, ancient bronze gongs, wind gongs, sun gongs, Burmese singing gongs, shofar and conch in one of the larger therapy rooms.

'Welcome in, guys. Love and light,' says the Bath Leader swinging a gong mallet like a golf club.

Carter is there, holding open the door for her. She scowls at him and sits on the far side of the room by the gongs.

Even as she is slipping into the alpha brainwaves of relaxation, anticipating the deeper theta of meditation, she can feel his eyes upon her.

The bite of his betrayal, she thinks, will keep her tethered to reality, but as the waves of the wind gongs

crest and crash through and through her, she sinks below the surface.

She dreams of her father: like her but bigger. Safer. Then, inevitably, of Tucson and the myriad highs she might lay her hands on there. She dreams of many-hued narcotics raining down upon her, of cruising on a lilo in a sea of vodka, leaning lazily over one side to lap at the intoxicating nectar, a cat beneath a cocaine sun.

Family Week was always going to be a problem for Sol. Runaway dad aside, the only person she wants to see is Kit, and he's not even family. Does that matter? She's talked loudly and often about him in the hope that Belinda will put him on the list. He's the closest thing to a brother she has – the pair grew up together. Kit is a year younger than her, though he sometimes seems older, and their mothers had been friends in the commune. All the children at Dreamtime were encouraged to see Phoenix as their father and in most cases, certainly Kit's, he was. But he was not Sol's. Phoenix loved her anyway and she suffered for it. 'You do invite it,' he told her.

Who counts as family now in any case? Not Chase, that's been her main specification. Given that he's doing time in Arizona State Prison, it's unlikely he would have made it over anyway. He's still her husband legally, sure, but spiritually she has flown. She wonders if he's run into Phoenix there yet. A reunion – Chase had at one point been the commune's dealer, or so he claimed. That should have been warning enough.

Sol is dressed in white to symbolise her newfound virginal purity. It has been a febrile night of sweat and sleeplessness. She is not at all sure what to expect. She only knows what she has observed: that those who undergo family therapy here always seem to be on the point of rehab graduation when they start, yet to have added to their sentence by the end.

Belinda has reiterated it several times: be wholly unprepared, be open-hearted, be undefended against the untold benefits of these sessions. Now she slinks up to her looking furtive yet triumphant. 'OK, Sol. Are you ready for this?' Belinda extends her hand for a fist bump.

'Sure. Ready for what?' Sol feebly meets her gesture.

'Don't filter the feelings ... We've managed to get your mom on board. She's just through here.'

'Which one?' asks Sol, dismayed. Which one of the succession of foster parents that couldn't cope with her?

The answer is a jolting thunderbolt of a shock: Janet ... her actual mother. A mother unseen since the commune was shut down. Sol was eleven and taken into care.

'I - I'm not sure I'm ready for that,' she says, starting to hyperventilate. Of all the things thrown at her at Lights, this is the least tolerable.

'I think it will be very helpful for you to see her,' soothes Belinda. 'It will be in a controlled environment. We will be here; Security will be here too - she can't hurt you.'

'I'm not worried about her hurting me. It's just, it's been years and years, you know? Why dredge up the past?'

'Sol, if we don't address the past, it will be moved to constantly address us. Lights' family therapy is one of the most radical and effective programmes out there. Trust me. And anyway, she's here now.'

Sol had seen an unknown woman earlier, escorted by guards through the back of the complex. Could that have been her mother? She hadn't been able to make her out clearly, but the pose was a familiar one. All the Dreamtime women had been led away by the feds. Then the social workers came for the children.

It is 9 a.m., a time for suits and schoolchildren, but here it's late in the day. It is nearly lunchtime. She has already had an hour's kundalini yoga session, attempting

to open her clam-like root chakra, a vedic chanting session and a macrobiotic cookery lesson, fermenting soybeans to make *nattō* and hearing about the dangers for 'people like us' of residual alcohol in kombucha.

Full of dread, she follows Belinda along the pebbled Twelve Steps path, a priapic monument at each juncture. Some way past a locked gate stands a guard by a circular thatched hut. The door requires them both to duck.

Inside, she is blinded by the sudden darkness. The light of the UV lamp outside dances like neon in her eyes, obscuring what is there. A hand takes hers and she hears Belinda's voice: 'Welcome to the Rebirth Hut,' she begins importantly. 'Now, research has shown that birth is the first big trauma we experience. The screaming, the blood – I mean, guys, you know, it's no fun for anyone. At Lights we believe that most of our patients are suffering from a kinda PTSD that stems from this: the initial terror of being expelled from the birth canal. Here we aim to replace this trauma with a more positive experience for baby, and for mamma too.'

Someone grunts, presumably Janet.

Sol is used to surrendering to the idiotic – weird shit happens all the time at Lights – but she could never have predicted this.

'I want you to come and lie down over here, Sol. On your left-hand side, that's right. Now curl up. Like a foetus. Got it? Now, Janet, you move in a bit closer and put your arms around Sol.'

'Uh, OK ...?' Her skin tingles unpleasantly as she feels flesh enclose her from behind, breath in her ear. Janet's herbal smell is overwhelming: here is childhood. She can feel her mother smiling.

'Right,' says Belinda. 'Welcome to Womb Therapy. It's a seriously powerful tool, so take it seriously, guys.'

Sol's solar plexus spasms as Janet squeezes her rigid form.

‘Sol,’ Belinda urges, ‘it’s very important you don’t think too much about this. There’s a lot to process here and your rational mind will only get in the way of that. So try just to go with it and let your inner child take over, yeah?’

How is she supposed not to think about this? As far as she understood it, her mother had disappeared off the face of the earth after Phoenix’s place was shut down. It wasn’t like she hadn’t looked for her. Janet’s nebulous clues were the only hope she had of finding her father. But people can change their name, can hide in virtual reality or whatever. Sol grew used to the idea of being unwanted. When she was on the streets, she sometimes thought she’d seen Janet – but it always turned out to be someone else.

‘My little Sola,’ whispers her mother.

‘OK, guys. Talking is thinking in action so we’re not going to do much of that. We’re going to let your bodies heal the severed maternal dynamic here.’

Sol’s ear is full of her mother’s sighs. Contentment or frustration? Janet is fussing with her dress. Sol longs to turn round and look at her captor. It’s still pitch black.

Rhythmic whooshing and thumping starts to emanate from unseen speakers.

‘These are the sounds you’d have heard in your mother’s uterus, Sol. Close your eyes and just let yourself drift back there.’ Her voice slows to a mesmeric drone. ‘That’s good ... That’s great ... We’re going to perform a mother-child meditation here together like this.’

Oh, this is right up her mother’s street. Just typical of her to reappear in some hippy bullshit ritual after nearly twenty years. She’s probably been sucking on Sonoran Desert toads this whole time, worshipping the scorpions and mainlining peyote. She can hear Janet breathing deeply and peacefully behind her. Sol has never breathed deeply and peacefully. It’s Janet’s fault, she thinks, tense

as a taxidermied mouse up against her mother's scalpel hands.

'At the end of the meditation, Sol, you'll be ready to ask your mother a key question. Don't think about it! The little child inside you will be the one asking. Be quiet and you'll let her speak. Listen to her; give her your silence, your time and understanding.'

One question! There's only ever been one: where is he?

But now she finds this displaced. There are others. Why couldn't you protect me? Why didn't you come and find me? Why did you ruin my life? Do you know that you did? Do you care? Where have you been? What happened to you?

But she must not give Janet the satisfaction of knowing she cares.

She forces herself through the next god knows how long, toxic with murderous thoughts. An eternity. Finally, Belinda's voice intones, 'Let the child speak. What does little Sol want to ask her mom?'

But Janet interrupts: 'Actually, there's something I need to tell you, Sola.'

Sol exhales blackly.

'Janet,' Belinda chides in the same hypnotic chant.

'Just shut the fuck up, will you? I came here to tell my only daughter something important before I die.'

There is silence in the darkness.

'Sola, look. I'm sorry I kept this from you. I thought I was doing you a favour at the time, but that doesn't excuse it, not really. Your father's name is not Jo ... Jackson, or whatever I told you. It's Jonny - Jonathan - Quiss ... Will you let me speak! Listen, he didn't work in carpets. He was a GI. He was in the marines when I met him, in Tucson on leave, and he got me pregnant - with you, obviously. He said he'd stay and do right by us, and he did ... for a while. He kept coming back anyway, every

few months or so. But one day – you’d just turned three – he returned to Japan and he ... just never came back. No, I don’t know where he is now, or really where he was then – Tokyo? He was always moving about and all those Asian places sound the same to me. But it shouldn’t be too hard to look him up now you have the right information, if you want to. I just thought, with everything changing as it is, time is running out ...’

‘You’re dying?’

‘No, girl. It’s just a figure of speech. I mean with the world changing ... What, you don’t get the news in here?’

‘Why are you telling me this?’

‘I’m righting my wrongs all over the place these days.’ She laughs. ‘It’s part of My Recovery.’

THE GROUNDING

The hotel where Kit works is not all that far from Lights. The Tucson Grand Resort, part of a worldwide chain though it pretends to be boutique, is proud to offer no-expense-spared, predictable luxury among the saguaro-strewn foothills of the Sonoran Desert. Kit must casually strike up a chat with diners – the kind of breezy sycophancy that the robots in cheaper establishments still can't quite pull off. The guests expect it, and it ensures his tip hovers between the twenty-five and fifty-per-cent mark. Essential, as he's not paid much besides. To be honest, he's lucky to be employed there at all. He's had to tame his shaggy, sun-streaked hair – some strands made their way into a bonanza breakfast – and clothe himself in a jaunty, upbeat persona. His black-and-white bow-tied uniform couldn't be further from his usual T-shirts, jeans and baseball caps. Makes him feel like a cat in a jacket.

'God, it's so beautiful out there today,' Kit sighs, bearing down upon a Chinese businessman who flinches as he approaches. He places the man's wedge salad on the table before him and assumes the position: hands on too-thin hips, he stares – yearns – through the floor-to-ceiling glass windows out to the rocky desert, a heat haze hovering above it. 'Wow, I could look at those mountains all day.'

Fakeness clogs in his pores: blue-cheese dressing oozing into the cracks and crevices of the iceberg lettuce. He feels the old sensation tightening around him, of being trapped in his own skin, two tiny fallible eyes his

only access to the world. Kit dreams sometimes of waking up blind, fumbling his way across a hostile, burning earth by smell and touch alone.

A creature flashes by the long window, a cat perhaps, then slinks back and stops to stare at them through the glass. Kit sees to his surprise that it is some kind of desert fox, its fur bright orange beneath a grey-sprinkled spine, ears large and alert. It must be a kit fox. He thought they'd all died out in recent years; they'd been on the verge of it for decades, like most of the non-terrifying wildlife. The giant crab spider's doing fine, naturally. Thriving, even.

'Look at that!' Kit instructs his diner. 'They're super rare, and in any case nocturnal ... This one's acting like a house cat.'

The man, despite being alone and therefore a prime candidate for Kit's advances, does not appear to be biting. He grunts and returns to his Virrea, erected in a silver holder beyond the salad and adjacent to the bottomless Starbucks flask that sits on all the dining-room tables.

The man stabs a fork into the architecture of the wedge, and Kit lingers, watching the tiny fox scurry off. As its amber eyes meet his, he realises it's a coyote. Of course it is. Those great American tricksters have somehow thrived where so many Sonoran animals have not. It must be a pup, that size. Cunning dogs. He shudders, ten years old again, remembering Chrissie ...

He reshuffles his attention and tries again. 'May I recommend the barbecue restaurant tonight, sir, if you're staying with us? The king crab legs are out of this world. Guaranteed clean! From Alaska, not imported.' Has he no pride? There are better ways of getting money, that's for sure, but not so legal ... He needs this job. He sure as hell needs its tips.

‘I could bring you a jar of our barbecue sauce, sir, as a special present – if you like, I mean.’ He bares his teeth in a smile.

Kit’s shoulder is starting to hurt. He’s back with his parents again; like he’ll never be able to break out on his own. They’re still fostering, so he’s sleeping in a blue polyester bag in the living room. Temporarily! He falls asleep on his back but inevitably curls up into a foetal position in the night, jamming his shoulder against the laminate. But how fortunate he’d been with these people. Kit was the only foster kid they’d ever adopted, suckers for his angelic looks: wide blue eyes and a golden mop. He’s more like a scarecrow now. How generous they are still, though; how different from all those forever families that took in and, as quickly, kicked out Sol, returning her to the group home.

He can’t wait to see her later.

The man at last looks up from his device and says through a mouthful of smashed-up lettuce, ‘That’s really quite alright. And thank you, but I’m meeting friends in Tucson for dinner, then catching a late-night flight back to Tokyo.’

For a Chinese citizen to be here in the States is one thing, but to be back and forth with their allies too, to be based in Tokyo ... Well – Kit feels a little thrill in the base of his spine – perhaps the man is a spy.

‘Do you live in Tokyo, then?’ he asks airily.

The man exhales heavily and makes an exaggerated turn away from his salad to face Kit. ‘I’m just tying up some loose business ends before the ban.’

‘What ban?’

‘Do you not get the news here in America?’

Debatable whether they do, actually. Seeing as the same rich prick owns both the world’s largest virtual reality company and the most popular news channel.

'I haven't seen the news today, sir.' Few bother any more. It's too depressing. 'Has something happened?'

'Your president has finally agreed to end commercial aviation. It won't be possible to fly anywhere by the end of the year.'

That ban. The Senate's been talking about it for years, but no one ever thought it would go through. And so soon ... Kit is silenced; he can hardly believe it. People have largely stopped acknowledging the quiet death sentence upon them. They have come to accept inertia and stasis in the face of climatic catastrophe and the invading seas.

'Do you mind if I have a look?' Kit gestures to the Virrea. The customer pretends not to hear for a second too long, then nods at it.

There's an expert in a suit allaying fears about the economy. 'Yes, there are various more environmentally friendly ways of flying,' he's insisting. 'And when these electric planes are fully viable, and proven to be safe, limited flights will be permitted once more. This cessation will be an incentive for the big airlines to divert their resources into speeding up this process.'

He supposes they'll invest in VR too - it's already so much a part of people's lives, sometimes indistinguishable from reality. The Virrea guide even dared to suggest it might offer a more authentic experience of a country. Stare at the Taj Mahal at your leisure, free from the squalor and the tourist tat. Do it with an American beer in your hand. Do it in the comfort of your own home. In bed. The whole experience made Kit feel not just trapped in his own body but wallpapered over - with posters of places he would never see.

'I guess there'll still be boats, if people really need to travel,' Kit says hesitantly.

'I don't know about that; all travel spreads pollution and disease. Climate migrants as well,' the guy adds with sudden vigour. 'Keep them where they are.'

Kit knows too many in Tucson who think that way. America for Americans. America first. In a way, it's surprising the government didn't stamp down on travel sooner. They sort of have. None may come in, but the world is theirs. The Silicon Valley billionaires have fled to their New Zealand estates.

The Chinese leaves without tipping a single cent.

Kit is enchanted to see Sol transformed. She is as luminous now as the white temperature-controlled empire of wellness around her. Brown eyes glitter in her elfin face as she takes his hands in hers over the yoga mat, a fragment of a second before they are dashed apart by their Lycra-sprayed coach, an implausibly glowing woman named Belinda. Touching, it turns out, is only permitted in the more advanced poses of partner yoga, and they come later, Kit.

He is inflexible to the point of breaking, too rangy for Sol's slight and springy form. He will swallow the pain: her beauty, her pixie wildness is before him. She is free even in incarceration, freer certainly than when she was brought here, her childlike frame emaciated, long hair matted and sprays of livid acne across her now clear and lovely face. That dark hair has been cut and it stands up over her darker eyes in protest at its owner's imprisonment. More boyish now, there's definitely something of Phoenix about her - it's the colouring. Brings back all the old doubts. Kit reminds himself that he looks wholly different from Phoenix, who is certainly *his* father. Colour means fuck all.

Under Belinda's gelid eye, they stretch, independently, and chat as if they have never been apart. Sol is fixated on her father again. She seems crazed with the idea of tracking him down.

Sol has had various obsessions over the years, most of them substances or inappropriate older men - con artists