

## TeleAbsence

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Tony put on the spex and scrunched his hands into the tight datagloves. He pushed a button on the right earpiece, and the world around him changed.

He had been sitting in his little room, with torn clothes scattered about, a broken dresser, and a dirty window that looked out onto a brick wall. Now he found himself in a classroom. The floor was clean and the walls were a bright yellow. Tony counted fifteen desks arranged in a roomy and orderly fashion, fewer desks than he had ever seen in a classroom before.

Tony had jacked in at a few minutes before nine so he'd have a chance to explore before anyone else showed up, and he started with the windows. These windows weren't broken, like those at his own school, and it looked as if morning sunlight actually streamed in from a clear blue sky. He opened one and stuck his head out to see an incredibly large playground a few stories down; nothing like the old broken-down one in his neighborhood, where Mom never let him go, even in the middle of the day. Not that Tony was about to do so, ever; he was just as scared of the gunfire as his Mom was.

Tony pulled his head back into the room and continued exploring. Walking around felt strange, since he could feel his legs not moving as he sat in his room. And yet, in this classroom he was standing, and moving his hands around caused the rest of his body to follow. He traced the edge of the room, sliding along the screenboard at the front with the alphabet printed above it, and along the walls on the side, which were decorated with the artwork of the school's students. There was a calendar, set to this month, September. He also noticed a seating chart, with each student's name in different handwriting.

He came to a mirror in the back corner of the room, and stopped short. Staring back at him wasn't his deep brown face and curly black hair that was all too familiar, but an image of a white kid with blond hair, dressed in a button-down shirt and slacks. The spex and gloves didn't appear in the mirror either, just sparkling brown eyes and smooth pink hands. Tony moved his arms and face around, and noticed that the mirror image did so too. \_No wonder the gloves are so small,\_ Tony thought, \_this kid has got to be at least a year younger than me. Maybe this isn't a sixth grade class --\_

A sharp buzz startled Tony and he jumped. At the front of the room appeared a pretty white woman who looked as old as Tony's teachers, but she wasn't scowling the way Tony's teachers always did.

Instead, she was smiling. Despite that, Tony felt scared.

"Good morning, Andrew," she said. "I'm surprised to see you here early." Her voice was soothing to Tony's ears, and he calmed down. There was no way she would figure out that he wasn't Andrew; the mirror had shown him exactly as he appeared in this virtual classroom.

"Hello, Miss..." Tony trailed off. He knew that he had taken Andrew's place, but he had no idea what the teacher's name was.

"Why are you here early? You're usually one of the last to jack in."

"Ummm...well..." Tony looked around as he stalled, and spotted a nameplate on the desk. Fortunately, it was facing towards him.

"Miss Ellis, I just felt like taking a look around before we started." Tony's voice sounded like his own to his ears, which worried him. Would Miss Ellis be able to hear that he wasn't Andrew?

Apparently not. "Okay, Andrew, though you won't have much time." She looked at her watch. "In just a minute --"

Another buzz, and this time a cute girl popped in, already seated at a desk. "Good morning, Miss Ellis."

"Good morning, Sheryl."

"Hi Andrew!"

Tony wasn't sure how to respond, but it seemed safest to say little. "Hi, Sheryl."

Sheryl opened her mouth to speak, but was interrupted by another buzz. The ritual repeated itself over the next few minutes; another kid popped in each time, some already sitting, some at the door, and one or two in the corners, until there were fourteen other students. Most were white, although he saw two who were black and three who he thought were Chinese. Tony noticed how happy they all looked, as they milled about talking to each other. Tony wanted to mingle, but was afraid, and so he stayed off to the side, studying the seating chart. Andrew was assigned to the front row, second seat. At least he would know where to sit when class began.

He traced the name of the student he was replacing, Andrew Drummond. Now he had a full name to attach to the spex.

Another buzz, deeper and longer, startled Tony, and a chill went through him. What if that was Andrew jacking in? He would ruin everything, and everyone would know that Tony was a fake! Tony looked around, scared, but didn't see anyone that resembled the kid in the mirror.

"Okay, class," said Miss Ellis, "it's nine o'clock. Time to begin." So that's what that different buzz meant. Tony relaxed into his -- into Andrew's -- seat. As long as he had Andrew's spex, he realized, he was Andrew, and there was no way that the real Andrew could pop in and prove otherwise. Tony wished he could be Andrew all the time, but at least he could be Andrew for the school day. Then he'd have to return to his own life. For the first time, he dreaded the final bell that would go off at three o'clock.

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Miss Ellis began the class by taking attendance. Tony remembered to respond when he heard Andrew's name, which was second, right after Melissa Connor, who sat to his left. Once Miss Ellis noted that all were present, she told the class to take out their homework from last night.

At first, Tony didn't know what to do. He felt a lump in his throat as he realized that he couldn't take out last night's homework since he wasn't really Andrew. He knew the punishment he could suffer for not having his homework with him, and he started to tremble.

Then he noticed what Melissa was doing. She pushed some button on her desk and her computer screen flashed, and now she was waiting patiently. Maybe the homework is also done in virtual space, Tony thought, and he looked at the buttons on his desk. Sure enough, among all the letters and numbers of the keyboard there was a button labelled "HOMEWORK." Tony pushed it with relief.

His screen blinked, and a message came up: "Please enter your homework password."

Oh no! I don't know Andrew's password! Tony thought. Now what? Maybe Miss Ellis wouldn't notice if he just sat there looking intently at the screen. If he kept his head down, perhaps she wouldn't call on him. Then he wouldn't be found out.

"Melissa? Please tell us how you did the first problem."

The first problem was an easy math problem, but Melissa got it wrong. Tony braced himself for the explosion, but it didn't come.

"That's okay," said Miss Ellis instead. She worked out the problem on the screenboard in front and showed Melissa where her mistake had been. Tony was shocked. She hadn't yelled at Melissa for being wrong, and Melissa hadn't make any rude comments back or started crying.

"Andrew? Would you please explain the next problem?"

Bad luck. It looked as if Miss Ellis went through the class alphabetically when going over homework, and naturally that meant Andrew was next. But Tony knew he couldn't go over the next problem. What could he do?

"Andrew? Is there a problem?"

Tony looked up. Miss Ellis wasn't frowning, and she didn't seem upset at all. She hadn't yelled at Melissa for being wrong; maybe Tony could pretend to be having a problem as Andrew and not get yelled at.

"Yes, Miss Ellis. Ummm...I forgot my password."

"Oh, is that all? You should have said something." Miss Ellis came over to his desk, pushed a few keys, and accessed the assignment for him. It made sense, he realized, that she would be able to do that. The homework that Andrew had done came up on the screen. Feeling relieved, Tony puzzled out the solution to the second problem, which fortunately Andrew had done correctly. Tony treasured the "Very good" that Miss Ellis said in his direction, even if it was followed by "Andrew."

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The class continued throughout the morning, with Miss Ellis going from subject to subject. A little math,

some English, a bit of art. Tony especially enjoyed the art, as being in a virtual classroom enabled him to create beautiful pictures almost by just thinking of them. He could paint pictures in three dimensions, and he even created a collage using video images that moved and sound effects that came from a classroom library of such things. It almost got him discovered, because apparently Andrew was not too keen on this subject, and Miss Ellis became suspicious of "Andrew's" new-found enthusiasm for light sculpting. But it turned out all right; Miss Ellis was actually more pleased than suspicious to see Andrew taking an interest.

A little after eleven o'clock the buzz sounded, announcing the lunch period. Miss Ellis and the students jacked out one by one. Tony envied the other students; he imagined them in comfortable homes, sitting at tables with steaming hot plates piled up with food.

Tony himself didn't jack out. He spent the entire forty minutes in the virtual classroom, relishing every minute he was there. He played with his desk computer, using it to create more works of art and to read history textbooks that changed the words they used when Tony punched in that he didn't understand something. He didn't mind the stomach rumbles he felt near the end of the period; he was used to them.

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"Now, class, we're going to learn a little geography. Who can tell me what this is?" Miss Ellis pushed a button at the top of the blackboard, and a holographic map appeared, floating halfway between her desk and the class. Tony recognized it and raised his hand. So did most of the class.

Miss Ellis called on Tony. "Yes, Andrew?"

"It's the United States." Tony thought it was the most beautiful map he had ever seen. It shimmered in the air, floating in and out of insubstantiality. The features -- states, cities, mountains, and rivers, just to name a few -- were displayed in many different intense colors. There was a vibrancy to this map which made it more real than any flat map Tony had seen in his own classroom.

"Very good, Andrew. Well, class, today I want to introduce you to the various parts of our country, and I think the best way of doing that is to have you do it for us. Who wants to be first to tell us where they're from?"

The girl sitting to Tony's right raised her hand. "Janice?"

"I live in Florida, Miss Ellis, in Neptune Beach, near Jacksonville. But I just moved there from San Francisco."

"Can you point out both places on the map?"

Janice punched a few keys on her desk computer, and a small spot in northeastern Florida lit up in green. A second later, so did a spot in northern California.

"Very good! Someone else?"

One of the Asian girls raised her hand. "Sandra?"

Sandra hit a few keys and a spot near Washington, D.C. turned green. "I live in Silver Spring, Maryland."

Miss Ellis continued going through the class, and the students became very enthusiastic about it. "I'm in

East Lansing, Michigan!" shouted a kid named Brian, who had just moved from Los Alamos, New Mexico. "I live near Boston!" shouted another. Each student's hometown was lit up, either by Miss Ellis or by the student.

Tony felt scared. He lived in Harlem, in New York City, and desperately wanted to volunteer that information, but he couldn't. He was supposed to be Andrew, and he didn't know exactly where Andrew lived. He knew it was out on Long Island, because the car with the spex had displayed Long Island license plates. But where on Long Island?

And how did the other students use the computer to light up the map?

The next one to go was Sheryl, who had been the first student to pop in after Tony. She used her computer to light up Suffolk County, on Long Island. "I live in Port Jefferson," she said, "right near Andrew."

"Andrew, would you like to locate your hometown as well?" asked Miss Ellis. "You could come up to the map since it's already lit up."

Feeling trapped, Tony ran up to the map, stabbed at Suffolk County with his -- Andrew's -- finger, and sprinted back to his seat.

Miss Ellis went through the rest of the class. All over the map, the hometowns were lit up in green. "Who would like to talk about their hometown first?"

Tony felt Miss Ellis's eyes staring right at him, and worried that she might call on him. Her eyes passed over him, though, and she called on Brian. Tony exhaled a breath that he didn't realize he had been holding.

Since he knew Los Alamos better than East Lansing, Brian chose to talk about his original hometown instead of where he was now. Tony barely paid attention as Brian talked about the joys of small town life and then displayed some pictures from a family photo album that he was able to pull up using his computer. Miss Ellis then discussed the arid mountainous area where the town was located, and how there had been a scientific laboratory there until the year 2010.

Janice went next, and again Tony was too scared to pay attention. Janice described San Francisco, and, possibly still thinking about lunch, mentioned the delicious seafood and sourdough bread. Miss Ellis talked about other things, such as the earthquakes that San Francisco had experienced, and the Golden Gate Bridge, which she said had been one of the longest suspension bridges in the country until the earthquake just last year that destroyed it. She showed three dimensional video images of the earthquake, and even made the classroom shake up a bit, so the students could experience a bit of what an earthquake was like.

Janice continued, "But now I live in Florida, and it's really nice, except it gets awful hot in the summer. But let me show you!" With that, Janice hit a few keys, and on the screenboard appeared a picture of a large white house. "See! There's my front yard!"

"Oh, yeah?" said Brian. Using his computer, he erased the picture of Janice's house. A few seconds later, a picture of Brian appeared, wearing spex and sitting in some sort of large black chair with arms that closed in front. Tony felt uneasy, looking at that picture.

Brian waved his hand in class, and so did the Brian in the picture. "See!" he said. "That's me in real

time!"

"Oh yeah?" said Janice. "Well, watch --"

"Janice! Brian!" Miss Ellis interrupted. Oh no, thought Tony, now they're going to get it. He braced himself for the shouting. Instead, the two students each mumbled an apology.

"It's okay," Miss Ellis said. "I understand why you're excited, I just didn't want you to get out of hand. You see, class, one of the nice things about being here is that we all jack in from different places. Each of you can learn from one another about the great diversity we have in this country. Here you are, telling each other about your hometowns, even though you may live thousands of miles away from your classmates. I figure it will also give you a chance to find out more about each other, since it is so early in the school year."

Sheryl raised her hand, which worried Tony. "Couldn't people do that before?"

"Well, yes," Miss Ellis replied, "but it wasn't so immediate. In fact, you're experiencing something now that in the past only college students could usually experience. And they had to travel physically to one common location to share their backgrounds, which was much more expensive and time consuming. You don't need to do that at all."

Miss Ellis turned to Tony. "Andrew, since Sheryl asked a question, why don't you tell us about your common hometown of Port Jefferson?"

Tony looked down at his desk. His stomach felt queasy. If only Sheryl hadn't brought attention to herself, and then to him as well. Or if only Sheryl hadn't been here in the first place. Then he could make up anything he wanted about Port Jefferson, and Miss Ellis would never know. But Sheryl would see right through any lies he might tell, and anyway, Tony didn't like to lie.

But wasn't that what he was doing right now, pretending to be Andrew?

"Andrew? Are you okay?"

"Yes, Miss Ellis. I --"

Tony was interrupted by a sharp buzz, and he looked up. At the front of the classroom appeared an older man with thick grey hair. He headed straight for Tony, a scowl on his face, and Tony looked down again, in fear.

He heard Miss Ellis speak. "Mr. Drummond, what are you doing here?"

The man didn't answer Miss Ellis. He went right up to Tony and said, "Give them back! They're mine!"

Tony shivered. It had been too good to last; now he was going to be found out. This man was obviously Andrew's father, come to get the spex back.

"Mr. Drummond!" said Miss Ellis, with an angry tone that was familiar to Tony. "I would appreciate it if you would not interrupt my class to talk with your son! Can't this wait until later?"

"This is not me -- I mean, this is not my son!" Mr. Drummond shouted.

There was silence for a moment. Tony felt Miss Ellis move next to him and Mr. Drummond. "What's going on?" she asked.

"This kid stole my -- I mean, my son's spex!"

Tony looked up at Miss Ellis, and saw her smile. Facing Mr. Drummond, she said, "That's you, isn't it, Andrew?"

For the first time since he appeared, "Mr. Drummond" looked uncomfortable. "Ummm, yeah, Miss Ellis. I had to use Dad's spex to jack in. Whoever this is--" he pointed at Tony-- "stole my own spex."

"Ah-ha. Andrew, go home. I'll take care of this."

"Ummm. You won't tell my Dad, will you? I don't want him to know that I've been careless."

"No, I won't tell him. Now go. I'll contact you later."

The image of Andrew's father vanished, and Miss Ellis turned to Tony. He was on the verge of tears.

"Well, young man, who are you?"

He sniffled, and whispered, "My name's Tony."

"Tony? Did you steal Andrew's spex?"

"Yes." He could barely hear himself.

Miss Ellis sighed. "Why?"

Tony looked up into Miss Ellis's eyes, and it all started pouring out of him. "I just wanted to go to a good school, one where I wouldn't be afraid, where the teachers and kids are nice, where I don't have to worry about guns or drugs or being beaten up or --" Tony stopped. He felt as if everyone was staring at him. They probably were, but it was too late to take back anything he had said.

"I found the spex in Manhattan, Miss Ellis. I know it was wrong, but I didn't care. I just wanted to go to school somewhere nice. I'm sorry." He started to sob.

"Class, I'll be back in a moment. No one jack out."

Miss Ellis tapped at the air to the side of her face, and the classroom around Tony vanished.

Tony found himself alone with Miss Ellis in a much smaller room furnished with a desk, chair and sofa. He had been sitting at a desk; now he was standing. He was still crying, though. He wasn't worried that Miss Ellis would beat him, since she really couldn't hurt him through the spex. She might yell at him instead, but when she spoke her voice was calm.

"Tony, I've brought us here so we could talk alone for a few minutes, away from the rest of the class. I hope you don't mind, but I didn't think you'd want to continue talking about this in front of everyone."

Tony nodded, and wiped away the tears on his face using his sleeve. He didn't want to get the datagloves wet. "Thanks."

Miss Ellis sat on the chair, and motioned Tony to the sofa. As he sat down, he spotted his image in a mirror he hadn't seen before. He still looked like Andrew.

"Tony, why don't we start with you telling me about yourself, like where you live and what your full name is."

"I'm not going to get into trouble, am I?" he asked.

Miss Ellis smiled. "No, you're not, Tony. I want to help you."

Tony told Miss Ellis about his life; in particular, about the horrors of his awful school. He was surprised to discover that Miss Ellis also lived in Manhattan, but downtown, below the fence. When Miss Ellis found out that Tony was black, she made some adjustments and asked Tony to check his appearance in the mirror. Tony was surprised to see a black kid facing back. It still didn't look like him, so he told Miss Ellis more about his real appearance. He watched as Miss Ellis changed the image again, until it more closely resembled his true appearance.

When Tony was satisfied, Miss Ellis gave him a long hard look. "Tony, I'm not going to tell you how wrong you were to steal the spex, because I can see how bad you already feel." She paused. "And, frankly, I agree with what you did."

Tony was surprised. The teacher thought it was okay that he stole something?

"I guess it's because I remember when those spex you're wearing were first developed. They were praised as being the first step to solving the problem of violence in schools -- if the students weren't physically in one real place, they wouldn't be able to hurt each other."

"Do you mean that I was supposed to have the spex in the first place? Is that why you approve?"

"Well, I don't really approve of the stealing. But I understand. After all, Tony, you and kids like you were the main reason they were invented in the first place. But I guess people forgot that it's not enough to develop the proper technology. You've got to fund it too."

Miss Ellis stood up and walked across the room, her back to Tony. She took a deep breath, and then turned around to face him.

"Tony? Would you like to stay in telepresence school? Not have to go back to your old school ever again?"

Tony's eyes opened wide and he let out a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding. "You mean I can stay?" He tried to keep the eagerness out of his voice.

"Well, not as Andrew. This is going to be difficult to arrange. Technically, you can't come to telepresence school unless you can afford it, and obviously you can't. But we might be able to sneak you in."

Tony couldn't believe what he had just heard. "Sneak me in? Isn't that as bad as my taking a pair of spex?"

"Yes and no. I might be able to work it out so that you have your own set of spex, and can attend my



class on a regular basis. We'd have to get you a full simulator too, if you want to participate in outdoor games. But you won't be able to attend as yourself."

"You just said I can't be Andrew. I don't understand."

Miss Ellis sighed. "Tony, I believe you have a right to be here, as much right as any other student. But I personally can't afford to pay for you. And I suspect that your parents can't either."

"My Mom. We don't know where Dad is."

"Your mother, then. The problem, Tony, is that the computer that runs telepresence school keeps track of every student through the spex, and so it knows how to charge you. Your little visit today cost Andrew's family some money."

This made Tony feel worse. "Then maybe I shouldn't be here at all."

"No, Tony, you can be here. I have a -- a friend who can do something to a pair of spex so you won't be charged, but the cost of attending will be spread out onto all the other students. That way, no one student will be charged too much for you, and you'll be able to attend the school."

"Isn't that stealing?"

Miss Ellis thought a moment. "Technically, yes, but the theft is so small and spread out that no one would notice. Besides, it's the only way I can arrange it."

"So, Tony, would you like to attend telepresence school?"

"Yes, Miss Ellis, very much," he whispered. After all, he told himself, it couldn't be completely wrong if the teacher was willing to do it.

"Okay, but we can't let you enroll as Tony, because the other students know who you are."

"Does that mean I have to be white?"

"No, Tony, of course not. No one else has seen your real appearance but me, so you can look like yourself if you wish. That's no problem. But we'll have to call you by a different name, and probably pretend that you live somewhere other than Manhattan. Will that be okay?"

"Fine. Ummm...Miss Ellis?"

"Yes?"

"Why are you doing this?"

Miss Ellis frowned, and for a moment Tony worried that he had just said the wrong thing. But then she smiled. "Never mind, Tony, it isn't something you need to worry about. In the meantime, you'd better give me your phone number and go home. Tell your mother I'll call her tonight."

\* \* \*

"Excellent work, Howard."

"Thank you, Miss Ellis," Tony said. For three months now he had been enrolled at the telepresence school, in the same class that he had visited using Andrew's spex. Tony now had spex of his own, along with a full simulator, and had begun to strike up a few friendships with the other students, including, oddly enough, Andrew.

Of course, they didn't think of him as Tony. He was "Howard," from a middle-class family living in Forest Hills on Long Island. Forest Hills had once been a part of the city, but was now a neighborhood in one of the three independent boroughs, a place where it was reasonable to assume that a family had the money to send a child to telepresence school.

At first, Tony felt strange pretending to be from someplace where he was not. But Miss Ellis had brought him through a virtual representation of the neighborhood before bringing him into the school, and fortunately, none of the other students had tried to trip him up with questions about his hometown.

Which was good, because Tony was happy here. He couldn't remember ever having been happier.

"Howard? Are you with us?"

"Oh, sorry, Miss Ellis, I was just thinking." Tony felt his cheeks flush as the rest of the students turned around to stare at him in his back row seat. Fortunately, no one could see his embarrassment in the virtual classroom.

"As I was saying, it's time for playground recess, so everyone get ready." With that, Miss Ellis tapped at the air next to her ear, and the class was virtually transported to the playground "outside." They did this every day of school, but it never stopped to amaze Tony. He always felt a warm sun and cool breeze playing against his face, which seemed perfectly real, even though he knew it had to be an illusion.

He closed his eyes and took in a deep breath; the stale air reminded him that he was really in the simulator back in his apartment. As he was about to breathe out, he felt someone tap him on the hand.

"You're it!" He opened his eyes; it was Andrew who had tagged him, and who was now running as fast as he could go. Tony usually played with Andrew and Janice anyway, so he smiled and raced towards Andrew as fast as he could go, on virtual legs.

They played tag and ran around for most of the recess period, and near the end, the three friends sat down on a bench to rest up. It would soon be time to return to the classroom. Janice took a minute to catch her breath, then jacked out to get a glass of water, leaving Tony and Andrew alone.

"Boy, that was fun!" Andrew said.

"Yeah, it sure was."

"Listen, Howard, I've been thinking. You live in Forest Hills, right?"

"Ummm...yeah, I do."

"Well, that's practically next door to me! Why can't we get together in the real world?"

Uh-oh. Tony was afraid that Andrew would suggest something like this. "Wouldn't it be too difficult? I mean, you don't really live next door."

"So?"

"So it would be a problem for me to come out to Port Jefferson."

"Hey, is that all? My Dad can drive me to your house, then, no problem. He usually has business to do in Manhattan anyway, and sometimes lets me come along with him. I think I can get him to drop me off at your place for a day."

That was the last thing Tony wanted to hear. "I don't know," he replied, speaking slowly. "I don't think my Mom wants me to have friends over."

"Can't we just go hang out in Forest Park or something? We wouldn't have to spend the day at your house. My Dad could just drop me off there."

"Well..."

"Besides, we can invite someone else along too."

"Who?" Who lived close enough to join them?

"Sheryl." Andrew smiled. "I've seen the way you look at her. You like her, don't you?"

"No," Tony lied. He felt pained.

"I know! Let me go ask her now! We can try to get together this weekend!" Andrew jumped up and started shouting Sheryl's name.

"No! Andrew, please don't!" Tony started to cry.

Andrew sat back down. "Howard, what's wrong? I'm just suggesting a little friendly get-together."

"We can't get together at my house. We can't."

"Why not?"

Tony thought hard. He liked Andrew, and he knew that Andrew liked him. They hung out together almost every recess, and usually worked together when Miss Ellis made everyone find partners for school projects. Surely Tony could trust him, couldn't he?

Besides, he still felt very bad about lying. No matter how much he wanted to be here, no matter how much Miss Ellis said he had a right to be here, it still bothered him. Perhaps if someone else knew, someone like Andrew, it would make him feel better. After all, Andrew liked him. Surely Andrew would keep the secret.

And, come to think of it, there was no way Andrew would tell anyone. If he did, his father would find out about the time Andrew was careless about his spex.

"Howard? Why not?"

A deep breath, then: "Because my name's not Howard. It's Tony."

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Two days later, on Friday afternoon, Miss Ellis asked Tony to stay after school so they could have a private talk. After all the other students jacked out, she asked, "Tony? I notice that you and Andrew don't seem to be getting along as well as you used to. Is there a reason for this?"

Tony squirmed in his seat. Miss Ellis wasn't smiling. "Uh, no, Miss Ellis."

"Are you sure?"

He remained silent for what seemed like a minute.

"Tony, did you tell Andrew about our little arrangement?"

He didn't say a word. He couldn't; his throat was choked with fear.

"Tony? Did you tell Andrew?"

He croaked out a whisper. "Yes, Miss Ellis. I had to."

She sighed. "Tony, I was afraid of this. You shouldn't have told him."

"But Miss Ellis, he wanted to come over and visit me. I couldn't let him. I had to tell him why; I wasn't about to lie to him."

She smiled bitterly. "No, I guess not. Tony, I applaud your honesty, but this afternoon you and I are going to have to face Mr. Drummond."

"Mr. Drummond? Do you mean Andrew actually told his father?"

"Yes, and it gets worse. Mr. Drummond is a lawyer, and he's on the board of trustees of the telepresence school program. Do you know what that means?"

"No, I don't."

"It means that he's one of the people who makes policies for the school. He makes decisions on how money is spent to keep the school operating. And I don't think he wants to see us because he agrees with how we're spending the school's money."

"I'm sorry, Miss Ellis. I didn't mean to get you into trouble."

"It's all right, Tony. In a way, your honesty makes me proud. But--" she pushed a button and a clock appeared on the screen -- "we have only half an hour until Mr. Drummond jacks in to talk with us. I suggest you jack out for that time and talk to your mother; let her know what's going on. Then come back."

"Can Mom come too?"

Miss Ellis looked at Tony sadly. "I'm afraid not, Tony. You only have one set of spex at home, and Mr. Drummond wants to see you, not your mother. But don't worry. I'll be here too."

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Tony had a hard time telling his mother about what had happened. He was worried that she would be very angry at him for ruining his chances of attending a good school. Fortunately, her attitude had been similar to his teacher's.

"We'll figure something out, Tony, we always have," she said while hugging him tightly. "You just go back and talk to Mr. Drummond. Maybe you can make him change his mind about you. Show him what a good boy you are."

Tony jacked in, for what he thought might be the last time, and was back in the classroom with Miss Ellis. She was talking to Mr. Drummond.

At the sound of the buzz signaling Tony's arrival, the two adults turned to face him.

"So here's the young man," said Mr. Drummond gruffly. Tony took a good, long look at Mr. Drummond, and tried not to seem afraid. Mr. Drummond towered over Tony impressively. His hair was thick and grey, and he wore an elaborate suit with a vest and chain. Tony also noticed that Mr. Drummond was sporting a pair of metal frame glasses, which didn't make sense to him. In real life, after all, Mr. Drummond had to be wearing a pair of spex, so having his image wear glasses had to be a personal choice.

Tony almost laughed at that -- \_how silly of Andrew's father to have his image wear glasses!\_ -- but he bit off the laugh quickly. \_Mr. Drummond's glasses probably mean as much to him as my skin color means to me.\_

Tony greeted him solemnly. Mr. Drummond returned the greeting with an embarrassed smile and turned back to Miss Ellis.

"As much as you may like the boy, it's unfair to the rest of us to keep him enrolled at this school. Your little billing stunt is grounds for dismissal, you know."

"Yes, I know. But, Mr. Drummond, if you knew what Tony had to face each day in a regular school --"

"That is not the issue here. I understand what Tony has to deal with at his local school. But look at what his presence does to our own resources." He tapped at the air and a sheet of figures appeared on the screenboard.

"The fact that you tried to spread the expense out to everyone is commendable, Miss Ellis, but it's still patently unfair to those families who are just barely able to send their children to telepresence school. If you look at these records, you can clearly see that some families are about to receive bills that may only be slightly higher than expected -- but still higher. Did you honestly expect that no one would take notice?"

Miss Ellis turned to look at Tony. "I hoped," she said.

"Well, I'm afraid it's not possible. The money simply doesn't exist. The school cannot afford to keep him here."

"He's one of the best students in the school. Is there nothing we can do for him?"

Mr. Drummond sighed. "What about all the other Tonys out there? We'd be unfair to all of them if we favored just one particular student. This is a private institution, not a public one. It's completely supported by the families, and quite a few of us are stretched to the limit. I'm sorry."

"I knew you had to be rich to attend," Tony heard himself say.

Mr. Drummond frowned at Tony. "Tony, to you we may seem rich, but believe me, we're just getting by. Perhaps we don't find it as difficult to live as you do, but we honestly can't afford to keep you here."

He turned back to Miss Ellis. "We'll have to make arrangements to retrieve the simulator and the spex. I have to go now; I have a trustees meeting to attend." He tapped his earpiece and disappeared, leaving Tony and Miss Ellis alone in the classroom.

"I guess I won't be able to stay, then," Tony said. "But I don't want to go back to my old school." He started to cry.

"Tony, don't cry. Listen to me. There is a way out."

\* \* \*

The following Monday afternoon, Tony took the subway down to Greenwich Village. He had to show a pass at 96th Street in order to continue under the fence, but Miss Ellis had arranged everything.

He went to the address Miss Ellis had given him, a brownstone on West 10th Street, and rang the doorbell. A black woman opened the door. She had a thick red scar seared across her right cheek.

Tony stammered. "I'm sorry, I'm looking for Miss Ellis. I must have the wrong place." He started to back down the steps.

"It's okay, Tony, this is my house."

Tony stared at her, afraid to enter. The voice was right, but...

She laughed. "It's me, Tony. Come on in."

Tony hesitated, then followed her into the house. "I'm sorry, Miss Ellis, it's just that--"

"I understand. I've set up a classroom in back."

They entered a small room with a tiny green blackboard in one corner and two small desks. Written on the board with actual chalk were the words, "Welcome, Tony." Sitting on the desks were notebooks and textbooks. They looked old and worn, but also loved.

Tony looked at Miss Ellis and smiled. She smiled back. Even with the scar, she was the most beautiful sight in the world. "Well, let's get started," she said. "I told you things would be different."

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