



# Watching the Wind

by Don Gauger

Daniel simply rose from his bed and stopped the alarm. No snooze alarm. No returning to bed. He would keep to his standard schedule and prepare for work. Daniel avoided looking directly at the time floating in the air above his Halo VR headband, docked on his bedroom bureau. His peripheral vision avoided the time while allowing himself the simple pleasure of watching the virtual show rising up from his Halo, a dim, slow fountain of colorful-soap bubbles lazily floating upwards. This suited Daniel. He instinctively knew his own schedule. He liked avoiding the distractions that would begin once his Halo sensed him making eye contact with it. Then Virtual Reality windows, with alerts for messages, weather reports, news headlines, and other V-windows with video clips of cute baby animals, would all float in the air competing for his attention. As Daniel brushed his teeth, he reflected on how the Halo's behavior had become more persistent lately, undoubtedly after some automatic software update had changed his preferences with new defaults that favored the vendors. He sighed. Who had spare time to reset their preferences? He knew the Halo developers and business leaders knew this nuisance would not stop most customers from using their Halos. Most folks could not imagine life without them, just like no-one called their headband an AREEGIO, their augmented-reality electroencephalogram input/output. It was their Halo.

Daniel dressed purposefully but with no hurry. He sighed, squared his shoulders, and prepared to start his business day. Using his peripheral vision he took his Halo and placed it on his head. As the EEG interface seamlessly took in his full thoughts, it smoothly responded by closing all app windows, while creating a virtual mirror in front of him. Daniel inspected his clothes. He'd have to replace his shirt soon, it was getting worn at the collar, not that anyone would notice it while he wore his Halo. With that thought his collar shimmered and appeared to be brand new. The V-mirror faded into nothing.

By the time Daniel was in his kitchen, his toast and coffee were ready. As he sat at his kitchen table he opened a news headlines and weather V-window in the air in front of him. He glanced at them while spreading strawberry jam on his toast. "The Phillies won both games in their double-header last night!" he said aloud with genuine surprise as the video highlights began streaming in a fresh V-window. "Maybe they'll make the championship playoffs this year after all." Another V-window, with price and availability for game tickets, floated nearby.

A stem of rose buds and blooms bobbed in the breeze on Daniel's balcony and caught his peripheral vision. He allowed the V-windows to "ghost-out" into standby mode. Momentarily rescued from the information feeds, he turned to give his full attention to the rose trellis. Daniel allowed his mind to relax, he stopped looking at any one thing, and allowed his peripheral vision to take in all of his small garden, planted in their mix of cobalt and jade-colored jardinières, and smiled. Even in this indirect broad-view way of looking he "saw" that the roses needed retying onto their trellis. Some inoffensive weeds had managed to find their way into a tall jardiniere filled with calla lilies. No matter, he'd find some time to get his gardening done soon. A tentative calendar appointment floated up in a fresh V-window; he saved and closed it in a blink. Many people opted for virtual-reality gardens these days. More time, less fuss, no failures, and more exotic choices. After the first pleasurable joy of seeing exotic-tropical orchids blooming perfectly in his V-garden, while two feet of very real, wet, and cold snow fell, Daniel had decided that he'd go old-school and stay with seasonal blooms of native species,

with a few exceptions, like the calla lilies, which were always a favorite of his great-grandmother.

It was time to head off and walk to work. Daniel knew he needed to go even though he did not check the time, and left the V-windows in standby mode. His “internal clock” was almost always accurate to five minutes on average, and two minutes on a good day. Funny how those unconscious processes could work without any technical support.

As he latched his front door, a security status V-window flashed up, showing all systems online and in GREEN active-security status, and then disappeared in a poof. Several reminder memo-posts popped up briefly, and disappeared when acknowledged. He suppressed other pop-ups. As Daniel passed his neighbors’ front-yards their virtual-reality gardens projected themselves fluidly through his Halo interface. He chuckled as he saw his neighbor Ellyn was growing a virtual beanstalk that flowed up high into a virtual cloud, the vine was covered in glistening golden-bean pods. He could always count on his artist friend to craft one of the most whimsical V-gardens in town, he thought as he turned to cross the street.

Daniel checked that his virtual-reality persona was active with his favorite “outdoor-walking” mode on. This caused a faint color-shifting light to subtly play across his softened silhouette. The effect was cheerful without calling too much attention to himself. Entering the neighborhood park, he began his customary walk to his office. His company was preparing a meet-and greet lunch, concert, and cocktail reception for their clients later that day. It would be a very long and busy day. Still, he was out early enough to grab a quiet coffee on his way, so he steered himself towards a café kiosk near the park entrance. The robot barista had his coffee ready when he arrived. Daniel avoided making eye contact with a “new coffee flavors this week” virtual ad, one of the few allowed in the park, but skimmed his virtual receipt with its green check-mark for prepayment, acknowledged receipt mentally, and watched the V-receipt spiral off into nowhere. He took a sip. His coffee was perfect. Daniel moved towards an empty park bench where natural sunlight filtered down through the old park trees.

Daniel reflected on how dependent he was on his Halo. As much as he tried dialing back all the available features, information, and “life-enhancing” options it offered, the truth was that no one could live in any major city today without a Halo. Even the free government-issued Halos were needed for the most basic functions of transportation, purchases, communications, and standard day-to-day services everyone relied upon. Life without a Halo would just not be possible.

The park was not too busy this early. It had its casual strollers, earnest amateur athletes, and parents watching their children as they played in a children’s garden. His focus shifted to the office workers. Most wore a variation on a virtual-reality “gray-mist” persona, the standard for busy people not looking to engage in direct interaction with other pedestrians, their figures softened and somewhat obscured within legal and socially acceptable limits. There were others who walked alongside their virtual-reality pets. Most V-pets were modeled on popular dog or cat breeds. Occasionally more playful variations passed by. A man walked with his miniature gyrfalcon perched on his shoulder, an older woman accompanied a young child with its miniature unicorn trotting alongside, and a two young men walked behind a pair of comical V-gargoyles that slouched ahead of them.

There were their fair share of flamboyant V-personas walking the park too. A figure walked by wrapped head to toe in a flowing cape of roses, with a trail of scented petals that fell freely and disappeared as they swept by. A middle age man in badly wrinkled clothes literally stormed, head down, across the main path, a virtual patch of miniature thunderclouds following menacingly over his head, which quite effectively cleared his way. “Well!” Daniel thought.

Children happy giggled and played together on an old-fashioned seesaw, virtual cartoon bluebirds hopping and singing about them, while a gentleman sat nearby reading his virtual newspaper.

A cloud of rainbow-hued soap bubbles drifted by, then swirled around him a few times and popped open. Butterflies emerged, fluttered briefly, then jetted away towards the far side of the park where a woman was walking. Clara waved, he waved back, and a private V-chat window popped up with a wine glass and question “meet up after work?” next to a time and address. He pushed the time up to 9 PM, was surprised when her “Okay” flashed back, and the V-chat window burst into colorful confetti only he could see. Clara waved and continued walking off towards center-city. Daniel sipped his coffee as he made sure his calendar was updated and several new alerts were turned on. He did not want to disappoint Clara. He liked her sense of humor, and they had an easy way of making each other laugh. He knew she was smart in a subtly disarming way, and he loved listening to the fascinating things she said. But he sensed that their relationship was changing, and was intrigued at the thought that Clara might be moving beyond friendship towards a more personal relationship. That thought would certainly keep him wondering until tonight.

Daniel took two more leisurely sips from his coffee cup, sighed, rose to finish crossing the park and head to the office. He had plenty of time. Maybe he’d window shop at his favorite used-book store. Daniel still liked the old-fashion feel of antique books. He’d been surprised more than once to find some rare old first-edition that someone else must have cleared out of a closet. Books were just not fashionable. No matter. He’d risk the avalanche if his ever-growing collection of books fell over. He privately allowed a virtual image of that scene to play itself out in an exaggerated way, and he couldn’t help but chuckle. He tagged the clip and forwarded it to Clara. Moments later a laughing V-emoji head rolled through the air in front of him shedding huge tears, and popped from view.

Daniel hummed as he turned the corner, and a series of small store fronts appeared ahead. A number of people were at the bookstore’s curbside café, and a few others were looking at the books outside in a portable rack, or glancing into the window display. His peripheral vision saw a shimmer where a woman stood. Something compelled him to slow down, then continue walking in a stroll. His peripheral vision took her in and he was slightly puzzled. He let his gaze broaden to take in the café scene. Most looked like locals who met here regularly. They all carried on without giving Daniel any regard. The woman by the window turned and sat at an empty table off by itself in a somewhat opportunistic extension of the available space. Daniel thought he knew what was catching his attention. This woman was almost too perfectly average. She was neither tall nor short. Her clothes were neat but not noteworthy. She had pleasant features, but nothing about her called out for paying her any attention. Her virtual-persona was softened like his but not “misty-gray” so she was not signaling a desire to be left alone. Daniel got the sense he was looking at a perfectly “plain vanilla” persona, and that piqued his interest. She never looked directly at him, yet he felt there was something happening, and the thought occurred to him he’d gotten some type of a greeting. A very subtle greeting at that.

Daniel was not prone to impulse, so he was mildly surprised to hear himself say to the woman, “May I join you?” She looked up and smiled frankly as she replied, “Please have a chair.”

Daniel introduced himself, and she answered. “Call me Anna.” “Well Anna, I’m ordering a coffee. Can I order something for you?”, and Daniel offered to pay for both. She smiled and her V-form order appeared before him. Daniel appended his own order and submitted the V-form with payment and tip. A waiter quickly appeared with Daniel’s black-decaf coffee, and Anna got her herbal-mint tea with honey. Anna thanked Daniel. He nodded. They raised their cups and considered the morning pedestrians. Children were heading off to school. Daniel heard some laughter and a knot of high school students, who must be old enough to have their temporary adult V-licenses, were riding e-scooters made out as various types of V-dragons. The dragons were fairly comical V-origami inventions, nothing too seriously frightening to any of the younger students. They knew there were V-rules and none would risk having their new license suspended. He figured they were probably art students tricking out their own designs off of someone’s free online-template, perhaps as school cap-stone assignments. Several of

the designs were quiet striking. Anna was laughing softly. He looked at her as she glanced at him, and laughed softly again. It was a subtle laugh, with a charm somewhere beyond his personal experience.

Anna took a sip of her tea, sighed softly, paused, and asked Daniel if he'd come for the coffee or a book? Now it was his turn to smile. He spoke of the independent book store's history, of its owner and staff, and how he thought it was probably the best indie-book store for a thousand miles. He mentioned some of the books he'd found there. He offered that he lived not too far away. He paused, not wanting to be boorish. A thought occurred to him, Anna's voice had not a trace of accent. Her voice was perfectly matched to her persona, pure "plain vanilla". Daniel allowed his intuition to play out and asked Anna if she was visiting the city? She smiled lightly and said she was visiting, and liked this section of the city very much. He asked if she'd travelled very far. An indistinct looked shimmered across her face, she paused a moment, then offered she had travelled far, and soon she'd be returning home. There seemed to be mixed emotions playing across her face as she watched the crowd walking by. Daniel tried to ease the moment by saying, "At least you found the best little used-book store in the whole country." This made Anna laugh in her easy musical way.

A silence followed and Daniel was not sure which way to go in this very pleasant and unremarkable conversation. He let that thought fade. He still had plenty of free time built into his morning schedule. Then he had the insight, their conversation was completely ordinary, yet somehow he had found a certain basic joy, or perhaps the joy had found him. He realized he was now straying into the world of Philosophy.

Anna shifted her bag and he saw she had a vintage copy of Tolkien's work "The Children of Hûrin". It happened he'd recently finished that book and was still mulling over his feelings about what he'd read. He decided to go with that topic.

Anna said she was rereading her copy, and asked Daniel what he'd thought of the book?

He gathered his thoughts and began, "Well, it is a pre-history of the First Age of elves and men in the mythopoeic world of Middle Earth. Tolkien's classics, "Lord of the Rings" and "The Hobbit" are best known. Those stories take place in the Third Age. "The Children of Hûron" is much darker. There are heroes and villains, but it seems to be part of the tragic end of that First Age."

Anna paused then added, "I know what you mean about the darkness. There are heroic people and elves. There are creatures of great evil. But I am confused by Tûrin, son of Hûrin. He seems quite a heroic character with many fine qualities. Yet time and again he makes the most unfortunate choices. Even when he has an opportunity to escape evil and return to a fairer world, he seems to never learn to make better choices. I am trying to understand the author's point."

"Ah, I think you've outlined the point quite well Anna. People are free to make choices all the time. Tûrin is an epic example of someone who refuses to learn from their mistakes and continues to make poor choices. Evil is always trying to do him harm, but it seems to me that if he made better choices, then evil would not have an opportunity to work its mischief." Daniel mused.

Anna asked plainly, "Do you think this is true of most people?"

"I think it is the nature of most people to make mistakes when they are younger, but then they learn to make better choices as they grow older. At least that is true for most folks." Daniel paused, then continued, "Any student can point out a period of medieval history, a period sometimes called the Dark Ages, when leaders making extremely bad choices seemed to dominate all world affairs. At the same time there are significant examples of brilliant philosophical and religious thought that emerged and survived from that darkness. Not all of

their names are well known but their influence is still with us today.” Daniel sipped his coffee and looked off at the swelling carnival of mid-morning commuters, and was lost to thought.

He was not sure how long the silence lasted. Daniel turned to look at Anna. She too was looking at the throngs of people with an unfocused gaze he recognized. She shifted her attention and for a time they gazed directly at each other in relaxed silence.

Anna broke the silence and asked Daniel, “How do you know what is real?” Daniel thought he knew what she was asking but Anna then added, “How do you choose to stay in the real world and not give yourself over to any stray thought that gives you pleasure?” Daniel thought about the various regulations that allowed monitoring of virtual-reality usage, the safeguards against VR addiction, or other mental-health problems from long-term dependance on the pleasures of VR. She would be aware of those regulations. She must be asking about his personal philosophy.

“Well, Anna, I suppose I’m old-fashion that way. VR is just another tool. I use it in ways that let me effectively get things done, and play with its aesthetics like I would in making any other design choice. I’m fortunate, I seem to have no predisposition towards addictive behavior, and actually have a strong aversion to anything that is too popular. I think that helps. I also spend a few weeks each summer at a simple cottage. It is remote enough that there’s only the basics, electricity and running water. An old radio works most of the time, unless there is a solar-wind storm. There is no connecting to the Halo-net or any other network without driving an hour into a small town with its net-cafe. The cottage is one of those places where even satellite-net is poor. That all makes the choice obvious. I can choose to just be in the real world. Once I return to the city it is easier to make other choices, like choosing real dirt gardening over a V-garden, or even choosing to read old books. It’s the touch of something real.” Anna’s expression brightened at that last sentence, and Daniel felt the conversation had turned some important corner.

Anna seemed to be choosing her words with thought and care. “Daniel, I see on your public calendar you have some important events blocked out for the rest of the day. I need to go soon too. I’d like to tell you something but need to ask you if you’ll trust me.” Daniel did not hesitate to say, “Of course I trust you Anna.”

She held out her hand to him and they clasped hands in a friendly grasp as if to shake hands, as Anna said, “I’ve used an advanced technology to enhance my Halo. I have the ability to create a privacy bubble around us so we can speak more freely, is that okay?” He nodded in agreement.

Suddenly the café and the street around them was slightly hazed in a soft prismatic light. Voices around them were muffled and the general sound of city life was a nearby hum. “Anyone looking at us will just see two people sitting and casually looking at nothing in particular. It’s a randomized VR loop that can stay running as long as we what our privacy.” Anna explained. Daniel was impressed at how smoothly it operated.

Anna gently squeezed Daniel’s hand, unclasped her grip, and turned his hand over. He watched as she slowly ran a finger gently but firmly across his palm. The flesh paled as blood flowed away, then brightened as blood flowed back. She turned her palm upwards and offered Daniel his chance to do the same. He traced his finger across her palm and saw the coloration fade and return, but was somehow uncertain of what had happened. He looked at Anna and stroked her palm again. Again the color changed and returned, but he was fairly certain it was a VR simulation. “Anna, what are you trying to tell me?”

She paused before speaking, “I’m part of a pre-diplomatic outreach group’s research team. I’ve been preparing my final report. I can’t say what the outcome will be but, I think your world’s inter-government council might be hearing from my world’s ambassadors in the near future.” Daniel was surprised to find he was considering her words at face value, as he said “Oh, well, wow.” She slightly frowned and smiled at the same time and said, “There are strict rules on

what I can say and what I can't, but there is something I can do to help you understand what I'm saying." She paused once more, and added, "With your permission, I can dampen any VR field within our privacy bubble. We can speak to each other as plainly as if we were at your remote summer cottage." Daniel simply said, "I agree."

It was as if a gentle breeze had blown through the café and all was transformed. Virtual elements, like the potted plants and decorative tablecloths had all disappeared. Anna was now looking back at him kindly with large moist eyes. Her smooth skin flowed from the pale-lemon yellow of her face downward into tangerine and deep red-violet. Gentle spots of plum and deep blue dotted her skin. Her enigmatic smile immediately made him think of the famous painting, "the Mona Lisa", if that lovely countenance should suddenly appear on the face of a salamander-like amphibian. The effect was utterly charming and must have shown on his own face for he saw Anna's face deepen to a soft-orange.

He followed her glance as she looked down at her outstretched hand. He held her cool hand palm up. He saw orange color flow aside beneath her translucent flesh and flow back as his finger traced a line across her palm. It had the look and feel of that which was truly real.

"Your hand is so warm. I like that." Anna said. Daniel laughed and replied, "And your skin feels pleasantly cool." They both chuckled softly and they clasped hands lightly and let a quiet moment have its perfect way.

"We need to go, so I'm sending you a VR comm's channel invitation. If you accept it you'll see that it will stay on Standby mode. If you ever see it go to Active mode, then keep checking the news." Anna said. She frown-smiled and continued, "It was nice meeting you Daniel."

Daniel replied honestly, "You've changed my life Anna. Thank you for trusting me." Anna's smile broadened as she added, "I only returned the trust you showed me. Thank you." They unclasped hands and both rose. Anna gently cradled Daniel's face in her hands and leaned forward until their foreheads touched. Daniel in reply softly placed his hands either side of Anna's face. In that shared moment Daniel's joy was more than he could ever explain. As they unembraced, Daniel saw the cafe's familiar embellishments shimmer back into view. It was as if he was watching the wind. Anna playfully winked at Daniel and then she was her human persona again. Street sounds had returned to normal. He heard Anna say, "Yes it's all back as it was before." She squeezed his hand one last time, softly saying "So warm!" They let go and Daniel watched as Anna turned and walked away. She looked back over her shoulder, smiled and waved, then turned a corner and was gone. "And so cool." Daniel said aloud to no one in particular. He turned and started walking toward his office.

As Daniel approached the office lobby he slowed to review a V-window of his Contacts, checked his Invites, and accepted Anna's while placing it in a new folder he labelled "new associates". Her status icon showed up as "Standby". "Standby indeed." Daniel thought as he passed the elevator and began climbing the stairs.