

## The Day After Yesterday

"I can remember sitting next to my parents in the old, wooden rocking chair on the porch of our house. It was too large for me so my feet didn't touch the floor. Actually, it was big enough that I had to put some sort of block of wood in front of it to help me climb up onto it. Of course, they weren't really my parents either," Millie started to explain.

She leaned back in her leather office chair and nodded at James, who sat across the room from her with a puzzled look on his face. He too was sitting in an office chair facing away from his desk. On his desk were neatly organized piles of papers, scattered pens and pencils and two computer monitors. On one screen, a program was running through one set of various equations, and on the other there was an empty word-processing document open. Behind her, Millie could hear her own computer sorting through a slough of another set of equations and hypotheses and formulas. James raised his eyebrows in question as Millie paused in her story to run her fingers through her smooth brown hair.

"Not really your parents?" he asked. James was dressed in a brown button-down shirt, khakis and, of course, the white lab coat everyone at Dav-Corp was required to wear. He sported black, wild hair that was held in a disheveled look by a great deal of mousse or hair spray or some other oily substance.

"Right," Millie concurred. "They were holograms."

James laughed and shook his head. He swiveled around in his chair to face his desk. "Right," he said in between laughs. "Holograms." He picked up a pencil and jotted something down in a notebook he always had with him. After finishing, he read it aloud. "Millie David's parents are holograms?"

Millie rolled her eyes. Such a strange quirk of his, she thought. James tended to write down everything memorable in a small black journal he carried with him. He was very systematic about it.

“I’m being serious,” Millie continued. “My parents were holograms. There were two projection units. One was in the house and the other was in the car. They could project the holograms up to two hundred feet, I think.”

“Okay,” James said as he turned back around. “I’ve heard of holograms being used in classrooms to represent professors who are instructing multiple classes at once, but I’ve never heard of someone’s parents being holograms. It’s just not possible.”

Millie smiled softly and lowered her gaze to the linoleum floor filling the space between their stations in the office. Shoe scuffs scattered the floor from all the times one or the other of them would run across it. Thinking they had discovered something, they had dashed across the floor to bring what they found to the other’s attention. Each time, their research was proven wrong and more scuffs were put in the floor when they shuffled back to their chairs, downtrodden.

“My parents both died in a car accident when I was six,” she began to explain. “I couldn’t stand it. I had been so close to them. I *still* remember a lot about them—my real parents that is, even though I was so young when they died.”

James nodded slowly. His glasses slid down his nose and he pushed them back up as he waited for her to continue. “Go on,” he pleaded.

“Well, we both know how well off my uncle is. I mean, he’s funding our research here and was even able to simply hand me this job right after college. So, after a month in which I was crying every day, locked in my room, he finally hired a company to design hologram programs. It was amazing. They moved, talked and acted just like my real parents. The only difference is that deep down I knew they weren’t real. And of course, I couldn’t actually touch either of them.”

James began jotting furiously in his notebook. When he finished, he looked up and nodded absently, as if lost in thought. “Never would have thought it possible. “Weird,” he said.

Millie promptly turned around and went back to work.

“Hey, sorry, Millie. I mean—it’s a sad story. It is.”

“My life is a freak show,” Millie said quietly.

James had no verbal response. He bit his lower lip and tapped his pencil on his open notepad repeatedly, leaving black dots on the journal’s white surface. He grimaced and then jotted down, “Millie thinks her life is a freak show?” Afterwards, he was able to relax.

He turned around to return to his work as well. “What do you think, Millie? Do you believe God is real?”

Millie stopped typing and rubbed her chin with the tips of her fingers. She had wondered how long it was going to take before he asked that. Millie thought back to yesterday when she had spoken on the phone to a cousin of hers. One of the first topics even he had brought up was whether or not she thought God existed.

Millie tilted her head to the side and answered, “Honestly? I’m not sure. Most people think I don’t believe he or she exists. I mean, it’s only natural to assume that from the research we’re doing.”

“I don’t think God exists,” James promptly replied.

“No?” Millie asked, curious.

“Nah,” he answered. “God is just another deity like Zeus or Ra. Just some cultural fabrication.”

Millie ran her fingers through her hair again and looked up at the bright whiteness of the florescent ceiling lights. “I’m just not sure,” she said. “What about the research? Do you really think we can find an equation to prove God doesn’t exist?”

“Sure. Don’t you?”

“No. No, I do not. I don’t see how it’s possible,” Millie replied as she stared at the computer’s monitor. Lines of numbers and variables filled the screen and scrolled up so quickly that she couldn’t even read them without pausing it.

“We’ve found equations to prove everything else. I don’t see why not,” James answered.

Millie raised her eyebrows at the logic and then shrugged. She began occasionally to pause the scrolling results on the monitor off and on to pour over the computer’s results. Millie glanced at the clock on the wall. She and James had only been there a half-hour. On her table were piles of other notes and research she had to sort through later in the day. Millie sighed. After a few minutes, her eyes became bleary as she stared at the screen. She found herself gazing into the back of her eyelids as she started to fall asleep at the desk.

She began to daydream about her hologram parents, about them standing in front of the sink and behaving as if they were cleaning dishes. She recalled her mother kneeling down and extending a hand towards her. Her mother’s hand was dripping with soapy water. As the water dripped from her hand, it vanished when it should have formed a puddle on the floor. Millie recalled looking up into the hologram’s eyes and telling her that she wasn’t really doing the dishes. When her mother tried to convince her otherwise, she only ran away in tears. Later in the night, she heard the workers in the brown suits. She heard them walking around the house, doing dishes, doing laundry, making her meals. Millie remembered how frightened and confused she became each night when they crept around the house, behaving like little goblins.

“Millie?”

Millie opened her eyes squinted. “Huh?” she asked.

“Are you awake over there?” James asked.

“Yeah,” Millie stammered. “What’s up?”

James didn’t answer after a minute so Millie glanced over her shoulder. James stood up and launched himself across the room with his lab coat flapping behind him. He stopped at the printer and brought back a sheet of paper to his desk.

“What’s up?” Millie asked again.

“Oh—I was going to ask you something, but never mind. This looks interesting.” Millie sat and waited as James scribbled hastily on the paper. He bolted up from his chair again after a long moment of silence with the paper in his hand. His eyes were wide and he had a massive grin on his face.

“Can you check that out for me?” James asked as he nearly tripped over himself while he rushed the paper over to her. Yet another scuffmark was added to the floor as he arrived.

Millie double-checked the equation to ensure that he hadn’t made a mistake. She pushed her hair behind her ears and away from her face, then eyed the printout of the equation the computer had developed as a possibility.

“Well?” he asked impatiently.

Millie wrote on the paper furiously and then stopped. She put the pencil down, leaned back in the chair and smiled inwardly. “Nope,” she declared and rubbed her eyes in an attempt to come fully awake. “The computer must not have been updated with the most current information on some of these properties. This isn’t right.”

“Dammit!” James said as he growled and carefully scratched a spot on his head with his index finger so as not to mess up the arrangement of his hair. He threw up his hands and walked back across the room to his desk. “Maybe you were right. Maybe it’s not possible.”

Now able to smile outwardly without James noticing, she did so broadly and replied, “Maybe it isn’t.”

“Sometimes I don’t think you want to find it,” James said from across the room.

Millie looked around absently at the other tables in the room that were filled with a juxtaposition of Bibles, geology reports, religious texts, and books about evolution and Darwin. After months of work, the room was starting to look like a library that had been hit by an earthquake.

“I think I would like to know the answer just as much as anyone else probably wants to know,” Millie answered. “Unfortunately, our approach is difficult because we are trying to prove something *doesn’t* exist.”

Millie crumpled up the paper she had been working out the equation on and threw it across the room. It hit the floor, bounced once and came to rest by the wooden door. “For example,” she began to explain, “can you prove that the paper no longer has writing on it without looking at it?”

James wrote in his notebook, “Millie finds comfort in God, even when trying to prove he’s fake?” and shook his head in dismay. “Yeah, Millie, I get *that*. I understand that it’s an almost implausible task. I never said it wasn’t.”

Millie let the paper rest where it landed. “I dunno, James. I suppose I do want to succeed. If nothing else, than to be remembered in the history books.”

The two returned to their work. The sun reached midpoint in the sky and lunch came and went. In the early afternoon, Millie found herself staring at her keyboard as James launched into a long speech about how the newly discovered method for quick cloning would eradicate death and disease. He continued to ramble on and began an argument against the growing ethical dilemma.

“Hey,” Millie tried to interrupt.

“Cry cry, whine whine, life is precious and we should respect nature’s plan,” James was imitating a cloning protestor in a mocking tone. “I’m sorry, Millie. What was that?”

“What were you going to tell me earlier?” Millie asked.

“I was going to ask if things were difficult between you and your parents. I mean, it had to be hard having hologram parents.”

“Yes. It was,” Millie said with an absent tone.

James pulled out his notebook and peered over at her from behind his glasses.

“What was it like?” He sat at the edge of his chair with his journal and pen ready.

“Oh, I don’t really want to talk about it,” Millie began. She looked at her feet and shifted them against each other as she rubbed the back of her neck. “It’s one thing just to say I had holograms for parents; it’s another to try to talk about it.”

“Come on now, Millie. We’ve been working together for—what?—two years now?”

Millie sighed and grimaced and seemed to sink inward. “It was very hard, James. It—uhm—was hard not to wonder why I couldn’t touch them. They tried to convince me that it was because of the accident.”

Millie leaned forward in her chair and lost some of her prior hesitation. She pulled her hair back with both hands as James began jotting things down sporadically. “Like once, I wanted my dad to give me a piggy back ride at a park we were at. When he said he couldn’t, I ran away. I always ran from things that frightened me. It has always been how I deal with things. I hid for hours.”

James nodded slowly. “How did it all end? I mean, you don’t still talk to your par—,” James started to ask.

Millie leaned forward in her chair further as she became more eager to let it all out. “Then, it finally broke apart,” She began before James could even finish his question. “They were watching some show called ‘That 00’s Show.’ It was about these college students who get in trouble for downloading pirated music and getting drunk and such. I remember it so clearly, James. The audience laughed loudly at some joke.

Afterwards, my parents laughed too, but only after the audience had already grown quiet again. It was like the program was bugged that day and their programmed reactions were out of sync.”

Millie shook her head and breathed in deeply, slowly. She ran her hands across her face and then continued, looking down, with her head resting in her palms. “I broke down. I found their main commands and shut them off. After that, I was back in my room for months. I didn’t leave. I just cried and cried and cried. I’m not sure when I actually recovered from losing my parents. Maybe I still haven’t gotten over it, but at least I’m no longer crying myself to sleep.”

James shook his head with his mouth open and wrote furiously. “Interesting,” he mumbled to himself.

“Interesting?” Millie demanded with rage. Millie’s eyes grew wide and wet with passion. “I pour out my heart and all you can say is that it’s interesting?”

James immediately closed his notebook and folded his arms inwardly. “Millie—I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.” He said as he swallowed slowly and bit his lower lip. “I do care. I really do. What made you finally turn them off? Sure, you were only six years old when they were turned on, but you had to know something wasn’t right.”

Millie calmed down a little and sat back down. “I’m don’t know. I guess it was the comfort of just seeing my parents there: walking around, sitting down, reading, talking to each other and just doing what my parents used to do. And I guess part of what kept the image alive was that they still told me they loved me. Each time I started to question everything, they’d say ‘we still love you.’ I’d tell them they weren’t real, so neither was their love and they would only ask what difference it made if the love was real or not. I did finally turn them off about four years later, but I don’t want to talk about what happened then.”

James remained quiet after this as he considered it. For a while after, they were both silent. Millie returned to her work and so did James. For a while Millie fumed over James's reaction to her story. Heartless prick, she thought to herself. She laid her hands in her lap and closed her eyes in resignation. That's just the way he is, she thought. After a minute, Millie forgot work and let the images of another daydream overtake her.

*"We love you, honey. Isn't it enough, even if we can't hold you or hug you?" her mother asked between Millie's racking sobs.*

*"But you're just programmed to say that," Millie pleaded with outstretched hands. "You don't really love me! You can't!" Millie's face glistened from tear streaks as she waited for them to answer her.*

*Her dad gave her a pitiful frown and said, "Sweetie pie, what difference does that make? For a while, you were happy having us around. Just the fact that we said we loved you helped you. Why should it matter if we're not real if just the image of us helps you, pumpkin?"*

Millie blinked and snapped out of her daydream. In front of her, the computer's monitor was flashing a notice at her. One of the equations was a potential solution. She sighed, grabbed the mouse and clicked print. Her feet clunked loudly on the floor as she walked heavily over to the printer. She grabbed the printout without looking at it.

"Find something?" James said and straightened in his chair.

Millie made a disinterested noise that sounded something like "meh" and walked back to her desk.

"Should I be excited?" James demanded. He clicked the button on top of a pen he held in his hand repeatedly.

Millie shrugged without looking at him. "I doubt it," she answered.

"Fine," James said. "Let me know if it turns out to be something worth having me double check."

Millie sat down and frowned at the paper. It was a long set of variables, symbols and numbers that spanned nearly two lines and was the most complicated thing she had ever seen before. She grabbed a pencil and hovered the tip over it. She scanned across it and then looked up at the computer screen. She blinked a few times and looked back at the paper. She pushed her hair out of her eyes as it fell repeatedly across her face. Millie simply studied the different physical properties the variables represented at first and chewed on the end of her pencil.

"No," she said softly in disbelief.

"Well, keep looking then," James answered from what seemed like another world.

Millie ignored James's misunderstanding and continued to study the printout. She set to solving the equation on her own to see that she reached the same conclusion as the computer's. Many of the variables dealt with very hypothetical, very cutting-edge discoveries, so much of it had to be double-checked.

The pencil's tip broke as Millie finished. Everything checked out. The equation proved there could not be a creator; there could not be a God.

Millie stood up, stumbled over her feet and felt herself start to fall backwards. She grabbed the top of her chair to balance herself. She felt nauseous. For a second after, she was unsure what was happening until a pair of hands on her shoulders snapped her back into focus.

"You *have* found something, then?" James said. He let go of her shoulders and she sat down. James looked down at her pale face and then at the paper sitting on the desk. "Let me double check the work."

Millie swam through a fog of images of her parents. She felt a lump in her throat as their reassuring voices joined the images in her mind.

“Millie?” James said quietly. He placed his hand on her shoulder again and squeezed gently. “Can I see the printout? Is it something I should look at?”

Millie let her mouth drop open slightly and her gaze flicked all over the room. She stared at the books on Darwin, the Bibles, and the afternoon sun shining in through the window.

“Millie!” James shouted in desperation

Millie jumped and looked up at James’s face. She looked at his eyes, which were focused not on her, but at the printout sitting on the table. She stared at his carefully arranged hair, at the notebook he had in his hands and caught a glimpse of something he had written earlier: “Millie finds comfort in God, even when trying to prove he’s fake?”

Millie read the words in James’s book again and again. She remembered when she had finally found how to turn the holograms off and chose to do just that. She remembered running away from them and reading the command to turn them off from the piece of paper with their primary instructions. Millie thought back to what happened after. She thought back to the months she spent in her room in agony with countless nights of sobbing. She gazed up at James and smiled at him reassuringly.

“No,” Millie finally answered. “No, it’s nothing. I’m sorry. I’m just feeling a little sick today. That’s all.”

“What? Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Millie said. To confirm it, she picked the printout up, crumpled it, and tossed it across the room, where it landed next to the other discarded paper.

“All right,” James said with a shrug. He returned to his chair and sat down.

Millie turned to the computer. On the screen, the equation was still highlighted. She moved the cursor to the ignore button and pressed it. The equation was deleted and the computer began its search once again where it had left off.