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Beyond Words

Laori blinked, her retinal scanner humming as it traced over the chip. Instantly, code working in the back of her head rushed over her vision, transforming the seemingly innocuous little square into valuable data.

Author: David Jennings, Year: 2025. Form: Diary. Subject: Daily life, Personal reflections.

She scanned over the information like a catalog, ignoring the prompts to activate the sensory immersion. She didn't need the jolt of artificial coffee on her tongue or phantom raindrops prickling her skin. All she wanted was the information, clean and precise.

Laori wasn't just reading for fun. She was writing a book on an average man as he explored his passions. For that, she first needed to research how the average man lived. That was why she came to the archives, combing through diaries like this one. She wanted to collect real knowledge to better immerse the readers. For her, the sensory immersion wasn't worth the time. She didn't need to feel the rain, only to know it had fallen.

The diary opened with a single line. *Walked home in the rain after work.* She processed the info for its value: rain, commute, location. The author had lived in City-9, with an office job and a 30-minute transport to and from work. They must have been an average citizen. Laori noted the value in that assessment and moved on. Again, the system pinged to activate the sensory immersion. Once again, she ignored it, this time making sure to manually think to disable prompts. If it wasn't going to give her new information, what was the point? She had already gotten everything she needed. Everything else was simply inefficient. Sensations weren't writing. Sensations were theater.



Kai slumped into his sofa, brain on autofocus. Yet, no matter what he tried, the grade report he had just received always seemed to be at the edge of his mind. He tried to blink the thought away. He couldn't do anything about it now; it was done. Yet, the knot in his chest wouldn't disappear.

He turned his gaze and looked at the chip in his hand. He felt its rough, uneven texture. He had no idea what story lay inside it. He had simply grabbed a random chip the last time he was in the library. He loved reading. It felt more real than anything he had ever experienced.

He flicked the chip around, held it up to his eye, and engaged his retinal scanner. Instantly, his murky clouds faded. His AI net traced over all the lines of encoding, transforming them into signals he could process. It took over his synapses, allowing them to control his eyes, ears, smell, taste, touch, and feel with manufactured proteins and artificial stimuli. Without a second thought, Kai enabled the sensory immersion.

In under a second, the murky clouds in Kai disappeared. His world tilted. Instantly, he noticed the change. He felt the damp metallic air filling his lungs, heavier and more humid than anything his climate-controlled apartment could ever generate. He felt his body shiver, his clothes soaked, clinging to his skin from the torrent. The rain roared around him, falling onto the back of his neck. He staggered.

He heard the far-off, muted sounds of engines dampened by the storm like a lighthouse drowned out by the dark waves. The conversation a lady was having on the phone about her nephew. The hiss of water seeping into the gutters.

Kai grinned widely, letting the feelings pour into him. This was it. What had happened here didn't matter. All he needed was right inside him. The real world with its grades and lectures and pressure could dissolve for all he cared. The rain was enough.



Laori stared at the publisher's transcription with unease. It was a rejection, not unlike the many she had received before. No matter how she braced for it, it would always feel like stones hurled at her, shattering her to pieces. She heard their words in her head again. *Lacks engagement*. She replayed it a second time, then a third, blindly hoping for something she could cling to.

Lacking engagement? How? She had meticulously captured every detail possible about her story and written it. Every routine, street name, and backstory had been derived from real accounts from her research. She had captured life exactly as it was. What could be more engaging than truth itself? How could something so accurate come off as flat and hollow?

Her gaze drifted back to one of the many chips she had used for research, the diary. She spun it around in her fingers. She had extracted the facts from it, gotten the information, so what other use did it have left? Lost for ideas, she decided to scan it again, in case there was anything she had missed. She held it up to her eye and engaged her scanner. She felt a slight prick, then a rush of information flooding every crevice of her brain.

The entry appeared as she had remembered it. Sat at a cafe with a friend. Same table as always. Coffee was bitter. She sighed. There was nothing new here. The system pinged again, asking if she wanted to engage her senses. She went to think no, then rethought. It couldn't hurt to just try it out, right? She prompted yes, and she felt herself moved. Gone was her room and walls. She felt a sharp taste spread through her tongue, the bitter, grinding taste of coffee. Heat spread through her palms and into her chest, as though she were holding the cup herself. The hum of conversation droned around her. The wallpaper colors seemed to jump out at her, as if to reinforce the branding of the little shop in her mind.

For as quickly as it came, it went. Laori stumbled backward and uttered a curse. She knew she shouldn't have bothered with the sensory engagement; she didn't gain anything

new from that. She already knew everything that had happened. She knew the author had drunk the coffee, she knew the café was crowded, she knew what the café looked like. But if that was the case, then why did it feel so different?



Weeks slipped past like data packets in AI centers. His grades hadn't gotten back up; if anything, the slump had only gotten worse. But that didn't matter to him. He looked around his apartment, noticing the variety of chips scattered about. One glinted in the sparkles of sunlight through his window.

He walked over to it and picked it up. He remembered this one; it was the fantastic diary with the rain and coffee shop. He shivered just recollecting the amazing sensations. He had never finished this chip. He decided to do it now.

He lifted the chip to his eye, a practice that had become second nature to him at this point. The scanner activated and the AI net sparked to life. Heeding his call, processing the data, they lifted him into the story, engaging the sensory immersion.

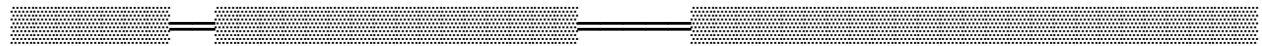
Expecting the thrill and rush of senses, conversely, he was swallowed by silence. The air was thick, suffocating, carrying the oppressive scent of dust and overripe flowers. Everything felt muted and dull, like nothing mattered. He felt the cold, smooth edge of a wooden rail digging into the palm of his hand. He was standing, but his knees felt weak, threatening to buckle, like he wasn't really there. He felt a crushing weight in his chest, making it impossible to take a breath. Sadness and monotony filled his heart, ripping away all other thoughts. He hated it.

Within moments, the imagery dissipated, and Kai buckled to the ground, panting on his knees, tears escaping from his eyes. What was that? Those feelings... There was no other way to describe it than hollow.

He usually discarded information that came with the senses. He found it unnecessary. However, this time, no matter how he looked at it, he needed to know what had happened in the diary. Without it, the intensity of the grief felt meaningless. He needed context. He sorted through the data for an answer, and he got one.

The man's name was David Jennings. He had been working his daily 9-5 monotonous job, yet found solace in the smaller moments in life. Combined with the love of his wife, he had become a rather happy man despite his circumstances. However, disaster struck when that same partner, who had given him shine, was taken from him ruthlessly.

It wasn't just feeling a loss; it was so much more. It was the story of a specific, loved person who was gone. He started to cry again. The sensory gave him the tears, but the information gave him the reason to cry.



Laori parsed through her manuscript open on her interface, the publisher's comment open in another section of her brain. Her eyes traced down her work, looking for places where she could improve it.

She landed on a line she quite liked. "He made his way to the café, ordering his usual bitter coffee." It was factually perfect, pulled almost directly from the diary entry. It was accurate to a point. As she stared at it, she couldn't keep from remembering thoughts of the sensory immersion she had experienced. It had felt so real, from the bitter taste on her tongue to the hue of the tables. That single moment had felt more vivid than anything she had ever written.

She pushed her chair back, legs scraping the floor, and spun around. Maybe that was the change she needed. She needed to know if that “inefficient” sensation could save her book.

She went back to the line and deleted it. She hesitantly started writing. “Oscar trudged his worn-out, once-white sneakers across the carpet as he craned his neck to look at the menu. The bright display was simply a courtesy for him; he already knew what he was going to order. He stepped up to the cashier and ordered his usual black coffee, craving the bitter feeling.”

She stepped back, rereading the new passage. It held no new facts of note, yet this time it seemed to jump out of the page. She smiled, as the story came to life in her mind. She moved to the next scene, ready to dismantle and rebuild her book.



Kai shuffled around on his bed. The memory of the funeral still resonated in his chest. He felt connected to it, no matter what chips he read after.

His eyes drifted, settling on the grade report in his storage. He looked it over, usually content to just let the unpleasant feeling wash over him and exit. However, this time, he felt the need to know why. He looked up and down the report.

He saw a D in participation with a note for absence. He sighed. It made sense; he had been skipping a lot of his lectures. He looked further and saw an F for an unsubmitted project. He shoved the report away from his mind, not wanting to look at it. The sheer, heavy guilt was too much.

He decided to look back through the specific assignment he had not done. He read through it. A presentation on a species of your choice. He sighed in disappointment. He could’ve done this one; it would’ve been easy.

As he started scrolling through his class, he noticed much more of the same. More and more things he could've done, yet didn't. The guilt he felt didn't disappear, yet it grew in direction and purpose.

He looked toward the assignment due tomorrow. A simple piece of homework. He went to ignore it and put it away, like always. However, at the last moment, he stopped. He paused for a minute. Then he made up his mind and started writing.