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a novel

EKATERINA YUSHA

Ekaterina Yusha

Coma

«Издательские решения»

Yusha E.

Coma / E. Yusha — «Издательские решения»,

This is not about technology, but rupture without a slammed door. A man turned supporting character in his own story, and a woman choosing expansion over closeness — not out of cruelty, but exhaustion. Coma is a psychological drama about love under redistribution — those who leave and those who remain. One already in the future, the other still in the past. And the unsettling truth: both are right.

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Coma

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Prologue

Would you want to live your life once more?
And if you were given the chance to rewrite the script?

In 2020, when few of us could imagine that a pandemic would begin with a heavily promoted respiratory virus, and that a century later the world would belong to corporations where everything would be paid for in energy or cryptocurrency, life still felt simpler.

We grew old. We died. We bought AirPods and spent days standing in lines for the new iPhone.

When we could no longer read the ingredients printed on food packages, and the name of an incoming caller blurred on a smartphone screen, we bought glasses. And if even the past was fading in the memory of those who had miraculously preserved their eyesight by the age of eighty, what could be said about numbers?

Back then, numbers meant too much.

We measured our worth in followers, likes, and views. For the sake of reach, we stepped outside our comfort zones, recorded ridiculous videos, danced in front of cameras, and willingly turned ourselves into caricatures of ourselves.

It was also the age of concentrated self-development. People made money from anything capable of creating the illusion of happiness, while every failure was blamed on retrograde Mercury.

If you asked me to describe that time in three phrases, they would be: «I am in the flow,» «I am in the moment,» and «I am in my resources.» Do not ask what those words truly meant. It is better not to know.

Today, however, vision can be improved through an application. Forgotten memories are no longer confined to a smartphone gallery — you can step inside them, inhabit them, and relive them by launching virtual reality.

That forgotten world was the place Lessie wanted to return to again and again.

She watched videos of herself petting a cat or watering flowers. It did not matter that in reality the flowers had long since dried and the cat had run away searching for food. One more problem simply ceased to exist.

Lessie Brick turned seventy-eight last week. She had been connected to the «Coma» program for twenty years.

She belonged to the generation that still felt nostalgia for fitness bands, the old AirPods, and the time when the corporation beginning with the letter «F» first presented its virtual reality project. Lessie was among the first to purchase a subscription.

The early version of «Coma» was either a one-way ticket or limited to two hours per day. Now the system had reached its thirteenth update, and all restrictions had finally been removed.

The only requirement was notarized consent allowing one's consciousness to be uploaded into the virtual world, along with payment for the chosen period. When the subscription expired, the user would be returned to the real, unwanted world — or remain forever inside an alternative reality as a numerical code.

Subscription packages ranged from one week to several decades.

For those who paid in full, bonus options were available, including the ability to visit any historical period. Once, Lessie returned to the nineties.

That decade was no longer in demand. Those who had lived through it were mostly gone, and those who had seen Tetris or Tamagotchi were too few — and even they were slowly forgetting.

Lessie was among the latter.

Sometimes she and several other «tourists» — the name given to those who visited unpaid time zones — met at a school dance inside a hallway or an assembly hall, depending on luck. They used avatars selected from a standard catalogue. Paid zones were inaccessible to them. No one ever explained why.

People like Lessie, whose lives were quietly but steadily approaching their end, preferred the twenty-first century.

Numbers were no longer as important, because people were willing to pay for the chance to relive youth and do the things they had failed to do while wasting time scrolling through social networks.

Lessie wanted to remain young, and «Coma» granted her that wish.

The creators of the alternative reality had accounted for every detail, and now everyone dreamed of purchasing the same subscription.

People, shops, even advertisements inside «Coma» looked exactly as they had in 2020. This was the reality Lessie had bought for herself.

She paid for a fifty-year residence package, hoping that when the term ended she would no longer care about her appearance or about the year written outside the virtual world.

After her death, her consciousness would remain inside «Coma,» while her physical body would be cremated. This was stated in her will.

In the virtual city beginning with the letter S, Lessie lived an ideal life.

In reality, her friends were either dead or approaching death. But here, she and all her friends were young, beautiful, healthy, and full of energy to celebrate endlessly.

Here, Lessie tasted wine for the first time and spent a long time blaming herself for discovering it so late.

In her first life she had never accepted such ways of relaxing. There had simply been no time.

First, she focused on school so she would not become a street cleaner, as her father had once predicted, and so her mother would not have to feel ashamed before teachers.

Then she entered a local university to remain close to home, and later she built a family.

If she had known that excessive parental protection would grow into a web of complexes and silent psychological shadows in her adulthood, and that her children would forget her the moment they had children of their own, she might have spent more time pursuing her own desires.

If she had known that her husband would die so early from a heart attack at the job to which he had devoted his entire life at the cost of family time, would she have loved him more?

Hardly.

We are often told that every event brings us closer to an ultimate purpose. But what is our purpose?

If one listens to self-proclaimed guides who claim to have understood this truth, does it become any clearer?

Will standing on nails or meditating change one's financial reality?

Will a cryptocurrency wallet grow heavier if we surrender to the flow and listen to our heart?
Rhetorical questions.

Now Lessie no longer regretted the past.

The coins stored on her account could guarantee a new and comfortable life.

After spending her first year inside the virtual city, Lessie never once considered returning to reality. Everything in her time spoke only of approaching death.

Unlike the virtual 2020.

That was the year she decided to stay here forever — though she did not yet know that virtual love could cause no less pain than real love.

Chapter One

In this part of *Coma*, I invite you to trace the patterns that keep repeating in the life of the main heroine. And there is something else... something that came into her existence at the moment of her birth.

Dawn was breaking.

Sunlight stubbornly pushed through the thick burgundy curtains into the room. Squinting against the brightness, Lessie slowly opened her eyes, pulled the blanket aside, and remained lying in the warm comfort of her bed for a few more moments.

She finally rose and walked to the window, throwing the heavy curtains open. The sunlight struck her face with the force of a Star Wars blaster.

The apartment, gifted by her parents upon her university graduation, overlooked the city's central park.

The girl smiled sleepily at the new day, watched the dog walkers outside for a couple of minutes, and then began preparing for her long-awaited meeting with her brother.

Leaving the house, Lessie took a short walk through the park visible from her windows. The light summer dress she had chosen for the meeting lifted slightly in the wind, resisting obedience like a living thing.

Turning toward Saint Louis Street, she entered a small shop famous in Charle for selling the most delicious marzipan.

Arriving at the café *La Parisien*, she found a distant table and settled onto a soft velvet sofa. The waiter with the name tag «Nick — Trainee» took her order and promised to bring coffee in five minutes.

«Hey, sister!» she heard behind her.

«Hi. I didn't notice you coming,» Lessie said, standing and hugging her brother.

«Well, this generation, glued to their phones and blind to the world around them,» Scott said, rolling his eyes.

Lessie instinctively shrank slightly at the sound of his nasal voice.

«Let me remind you, dear brother,» she said slowly, emphasizing each word, «that you belong to the same generation. Zoomer or boomer — how is it supposed to be called?»

«I was just joking! People are so sensitive these days. How are you doing?» «I'm doing wonderfully,» she answered dryly.

Why do some people believe that after not seeing each other for a long time, they can summarize their lives in a single minute?

«I'm good too,» Scott said, smoothing his damp red hair that had grown sticky in the summer heat. «By the way, what are your plans for the weekend?»

«Probably going to a club with my friends or walking around the city. Why do you ask?» Lessie lied, surprised by her brother's sudden interest.

In truth, she had no real friends. Not even here.

Lessie did not believe in female friendship. She believed that sooner or later even the most loyal friend would betray you, intentionally or not. With men, there was simply nothing to divide — and that made things easier.

«Well, sister, how could you forget? Friday is your brother's birthday.»

«What? Of course I remembered,» Lessie lied again. «I would have sent you a message. What do you want as a gift?»

A stupid question, isn't it? Have you ever received an honest answer to it?

Though sometimes it happened. Once one of Lessie's colleagues sent a wishlist to everyone in the company a week before her birthday celebration.

«I don't need anything. I'm planning to go to Nellie Island with friends to celebrate, and I thought maybe you would want to join us.»

«The island with the best clubs in the country?» Lessie asked in surprise. «Yep!» Scott replied proudly, completely missing the sarcasm.

«You decided to splurge?»

«Well, turning thirty doesn't happen every year,» Scott laughed — though now he could celebrate his «thirty» literally every year, and this was already the fifth time.

«I'd love to join you,» Lessie agreed.

Scott rarely invited her to his gatherings, because if his sister appeared at a party, other «ladies» tended to leave, unable to tolerate competition.

At least, that was Lessie's own opinion.

The more likely reason was that whenever people started taking selfies in the style of *here I am with a glass, now I'm drinking from it, and this is the restroom*, Lessie could not remain silent. And that was rarely received well.

She believed that if you came to rest, then you should rest — put the phone away and enjoy the evening.

Yes, her character was far from gentle.

And if Lessie disliked another one of her brother's girlfriends, she would not pretend everything was fine. Usually, Scott chose women whose intelligence, in Lessie's opinion, was comparable to that of a loaf of bread.

On the way here, she had even fed a couple of pieces to the ducks in the park pond. Perhaps her parents had always wanted a son, or perhaps Lessie simply entertained herself this way.

And as long as «Coma» did not prohibit «tourists,» she would not have time to be bored.

If Scott was inviting her now, it meant he probably had some clever plan. He surely wanted to introduce her to someone «new.»

Lessie was eager to see what her brother had invented this time.

Last time Scott tried playing matchmaker, his friend never even called her back. Most likely, Lessie had simply gone too far.

Even though it was a joke for her, she had suggested they live together and sworn eternal virtual love.

Scott and Lessie spent another forty minutes in the café, talking about work, their parents, and the latest news, of course laughing at small mistakes they still remembered about each other.

From time to time, Scott poured more tea into his cup and loudly sipped the hot drink.

Once again, Lessie did not miss the chance to remind her brother of the fishing trip when he jumped from the boat a few meters before reaching the shore, thinking he was the smartest man alive.

Unfortunately, the water was much deeper than he expected, and Scott ended up soaked up to his ears.

And he had a three-day supply of cigarettes in his pockets.

Needless to say, Scott received a cascade of compliments from their friends afterward. But one had to see the expression on his face when he climbed back onto dry land.

Aquaman, no less.

«Oh, I have to go now. Work is waiting,» Scott said, noticing that the hand of his Chinese watch — though presented as an expensive one — had passed twelve. «Is your carriage about to turn into a pumpkin?» Lessie asked. «What?» Scott didn't understand the joke.

«Nothing. Go, Cinderella!»

«I'll pick you up tomorrow at noon. Be ready!» he said, leaning down to hug her. «Okay,» Lessie hugged him back, feeling the citrus scent of his cologne.

She had already suggested that he change his perfume, but apparently Scott liked it very much, since he did not notice the way people twisted their noses when he came closer.

Lessie said she would stay in the café a little longer. Scott said goodbye once more and left.

During her first year in Coma, Lessie enjoyed youth and freedom — the absence of work, the freedom from standing for hours by the stove to feed a family.

Even eating was optional here. One could simply choose the «food» option in the application, and within minutes feel full and energized.

The same could be done with every other human need.

But soon Lessie grew tired of living like a character in a simulation game, and switched to «manual control» mode, choosing to live like a human being.

Absurd, wasn't it?

People came to Coma to start a new life — not to relive the one they had run away from.

Chapter Two

The main heroine is afraid of flying and therefore has spent her entire life travelling by ground transport. But we both know there is no guarantee that ground transportation will safely deliver you to your destination either.

What is Lessie really afraid of? Flying? Hardly.
Falling? Possibly. Death?

Why are we afraid of death?

The answer can be heard in the audio.

Despite the cold shower, Lessie still could not wake up properly. She felt scattered, as if a thin veil had settled over her eyes, while a sharp, ringing hum of an approaching migraine filled her head.

Barely collecting herself, Lessie packed her belongings and checked her documents and money.

There was still an hour before her brother arrived. Sometimes he was late — so it might be even longer.

She would have time to check her messages on social media and write a few depressive poems about unrequited love for the group that had taken interest in the poems Lessie had posted on a website for people who considered themselves talented poets. Or simply poets.

¹

The group administrator had contacted her and offered to write one poem every three days for a small fee.

For the sake of experience, Lessie agreed.

The doorbell rang, and startled, Lessie dropped her favourite porcelain cup. It shattered instantly across the tiled floor.

«So, clumsy girl, decided to replace your dishes?» Scott glanced sarcastically at the shards.
«Something like that.»

«Don't worry, I'll buy you a new one. By the way, you've made your place quite cozy,» he said, looking around the apartment decorated in light tones with minimal furniture. «Remind me, what is this style called?»

¹ Facebook — Meta Platforms Inc. is recognized as an extremist organization and its activities are prohibited on the territory of the Russian Federation

«What I could afford,» Lessie laughed loudly, and Scott joined her.
«Come on, pack up. We'll be late.»

«Already done! Take the suitcase by the door and go downstairs. I'll be there in a minute.»

Checking once more whether everything was turned off, Lessie silently said goodbye to her apartment and the flowers.

Even though she often forgot to water them, she always gave them names. Though she frequently confused them.

A yellow Citroën with a taxi sign on its roof was already waiting outside the building. Settling into the back seat, Lessie put her headphones on and turned on the music.

Leighton Meester screamed directly into her ear so loudly that Lessie thought she was screaming along inside the car as well. But after looking around, she realized it was just her imagination.

Through the sounds of American country music, Lessie watched her brother gesturing wildly while talking to the driver.

Judging by the redness on Scott's cheeks, the driver had verbally outplayed him.

The middle-aged man, on the contrary, remained very calm — apparently he had encountered many different passengers in his life and only occasionally replied to Scott.

It was difficult to read their conversation from lip movements, and losing interest, Lessie turned her gaze toward the window, observing pedestrians and the changing pictures of the city.

Lessie loved this slow, unhurried city with its central street where cars passed once every two hours, where traffic jams never existed, and where the entire city could be walked across in thirty minutes.

Two-story houses, built seventy years ago as temporary structures, gave the impression that everything here was stable.

If you had not left this town during your teenage years, you would stay here forever. Lessie had not left.

Or rather — she had. But in the end, she returned.

Because no matter how hard you try to run away, the road always leads you to the place where you are meant to be.

The club on the central square — once a cinema where her mother had worked in her youth — was now used for weekly discos for the young... and not so young.

In this town, everyone knew each other, if not personally, then at least by name.

And although the people were not physically present now, memories of them still lived inside the girl's heart.

Lost in thought, Lessie did not notice when the car reached the railway station.

She had not even begun to feel sick from the smell of gasoline mixed with alcohol that filled the cabin.

As soon as they stepped out of the taxi, Lessie immediately asked what Scott had been arguing about with the driver.

«About construction materials,» her brother replied aggressively. «That driver will still try to tell me which ones are better,» he hissed through clenched teeth.

«Calm down already!» Lessie waved her hand dismissively, knowing this was a sore topic for her brother.

Scott clearly disliked being told to shut up twice within half an hour, but he did not continue arguing, remembering from childhood that arguing with women was pointless.

«Do you have a new friend?» Lessie asked, pointing toward a young man in torn jeans but wearing a classic shirt as they approached a group of five people.

«Yes and no. We studied together. Actually, that's why I invited you...»

«I knew it!» she nudged him in the side. «I felt there was a reason you called me. Another attempt to set me up with someone?»

«Don't be angry. Is it really so hard for you to keep him company? He's a good guy. He just broke up with his girlfriend recently and is feeling a little miserable... And... well... you are alone, more or less.»

«Well then introduce him to one of your friends! I am not an escort, Scott!» Lessie snorted and fell silent as they approached the group.

Scott shook hands with the boys, while Lessie hugged those she knew and greeted the others. The group hurried toward the railway station, because the train to Sahré was about to depart.

«Meet Elon — this is Lessie, my sister. Lessie — this is Elon,» Scott introduced them while climbing the stairs toward the second platform, where their train was already standing.

«This is the guy I told you about,» he said, turning to his sister. «We studied together. Now we rarely meet and only cross paths because of work. Elon is starting a construction business.»

«Nice to meet you,» Elon said quietly, studying Lessie with his green eyes. «Likewise,» Lessie replied curtly, turning her gaze aside.

The group reached the platform and found their carriage. Before letting them in, the conductor of the third wagon checked their tickets and finally allowed them to enter.

Lessie chose the window seat and pulled out a book she had grabbed at the last moment when leaving home.

Elon sat beside her.

While the others argued about where to sit, he asked for tea to be brought and silently offered a chocolate bar to his neighbour.

Finally, the train *Charle* — *Sahré* started moving, and everyone sank into their own thoughts to the rhythm of the wheels.

2

«I think every part of my body that could go numb has gone numb,» Lessie cursed under her breath as she stepped onto the platform.

Elon took her suitcase and extended his hand so she would not fall. «Do we have a minute for coffee?» asked the tall dark-haired man. It was Owen.

Scott's friend.

They were either working together or simply acquaintances — Lessie could no longer remember. She had known Owen for a long time, ever since he joined Scott's circle.

Poor man's wife. Her husband chased every skirt he saw, and she probably had no idea.

«Yes, guys, let's drink coffee,» Scott said. «The flight is in three hours anyway. We have time to reach the airport.»

They followed him to the café inside the station building.

After drinking a cup of hot coffee and eating cinnamon buns, Scott ordered a taxi to Sahré Airport, and they all went outside.

Scott, Owen, and Courtney animatedly gestured while discussing their arrival plans. Lessie only wanted to get to bed as soon as possible.

Traveling exhausted her since childhood, and five hours sitting on a hard train seat had not improved her mood.

Finally, a message arrived saying the car was waiting in the parking area.

Everyone walked happily toward the taxi stand — and immediately felt disappointed when they saw only one car.

There were seven of them.

Scott repeated twice to the dispatcher that they needed TWO cars for one address.

«So what do we do?» Scott tried to negotiate with the driver. «Our flight is in an hour and a half. We don't have time to wait for another car. I clearly said I needed TWO cars.»

² Facebook — Meta Platforms Inc. is recognized as an extremist organization and its activities are prohibited on the territory of the Russian Federation

The driver was a young man with a hipster appearance.

He understood their situation and said that if they could fit inside, he would take them. Lessie and Agnes were small in stature, so they sat on other people's laps.

Scott, being the tallest, sat in the front.

He turned toward Lessie and silently expressed sympathy for his sister.

She sat on Elon's lap, pressing her head against the worn upholstery of the old Fiat. The driver drove as if he was auditioning for a role in a new *Taxi* movie.

He made no particular effort to avoid potholes.

Perhaps he simply wanted to unload the passengers before being caught by the police.

But despite all his wishes, Scott could not give up his seat, otherwise he would have had nowhere to sit in the back — or might have broken his neck for sure.

Her suffering ended when the navigation system announced their arrival.

With great difficulty, Lessie crawled out of the car in an awkward, half-bent position.

Two boys whose names she barely remembered stayed outside to smoke before boarding, while those who did not smoke went to check in their luggage.

There was not much time left before departure.

After waiting for the others, Lessie passed through registration, and the flight attendant escorted her to her seat, asking her to listen carefully when the pilot spoke.

After hearing the emergency safety instructions and the pilot's greeting, Lessie fastened her seatbelt, and the plane began gathering speed for takeoff.

She watched through the window as the blue sky — smooth as a stretched sheet — covered the horizon, more soothing than any lullaby.

Who could have imagined that she, Lessie Brick, would be sitting inside an airplane and looking out through the window?

The same Lessie Brick who had never flown for leisure in real life, no matter how much her husband had tried to persuade her.

Once she bought plane tickets, but returned them the day before departure because she could not overcome her fear.

But fear of what?

Flying? The unknown? The possibility of a crash? She did not know.

Among all forms of travel, she preferred ground transportation and intended to keep it that way for the rest of her life.

Chapter Three

Arriving at Nelly Island, Scott once again took the initiative of calling a taxi, and this time two cars took them to a hotel he had previously booked, which, according to him, was only a few steps away from the sea.

When they were dropped off at the designated place, Lessie felt slightly confused.

It was difficult to call this a hotel — it looked more like a student townhouse — but the view was mesmerizing, and the sea truly lay only three meters from the entrance.

After receiving their keys at the reception, everyone went to their rooms.

Lessie had booked a separate room. The others were staying in a family apartment with six beds and a large living area.

Lessie invited Courtney to stay with her, but Courtney decided she would have more fun with the guys.

That girl was quite... promiscuous.

The friends agreed to rest a little after the journey and gather later in the common apartment. Entering her room, the first thing that interested Lessie was the bed. She took off her shoes and fell onto it fully clothed, immediately sinking into sleep.

«Where am I?» Lessie asked after opening her eyes.

«Dear, you're in the hospital,» Chris answered with tears in her eyes. «And where is Scott?»
«He...»

«He will be here soon,» interrupted a man who had just entered the room. Lessie noticed the beauty of his face.

«Chris, why are you crying?» Lessie asked anxiously, but the girl only began crying harder. The man standing beside her placed a hand on her shoulder.

Lessie tried to turn her head and look around, but she couldn't. Something was restricting her movement.

Lifting her eyes upward, she immediately squinted against the bright white light. «How is she?» Scott asked as he entered the ward.

«She just regained consciousness,» replied the man in a black jacket. «Tell me what happened.»

«I came to pick up Lessie as planned at twelve so we could make it to the restaurant. Everything was normal. Well... Lessie accidentally broke her favourite cup before I arrived. While she was cleaning it up, I took her bag and went down to the car.»

«Did she say anything was bothering her?»

«No, I don't remember anything like that. I asked if she was ready to go, she confirmed it, and I took the bag and went downstairs. But when she didn't come out after ten minutes, I went back for her.»

«Then what happened?»

«Entering the apartment, I called my sister. Silence. Looking around, I saw Lessie lying on the floor near the bathroom. I rushed to her immediately. Checked her pulse and called 911. The ambulance arrived seventeen minutes later.»

When Lessie woke up, the sun was still shining outside, and it felt as if she had closed her eyes for only a minute.

«Well, that was a strange dream,» she thought, focusing her gaze on the room's interior. Besides the double bed, there was a dressing table and a slightly crooked bedside cabinet. Lessie looked at the clock — it was just past eight thirty.

«Interesting... has the party already started? I don't hear any shouting. Probably they are still asleep,» she thought, pulling out clean clothes from her suitcase.

After taking a shower, Lessie put on her favourite black chiffon dress, gathered her long chestnut hair into a high hairstyle so it wouldn't stick to her shoulders in the heat, applied light makeup, and was ready for the party.

Admiring herself a little longer in the mirror, she finally left the room and walked down the long corridor to search for apartment number six, where the others were staying.

Approaching the door, Lessie nervously adjusted her dress and hair. «Did I really fall into my brother's trap?» she wondered.

Elon was indeed a very pleasant young man.

Much more pleasant and attractive than all the previous candidates Scott had tried to «set her up» with.

She had never seen him before, and that made her curiosity stronger.

During the journey to the hotel, she had kept thinking about what Elon might have been like in another life.

Elon differed from other men she knew.

He possessed gallant manners, refined elegance, and a rather pleasant aristocratic appearance.

He was a short, broad-shouldered brown-haired man with kind, almost sharpei-like eyes and a charming smile.

Finally exhaling, Lessie decided to knock.

Listening carefully, she understood that the party inside had already begun, though the music was still quiet, meaning they had only started recently.

Without waiting for an answer, Lessie opened the door and entered. «Finally!» Scott greeted her. «Look who came! Did you sleep well?» «Yes, thank you! Excellent room.»

«Glad to hear it! Make yourself comfortable!»

Taking a glass of whiskey mixed with cola from the bar counter, Lessie sat on the sofa beside the others, trying to understand what they were talking about — construction, politics, or perhaps everything at once.

After emptying the glass in one swallow, she went for a refill.

Throughout the evening, Lessie only exchanged glances with Elon and occasionally smiled at him.

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