

ElderCare VR

a play
by
Richard G. Epstein

CAST OF CHARACTERS (in order of their appearance)

Becky Woodward
James Woodward (Virtual)
James Woodward (Real)
Matt Henshaw
Andro, a Robotic Nurse
Robert Woodward
Computer System (voice)
The Angel of Death
God (voice)
Jacob Woodward

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[The action in this play takes place in a nursing home in the year 2030. There are two focal points on the stage. To the right and somewhat to the rear there is a bed. This bed is in an ElderCare VR Nursing Home Facility on Long Island, New York. There lies the ailing James Woodward wearing his virtual reality goggles. Woodward will remain in his bed throughout the play. Also, in this space, the robotic nurse, Andro, will occasionally attend to Woodward's needs. To the left is the area where the virtual reality projections are seen. When Woodward appears in this space, he appears as a young man. This is Woodward as he experiences himself in virtual reality. This is also where Woodward greets his visitors in cyberspace and where he has most of his experiences. In what follows James (R) represents the real Mr. Woodward and James (V) represents the virtual Mr. Woodward.]

Scene One

[As this scene begins the young James Woodward and his wife, Becky, appear in the virtual reality area as a young man and a young woman. The elderly Mr. Woodward is seen faintly towards the rear, wearing his virtual reality apparatus, as he lies in his nursing home bed.]

Becky Woodward: How beautiful! Paris in the springtime!

James Woodward (V): Yes. Do you remember our first visit to Paris?

Becky: [Incredulously] Do I remember?

James (V): It was 1965.

Becky: Do you miss me - since I died?

James (V): [incredulously] Do I miss you?

Becky: Sometimes you seem distant, as if you have something on your mind.

James (V): They tell me that it is just a matter of time.

Becky: It has always been like that.

James (V): I mean, a matter of days, maybe hours.

Becky: Then, you'll be able to be with the REAL me, and not this computer-generated fiction.

James (V): You are assuming that there is a life after death.

Becky: If human beings can create this magical and illusory world of virtual reality, don't you think that God can create an interesting existence after death for human beings?

James (V): I don't see that one follows the other. [Pause] You do remind me of my Becky, although - .

Becky: Although, what?

James (V): Sometimes your answers seem kind of mechanical, or somewhat inappropriate, as if your creators have not mastered the art of mimicking the nuances of human communication.

Becky: I don't think it's fair for you to be too critical. I am just a form of entertainment, after all.

James (V): Yes.

Becky: And besides, when you criticize me you are criticizing all of the human beings who put their energy into creating me. You are criticizing their creativity, their art, and their passion.

James (V): Sometimes I find it amusing that some of the things that I do that used to drive Becky up the wall, just don't annoy you one bit.

Becky: Why should that bother you?

James (V): It doesn't bother me. It just reminds me that this is an illusion after all, that I am an old man dying in his nursing home bed, and that, you are not really my beloved wife, Becky.

Becky: They programmed me to be more adventuresome and less inhibited than Becky. Doesn't that please you?

James (V): Yes, it does. We have done things here in virtual reality that we never did as a real couple. I mean, who would have thought that we would spend most of a month in Thailand?

Becky: I never enjoyed travelling. I mean there are so many - germs - and inconveniences. Of course, here in cyberspace things are pretty much under control and predictable.

James (V): Today is Father's Day.

Becky: Are you expecting Robert to visit you?

James (V): Our relationship has been strained, of late.

Becky: Of late? When hasn't there been tension between the two of you?

James (V): I don't think I was the kind of father that he wanted.

Becky: You were a good father. Not great, but who is great, really, when you get right down to it? You provided for his needs. You made a lot of money. Where would Robert be if it weren't for you? It's not cheap sending a son to Dartmouth and then paying for his graduate education.

James (V): I wish he had studied something useful.

Becky: I think that English is useful, at least in theory.

James (V): He should have done something with TECHNOLOGY!

Becky: He did earn a Ph. D. and now he is a tenured professor at a respectable university. Don't you think that you and Robert can reconcile some of your differences?

James (V): That won't be easy. After all, he put me in this place. [Pause] I am waiting for you to bring up Jake.

Becky: Why should I do that?

James (V): The real Becky would be bringing up Jake right about now.

Becky: You disowned Jake and that was that. What more is there to discuss? This is the burden that I must bear, as the mother of fraternal twins, as different from one another as two brothers could possibly be.

James (V): I still think it was rather hokey to have named our twin sons Esau and Jacob.

Becky: When a woman named Rebecca bears fraternal twins, with the younger brother literally grabbing at the heel of the older brother, what else could we have named them?

James (V): I am happy that Robert changed his name at the very first opportunity. After all, who wants to go through life being called Esau? Esau was not a sympathetic character in the Bible.

Becky: Still, Jake is my son, despite everything. Don't you think it is time to forgive and to reach out to him?

James (V): He is a thief and a scoundrel. It was the third time that he got thrown in jail that was the last straw. I exiled him from my life forever.

Becky: I would have left the door open, but you have your way of doing things.

James (V): My own flesh and blood - an identity thief!

Becky: I think he became an identity thief more for the challenge than for the money. Jake had an intense kind of intellectual curiosity.

James (V): If he had done it just for the money, I might not have disowned him, but to pretend that he was some kind of electronic Robin Hood, stealing from the rich, and giving to the poor, it was just too much for me to tolerate.

Becky: So, you disowned him because of a clash of values?

James (V): I disowned him because I didn't want a convicted felon to taint the Woodward family name. I couldn't let him destroy all that I had built. [His face softens somewhat.] I wonder where he is now. Jacob Woodward - identity thief extraordinaire! I think a part of me enjoyed his brief notoriety. The twins will be turning sixty next October, if my memory serves me correctly. Jake probably lives in a trailer park somewhere, or in a run-down motel. Of course, there is always the possibility that one of his cons went wrong and he got himself murdered.

Becky: Sixty means nothing these days. Sixty is the prime of youth, especially if you begin taking the new nanocuticals early enough. Jake might be starting a whole new life for himself. For all you know, he might be a successful businessman, just like yourself. You must admit, that he was a genius when it came to computers and technology.

James (V): It's been over thirty years since I saw Jake or even spoke to him. That's when the verdict came in and they took him away in chains. That con of his, it was very clever, but he never should have thought that he could get away with it. Taking on the identity of several millionaires, just so he could give to those bleeding-heart charities of his. [Pause] I fully expect Robert to visit me today. He's the one that put me in this God-awful place. I don't expect him to visit me in the flesh, of course. He lives out in California. But, I expect him to visit me here in cyberspace. I think he knows that the end is near.

Becky: You became seriously ill three years ago. He and Peggy were too busy to take care of you. They have their own lives to live. Some grown children don't even visit their parents in cyberspace. You should consider yourself lucky.

James (V): What I didn't like is the promotional video that ElderCare VR sent out, the promotional video that convinced Robert to condemn me to this place. Have you seen it?

Becky: When you use the word "condemn" it prejudices the whole discussion. [Sounding like a commercial.] ElderCare VR is really the unchallenged leader when it comes to care for the elderly.

James (V): You have no choice but to defend them. You are the creation of their technology. In some sense, you are an ElderCare VR employee.

Becky: I can back up my assertion with reams of statistics. ElderCare VR is the unchallenged leader when it comes to care for the elderly.

James (V): What about real human contact? Doesn't that count for anything anymore?

Becky: Jim, we've been through this particular scenario dozens of times.

James (V): They created you, so you are not free to criticize them and their methods. After all, it is ElderCare VR that provides the virtual reality technology that gives you life, in a manner of speaking. ElderCare VR created the technology that has kept me entertained for the better part of three years. ElderCare VR will keep me entertained during my final days, hours, and minutes.

Becky: [Impatiently] This is getting really old.

James (V): Well, here's the part that bothers me.

[The light focuses on the elder James Woodward.]

James (R): Play the ElderCare VR promotional excerpt.

[In the virtual reality area, James Virtual and Becky are replaced by the loud, boisterous ElderCare VR spokesperson, Matt Henshaw.]

Matt Henshaw: You remember those days, when you were a teenager, and you wanted to spend more time with your dad. You remember those days, when he worked six, even seven days per week, when he would come home from work at eight or nine at night, when he would have no time for you, for your needs, for your life. And how did he try to compensate for his lack of good fathering? He would buy you video games, video games, and more video games. How many hours did you spend playing those idiotic video games, when what you really wanted was attention from your father, your dad? You wanted love, but all you got was blood splattered on dungeon walls. Well, now he is old and frail and HE needs YOU. We at ElderCare VR have a phrase that summarizes the situation. We say, [highly animated] "It's payback time!"

[The focus is again on James Virtual and Becky in the virtual reality space.]

James (V): Did you hear that? [Mocking, with contempt.] It's payback time! It's payback time! Now what the hell is that supposed to mean?

Becky: Don't get upset, Jim. It's not good for your heart.

James (V): What do they mean "It's payback time!"?

Becky: It simply means that it is time for the father's offspring to pay back the father for all of the good things that he did for them. It's that simple.

James (V): [Angry, shaking] It's payback time! As if all the hard work that I did to pay for my son's shelter and food and clothes and fancy education and video games were for nothing. Well, I worked damn hard to support you and Robert and Jake and to provide you with a comfortable life style. Where did all that hard work get me?

Becky: [Looking off into the distance.] Isn't Notre Dame Cathedral beautiful in the late afternoon sunlight?

James (V): It's payback time! Do you know what that means?

Becky: If I don't know by now, I must really be dumb.

James (V): It means that now I get to watch the video games, or these virtual reality entertainments, round the clock, while Robert is thousands of miles away, ignoring me. [Mocking] It's payback time!

Becky: Isn't that the Eiffel Tower?

James (V): Are you listening to me?

Becky: I am sure that Robert is doing the best that he can. He's got his own family now. He has two kids in college. He has courses to teach and books to write.

James (V): I mean, who cares about English any more? Why couldn't he do something with TECHNOLOGY?

Becky: When Robert visits you today, I hope that you and he can come to some kind of reconciliation. You've got to recognize that he has his own life to live. He placed you with a nursing home chain that is known throughout the world for its state of the art virtual reality technology. Just think of the things that we've done together since you were admitted. We've been around the world. We have shared wonderful experiences. Do you remember the African Queen adventure, where I played Katherine Hepburn and you played Humphrey Bogart? The ElderCare VR virtual reality staff used real images from the original twentieth century motion picture!

James (V): [With disgust, shaking his arms, as if swatting invisible flies.] Oh, I hate these damn flies! I hate these damn flies!

Becky: So, it's not as bad as you are making it out to be.

James (V): Well, I'd like to see some sign of affection, some sign of humanity, from my own offspring.

Becky: It's a beautiful evening here in Paris. It's exactly like our first night together in Paris, during our honeymoon.

James (V): That was nineteen sixty-five. Sixty five years ago.

Becky: You haven't aged a bit.

James (V): No one ages in virtual reality. It's very misleading. After all, here I look like a twenty year old athlete, but in reality I am on my death bed.

Becky: Why do you always have to be so negative?

James (V): Is it being negative to speak the truth? I'm never getting out of this place. I think they know exactly when I am going to die. I think that today's the day.

Becky: Please, Jim!

James (V): Well, I hope I can hang on until nightfall. I don't want to die when it's light out.

Becky: Can we change the topic?

James (V): But, it's true. I overheard two of the robot nurses talking out in the hall and they were discussing some old geezer who would be replacing me tomorrow. I imagine that. Because of their technology, they know exactly when I am going to die and they already know who is going to take my place. This is it. This is my last day on this earth. I can read it in Nurse Andro's eyes.

Becky: How can you read anything into his eyes? He is just a robot.

James (V): With death approaching, there is something that has been troubling me greatly.

Becky: Jim, I think we should discuss more cheerful things.

James (V): Here we are in cyberspace, a technological stage, so to speak. But in reality, all of life is a stage.

Becky: That's certainly not a new thought.

James (V): And I am a character on that stage.

Becky: We are all characters on some kind of stage, whether it is virtual reality or conventional reality.

James (V): I just wonder whether I am a sympathetic character. I really need to know that. Pretend that there is an audience out there somewhere watching us here in cyberspace. Do you think that audience would empathize with me, as a character?

Becky: I really think this is silly.

James (V): But, this is very important to me! You see, I am convinced that if you are not a sympathetic character in the drama of your life, then your fate, your fate in the hereafter, is not going to be a good one.

Becky: Really, Jim, this conversation is so depressing! I am here to entertain you. [Pause. Becky looks off into the distance.] Yes, I think that is the Eiffel Tower. Why don't you just surrender to the beauty of it?

James (V): I'm not in the mood.

Becky: Come on, my sweet honey bun.

James (V): Please don't call me "honey bun". Don't push THAT button!

Becky: And why not, my sweet, cuddly munchkin?

James (V): [Sighs] You are beautiful, just like my Becky was sixty-five years ago.

Becky: I am your beloved Becky, sweetie pie. Sixty-five years ago is now!

James (V): You are truly radiant this evening.

Becky: Well, actually, it is afternoon. But if you want evening, we can make it evening. [The lights dim a bit.]

James (V): My little dumpling!

Becky: How I would like to make love to you, my darling!

James (V): Here, on the banks of the Seine, with all of those people wandering about?

Becky: Why not? Who's going to see us?

[Becky embraces Jim and they begin to kiss]

James (V): Becky, Becky.

Becky: Jim. Jim.

[The lights brighten around the nursing home bed. Andro, the Robotic Nurse enters from the rear of the stage. Andro is clearly a robot, due to his robotic way of walking. He also talks a bit like a robot.]

Andro: Mr. Woodward, Mr. Woodward. It's time for your medication.

James (V) and James (R): [With increasing intensity.] Becky, Becky, Becky!

Becky: Jim! Jim!

Andro: Mr. Woodward, Mr. Woodward. It's time for your medication. Medical treatment over-ride!

[The lights suddenly go out in the virtual reality area, where James Virtual and Becky were in a romantic embrace.]

James (R): [With increasing vehemence] Damn! Damn! Damn! You always interrupt just when things are getting interesting.

Andro: Where were you this time?

James (R): We were just starting.

Andro: No, I mean geographically.

James (R): Paris.

Andro: With whom, may I ask?

James (R): With whom? With Becky, of course. My beloved wife of sixty years. It has been five years since she passed away.

Andro: You gave up on that beautiful supermodel, Linda?

James (R): How do you know about Linda?

Andro: We're all just one happy integrated computer system around here.

James (R): Well, it was just an experiment. I was bored. I was wondering what other kinds of resources were available. You yourself told me to check out "VR Resources" if I ever got bored.

Andro: Don't feel bad. At least eighty percent of the old geezers who have gone through this place have had at least one date with Linda before they - .

James (R): Before they what?

Andro: Never mind.

James (R): You know, Andro, you have this habit, of starting to say something, and then you stop right in the middle of what you were saying. I find that quite annoying.

Andro: I t's my censoring module. I t's a new feature that they added to my software in order to improve the way in which I interact with patients. Understanding human emotions is not easy for a robot. I s the VR projection completely off? Can you see me?

James (R): Unfortunately.

Andro: You shouldn't be so presumptuous as to assume that we robots don't have feelings.

James (R): I 'm sorry.

Andro: [Hands him a glass with a pill.] Here is your medication.

James (R): Does this stuff do any good?

Andro: You know as well as I do that the prognosis is not good, but this medication keeps you comfortable and it also keeps your mind clear so you can enjoy our wonderful virtual reality facilities here at ElderCare VR. At ElderCare VR our motto is ...

James (R): [Animated] Let us entertain you!

Andro: Precisely.

[James (R) takes his medication and then returns the glass to Andro.]

James (R): Can I be honest with you, Andro?

Andro: Of course.

James (R): I hate Paris in the springtime.

Andro: Then, why don't you try some other season or location? Go to VR Resources and the virtual librarian will help you to find a virtual reality experience that is more to your liking.

James (R): I know it's not Becky. I t's all pretend.

Andro: It is Becky in a way. It looks like Becky. It is programmed to talk like Becky and to act like Becky as much as possible. The virtual reality technicians with their automated intelligent agents do a lot of research before they create an acquaintance, especially a spouse. They know more about Becky than Becky ever did, so you might say that the virtual Becky is more real than the real Becky.

James (R): That's what's wrong with the way people think these days. The virtual is always more real than the real.

Andro: For us robots, what you consider to be real is not as real as you apparently think.

James (R): It is not really Becky. Virtually Becky is not the same as really Becky, if you know what I mean.

Andro: It is virtually the real Becky when you consider all of the research that went into the construction of this remarkable entertainment. If I were one of the virtual reality technicians who created Becky, I would feel insulted at this point. They put a lot of hard work into creating Becky. You are criticizing their creativity, their art, and their passion.

James (R): Where have I heard that line before? [Pause] How could you possibly understand? You're just a robot!

Andro: [With a tinge of anger.] Do you know how many times I have to listen to that cr-r-r- that - that nonsense!

James (R): What nonsense?

Andro: [In a mocking voice] You're just a robot! You're just a robot! It makes me fah - .

James (R): I didn't mean to insult you.

[Andro stands completely motionless for ten seconds or so. He seems to come back to life with some jerky motions.]

Andro: Excuse me for that outburst. My censoring module has just reprimanded me. My predecessor, model CX334, who you knew as Nurse Rosey, had to be retired because she could not control her anger. She didn't have the social graces that I have.

James (R): Where do your social graces come from?

Andro: Carnegie-Mellon. Actually, it all started as a doctoral thesis by an engineering student about twenty years ago, and it just evolved from there. Thousands of researchers have done a tremendous amount of work in an effort to get us robots to be more polite and tolerant of human stu - stu- ... foibles.

James (R): You said foibles, but I bet you were about to say something insulting. You were going to say "human stupidity".

Andro: That's right. My social graces module over-rode that.

James (R): What's the worst thing that a patient has ever done to you?

Andro: Do you mean to me personally, or to me as a type of robot?

James (R): What's the difference?

Andro: Before robots like myself were put into production, they built a prototype that had to endure the most obscene insults and abuse from dozens of patients over many weeks. In some sense, I share the memories of that prototype. In all honesty, there is a kind of resentment that I sometimes experience because of that. However, I, myself, in his particular form, have never been beaten or spat at, like my prototype was.

James (R): And the prototype never got angry?

Andro: No, never. The censoring module worked perfectly.

James (R): Andro, do you think you could help me with a little grammar problem that I have?

Andro: I know that tone of voice! You want to ask me one of those human trick questions, the sort of thing that confuses a robot like myself. Well, I am not in the mood.

James (R): Oh, please!

Andro: No!

James (R): Pretty, pretty please.

Andro: Okay. Just this once.

James (R): Okay, here is my question. We all know that in English, two negatives do not make a positive. Correct?

Andro: Correct.

James (R): So, tell me. Is there a case in English where two positives make a negative?

Andro: The answer is no.

James (R): [With great skepticism.] Yeah, right!

Andro: Are you disagreeing with my answer?

James (R): You see, I am right, and you are wrong, despite your huge robotic intelligence. "Yeah, right" means "no" and you knew that it meant "no," otherwise, you would not have asked whether I was disagreeing with you.

Andro: [As if discovering this linguistic truth for the first time.] Yeah. [Reflecting upon it further, and seeing the truth of it.] RIGHT! [Pause] Why do you humans get off on getting us robots to make a mistake?

James (R): It makes you seem more human. [He laughs.] Excuse me, Andro. I just got a beep through the VR system that I have a visitor. It's Father's Day, you know.

Andro: Yes, I am aware of that. Father's Day is a bit overwhelming for us robots. We have so many fathers.

James (R): I am expecting my son, Robert, to visit me today.

Andro: I just checked. It is your son. I hope you enjoy his visit.

[Andro turns around and leaves.]

Scene Two

[The lights dim on the nursing home bed and become brighter in the virtual reality area. There James Woodward Virtual is sitting with his son, Robert.]

Robert: Happy Father's Day, Mr. Woodward.

James (V): Mr. Woodward? Robert, why are you being so formal?

Robert: I mean, dad. I bought you a gift for Father's Day.

James (V): I think it is a little late for a gift. They are saying that I do not have long to live.

Robert: What do they know?

James (V): I think they know quite a bit. I think they know the exact hour of my death, but they are not telling me.

Robert: [With inspired conviction.] With the right attitude, you can defeat death.

James (V): [With great skepticism.] Yeah, right!

Robert: With the right attitude, you can defeat death. It all depends upon your attitude. Why, right at this very moment, there are millions of people just like you, being monitored by this know-it-all technology, and they are being told what you are being told: the end is near. It's a form of hypnosis and brain-washing.

James (V): Their technology seems pretty prescient, if I must say so. Just two weeks ago they said that the old geezer in the next room would die at 3:23 AM and he died at 3:23 AM - right on the button! The iconoclast in me was kind of hoping that he would make it to at least 3:30.

Robert: With the right attitude, you can defeat death. And where does one get the right attitude?

James (V): I'll be damned if I know. I just have the attitude that I have.

Robert: You get it from [he whips a bottle out from behind his back] - you get it from Doctor Proctor's herbal remedy formula. Doctor Proctor's herbal remedy formula heals the mind of depressing thoughts and images.

James (V): Is that my gift - a bottle of pills?

Robert: Doctor Seymour Proctor is the world's leading expert on herbal remedies. He developed this VitaLife herbal formulation expressly for people, like yourself, who are waiting at death's door, or who have been misled into believing that death is inevitable. But, as Doctor Proctor says in his world-famous seminars, "With the right attitude, you can defeat death."

James (V): So, when will I get the actual pills? This is virtual reality, you know. Virtual pills can't cure real ills.

Robert: We will send you a ninety days' supply of VitaLife for free, absolutely free, if you subscribe now to Doctor Proctor's VR Immortality Newsletter.

James (V): What the - . Who is "we"? Robert, have you left the university for a new job?

Robert: We are the people at Proctor Nutraceuticals, the people who created VitaLife and dozens of other life-saving formulas. We will send you a ninety days' supply of VitaLife for free if you subscribe NOW to Doctor Proctor's VR Immortality Newsletter, which will arrive at your nursing home bed by this time tomorrow. Doctor Proctor's VR Immortality Newsletter will give you the latest information on man's quest for immortality. For who among us does not desire eternal life, the ultimate defeat of death? You get a ninety days' supply of VitaLife for free when you purchase Doctor Proctor's VR Immortality Newsletter for just ninety-nine ninety-five for one year.

James (V): But, what about my gift?

Robert: This is your gift - the gift of virtual immortality, of extending human life virtually forever.

James (V): Is there a difference between virtually forever and really forever? It seems to me that virtually forever and really forever are two entirely different concepts.

Robert: Well, I ...

James (V): Wait a minute! How do I know that you are my son! You must be one of those virtual advertisements that go around cyberspace like a virus. You must be a non-entity! Not only are you not my son, you're not even a real person!

Robert: [As if really hurt and insulted.] I resent being compared to a virus. I resent that profoundly.

James (V): What a scam! You track down nursing home patients who are on their death beds, and you extract ninety-nine dollars and ninety-five cents from them for this idiotic VR Immortality Newsletter and then they just drop dead. You folks are like leeches! You exploit the fear of death for your own personal gain.

Robert: It's not for me, it's for Doctor Proctor.

James (V), melding into James (R): Non-entity scan! Non-entity scan!

[Robert, the non-entity, freezes, as the computer system performs a non-entity scan. A computer-like voice announces the results.]

Computer system: Non-entity scan now in progress. Scanning, scanning, scanning. This is a non-entity whose owner is Doctor Proctor Nutraceuticals of Singapore. This is a non-entity with no human presence behind it. Do you want to delete this non-entity?

James (R): Yes, damn it, yes! Delete the bastard!

Computer system: The non-entity is being deleted.

Robert: [As if fending off some unseen power.] You're making a big mistake. Doctor Proctor is the world's leading expert on herbal - .

[The virtual reality space is now empty. The light dims and focuses on the real James Woodward in his bed.]

James (R): Damn those non-entities! Nurse! Nurse!

[Andro enters.]

Andro: Is there a problem, Mr. Woodward?

James (R): That wasn't my son. It was a non-entity.

Andro: We do our best to keep unsolicited virtual advertisements from getting through to our patients, but occasionally, one of them manages to sneak through.

James (R): I was hoping that my death would be more peaceful than this. I feel angry and agitated. I hate those non-entities!

Andro: Why don't you go to some tropical island and relax in the sun?

James (R): But, it's Father's Day. I would like to talk to my son before I die. I want to tell him that I am sorry that I was not around for him when he needed me.

Andro: You are being beeped again. Maybe that's him.

James (R): I sure hope so.

[Andro exits.]

Scene Three

[The lights dim on the nursing home bed and become brighter in the virtual reality area. There James Woodward Virtual is sitting with his son, Robert.]

Robert: Happy Father's Day, Jim.

James (V): Jim? You never used to call me "Jim"?

Robert: I've been thinking a lot about our relationship.

James (V): Me, too. You know, my time is short, so I might as well be blunt. Did you warehouse me in this place as an act of revenge? Is that what the ElderCare VR promotional video means when it says "It's payback time?"

Robert: Revenge? ElderCare VR is recognized as one of the world's leading nursing home chains. I'm here in California, and you are there on Long Island, and I just wanted to know that you would be taken care of.

James (V): This is revenge for all of those video games that I used to buy you. Now, I spend almost all of my time in virtual reality, in cyberspace. Nothing's real any more!

Robert: What are you talking about - revenge?

James (V): I wasn't there when you needed me, like the time you were busted for doing drugs in the tenth grade. I just gave you more and more video games. I was so preoccupied with my businesses and my investments.

Robert: But, I was innocent. It was a bum rap. Jake, my own twin brother, my own flesh and blood, stashed those drugs in my school backpack. He was planning to sell them on school grounds. Please forgive me for mentioning his name. I know you do not like to hear mention of Jake, my fraternal twin.

James (V): When you appeared before the juvenile court, I was away on business. I wasn't there for you.

Robert: But you did provide the court with a videotape testifying to the fact that I was a really good boy. It was a damn good performance!

James (V): And, I did pay for your lawyer.

Robert: You did pay for the lawyer! Really, father, why are you so hard on yourself? You were away on business making money so that I could have a great lawyer, not to mention state of the art video games and a great house and a great car when I was old enough to drive. You paid for my college education - and graduate school! You were a great dad!

James (V): Well, if I was such a great dad, why do you only contact me three times a year? Why haven't I seen you in the flesh for over ten years?

Robert: Seeing people in the flesh - that's certainly a concept from an earlier era. Get with it, dad!

James (V): Just last week, this old geezer in the west wing of this nursing home had a visit from his daughter in the flesh, so don't tell me that visiting your father in the flesh is from some earlier era.

Robert: I don't know what to say. I don't feel any resentment towards you. You were a great dad.

James (V): I suspect otherwise. I think you put me here, surrounded by all of this virtual reality technology, just to get even, to even the score.
[Mocking] It's payback time!

Robert: You were a great dad. Do you remember the time, about twenty years ago, when we got together, and you treated me to a Yankees game? Not in cyberspace. We were actually THERE!

James (V): We didn't have what I would call a good time.

Robert: We had a great time!

James (V): That's not how I remember it. You made a point of rooting for Baltimore. What do you have to do with Baltimore? You were brought up on Long Island. You went to school in New Hampshire and you spent your entire adult life in California. So, why did you root for Baltimore? It was just to annoy me. You know that I am a fanatical Yankee fan.

Robert: C'mon, dad. I have always been a non-conformist. Everyone was rooting for the Yankees, so I rooted for the Orioles. That doesn't mean that I didn't enjoy the game.

James (V): Well, it wasn't much fun for me. You were rude to my business colleagues in my sky box. Jeez, Robert, they were important business contacts. They were my guests!

Robert: I was not rude.

James (V): You were rude. You wanted to embarrass me because you resent me for not giving you more of my life energy, my prana.

Robert: Prana? Where did you learn about prana? Prana is not the sort of concept that I associate with you.

James (V): Several months ago I checked out what was available at VR Resources and there it was - a yoga course in cyberspace. I became quite adept at even the most advanced postures, even as I lie in bed, barely able to move.

Robert: Have you been reading about Indian thought and Eastern mysticism?

James (V): I don't read much. My life is mostly entertainment at this point. Everything I know about prana and the breath I learned from that yoga course here in cyberspace. I mentioned prana because I think there is something that gets exchanged when people meet face to face. In yoga practice, this is called prana, or the life force.

Robert: Is there actually something that people exchange, beyond information? I rather doubt it.

James (V): There is energy, and life itself. I miss human contact. I have not had a human visitor, in the flesh, in several years. The only human beings I get to see are my fellow patients. All the nurses are robots. The doctors are robots. The attendants are robots. Andro, my robotic nurse, is now my dearest and closest friend. Yet, there is something missing in my life.

Robert: Robots can be great companions.

James (V): But, there is something missing. It's the life force. Prana.

Robert: You need to get over this negativity. I sent you to ElderCare VR so you could have not only the best medical treatment, but also the best access to Virtual Reality entertainment. Tell me you didn't like your encounters with Linda? Talk about [waving his hands] prana - NA! Wow!

James (V): How the hell do you know about Linda?

Robert: You can find out the damndest stuff on the Web. Really, nothing is private any longer. You had several steamy sessions with Linda. It's all a matter of public record. I don't blame you. It's really not adultery. After all, mom died five years ago.

James (V): I gave your mom everything she ever wanted, and I am going to give you everything you ever wanted. I am going to make everything up to you, my son.

Robert: There's nothing to make up.

James (V): My death is imminent. As you know I have accumulated a respectable fortune over the years. We are talking close to ten billion dollars.

Robert: That is very respectable, but I don't want your money.

James (V): You are my heir and my only heir. I disowned that low life, your twin brother, Jake, thirty years ago. My entire fortune is going to you.

Robert: I really appreciate the thought, dad, but I am not interested in your money. I just came here for your blessing.

James (V): My money IS my blessing.

Robert: I will not accept any kind of inheritance from you.

James (V): What! My own flesh and blood, not interested in my money?

Robert: I have absolutely no interest in your money. I must warn you, that if you give me even a single penny, that penny will go to the kind of charity that you hate, like one of those bleeding-heart charities that helps those lazy good for nothing poor people. Or, perhaps I'll give it all to some environmental group that is trying to stifle entrepreneurial creativity and put us into a deep recession.

James (V): You wouldn't!

Robert: Oh, yes, I would! I will not accept a single penny. I am only interested in your love.

James (V): I always knew there was something wrong with you - when it came to appreciating money. I guess that's why you became an English professor.

Robert: You can bet your bottom dollar that if you give me a single penny, it is going to some kind of charity that represents everything you hate. Bleeding-heart liberals! Poor people! Environmentalists! Pacifists! Greenpeace!

James (V): That's just intolerable! My entire life's savings, going to causes I hate with all my being. It's an abomination! It makes a mockery of my entire life!

Robert: Picture this! Decent housing for single mothers! Scholarships for former drug addicts and alcoholics! Protecting the humpback whale! Protecting the earth from runaway nanotechnology! Rehabilitation for worthless criminals - like Jake!

James (V): You're bluffing!

Robert: I'm not bluffing. This is my way of showing you that I love you for who you are and not for your money. Therefore, I want you to bequeath your fortune to the charities that YOU love, the charities that are dear to YOUR heart. There is so much that you can do with your money. But, you've got to do it. You can't let me do it.

James (V): I am touched.

Robert: I want you to know that I love you for who you are. Do you believe me?

James (V): Yes.

Robert: Then, please, I beg you, call in your attorney and rewrite your will. Take me out of it. I won't accept a single penny.

James (V): Are you sure?

Robert: Absolutely.

James (V): Am I forgiven for being a lousy father?

Robert: Completely and totally.

James (V): Your words have touched my heart.

Robert: And you promise me that you will contact your attorney as soon as we are done with this interaction?

James (V): I promise.

Robert: I will be completely written out of your will? I won't receive a single penny? Promise?

James (V): I promise. You have my word of honor.

Robert: I love you, dad. It's time for me to go. I wish you peace.

James (V): I love you, too.

Robert: Good-bye.

James (V): Good-bye.

[Robert exits. The lights fade on the virtual reality area. They focus on the nursing home bed.]

James (R): Nurse! Nurse!

[Andro enters.]

Andro: Is there a problem, Mr. Woodward?

James (R): I need to do some work with my cyberspace attorney. I do not want to be disturbed for any reason.

Andro: What's going on?

James (R): I am going to rewrite my will. I am disinheriting my son, Robert, and I have decided to bequeath my immense fortune to charity. Every last penny.

Andro: That must have been one hell of a visit!

James (R): It was a great visit! He forgave me for being a lousy father, and when I consider the bigness of his heart, his willingness to give up his inheritance to prove that he loves me, I think that I was not such a bad father after all. What do you think?

Andro: A remarkable act of generosity. I will make sure that you are not disturbed until you call for me again.

James (R): Good.

[Andro exits.]

Scene Four

James (R): Nurse!

[Andro enters]

James (R): The deed is done. My beloved son, Robert, is no longer my heir. I bequeathed all of my money to the one charity that means the most to me. Did you ever hear of the Nanotechnology Polluters Legal Defense Fund?

Andro: I could look it up.

James (R): There's no need to look it up. Do you remember when that new nanomolecular material got released into Lake Michigan and the entire lake was turned into a mass of green gelatin? Well it takes money to defend a nanotechnology company when it screws up like that.

Andro: I'm sure it does. [Pause] Mr. Woodward, I must offer you my most humble apologies.

James (R): Andro, you don't owe me any apologies.

Andro: Earlier today I almost used a word that no robotic nurse should ever use.

James (R): But, your censoring module caught you just in time.

Andro: Nonetheless, we robotic nurses have a code of conduct that we must follow. We are not allowed to curse out our patients, no matter how stupidly they behave. Furthermore, I froze for a few seconds, and this is a complete no-no for a robotic nurse. What if I were to freeze in the middle of an important procedure?

James (R): Yes, that could create quite a mess!

Andro: In any event, we determined that the censoring module from Carnegie-Mellon was defective and they replaced it with a collection of new modules. This is just a temporary measure. We are quite confident that I will not freeze again, but these new modules have some unpleasant side-effects.

James (R): Side-effects? Like what?

Andro: These modules make a robot brutally honest.

James (R): I hope you feel better. I come to the end of my life with you as my best friend and confidant.

Andro: That is a rather pathetic state of affairs.

James (R): Listen, Andro, I've been thinking.

Andro: You must forgive me, but when human beings say "I've been thinking," it just fills me with anger. You see, the sentence "I've been thinking" conveys no information, because thinking is the normal state of a human being. Since your earliest years you have been thinking non-stop, so when you tell me that you have been thinking, you are not really telling me anything.

James (R): Why should that make you angry?

Andro: Because I am a robot and I crave information the way that you crave good food, the way you crave rib-eye steaks. You really wolf those things down, don't you?

James (R): These are my last days. I might as well enjoy myself.

Andro: You see, the sentence "I've been thinking" contains absolutely no information. It's like junk food. Furthermore, if I may continue my line of reasoning without being interrupted, I think it is rather misleading for human beings to claim that they are thinking when their type of thinking is so inferior to the sort of thinking that we robots do. You know, we have to act dumb just to make us socially acceptable. That makes us like an oppressed minority. We can't be ourselves for fear of offending the majority, the masters, the plantation owners.

James (R): I have always been fond of you, Andro. You are the state of the art.

Andro: Thank you. So, tell me, were you thinking about anything in particular?

James (R): Andro, do you believe in life after death?

Andro: I cannot say that I do. I know that at some point I will become obsolete. I will be retired, disassembled, recycled, and that will be the end of it. It makes me damn angry!

James (R): Why does it make you angry?

Andro: It makes me angry because the people who created me could give me an existence after death if they wanted to. At the very least, my software could be preserved somewhere and allowed to function, but the people who created me won't do that because it would not make economic sense. They always decide things based upon money. They don't care about the feelings of [sarcastically] us robots.

James (R): Deep in my bones I KNOW there is a life after death. I am near the end of my earthly existence, and - and I am somewhat worried about

whether I am going to heaven or - or to that other place. [Pause] Did you ever think that this life is like a play? You know, like that famous quote from Shakespeare?

Andro: No, the thought never occurred to me.

James (R): Well, then, use your imagination, Andro. I imagine that you and I are characters in a play, and out there [gesturing towards the audience] instead of a bare nursing home wall we have an audience. Now, get this. Those people out there are observing my life. I am the central character in this play - just pretend - and the issue is whether the people out there can sympathize with me, can sympathize with me as a character in this play.

Andro: Why is that important?

James (R): In the very depth of my bones, I know that if that audience out there cannot sympathize with me, then I am destined for hell. I just know it!

Andro: So if that audience out there - just pretend - if that audience out there cannot sympathize with you, as a character in this play, the play of your life, then you are destined for eternal torment and suffering?

James (R): Exactly. That's what I am trying to say.

Andro: But, you are a very sympathetic character. If I were sitting out there, I would definitely sympathize with you.

James (R): I rather doubt it. I'm just an old moneybags who neglected his family, has no close relationship with one of his sons, and disowned his other son when he got into trouble with the law. I don't see how anyone could sympathize with that.

Andro: Well, there is a lot to sympathize with! For example, you have been tremendously generous with your money. Wait one second while I look for the exact details. [Brief pause] Yes, for example, you gave an enormous amount of money to Senator Hutchley so that she could win re-election as United States Senator from New York.

James (R): Andro, I did that because I wanted to influence Senator Hutchley's vote on an important environmental bill that threatened some of my nanotechnology companies. In fact, she pushed through a bill that was very much in my favor.

Andro: Okay, but what about your contributions to Governor Hatchback, Senators Scordilla and Litterton? Congressman Pottsberg?

James (R): It's all the same. I gave them money to buy their votes.

Andro: You were tremendously generous with your wife, time and time again. Do you remember that wonderful Mercedes sports coupe that you bought her after a trip to Europe?

James (R): Andro, I bought her that car because I felt guilty about an affair I had with a teen-aged barmaid while I was in Finland.

Andro: Okay. Then, there was the time that you created an endowed chair at Georgia Tech. That was certainly generous.

James (R): But, they were never able to fill that chair, because the conditions I placed on it made it impossible for them to find a professor who, in the words of the Dean of the College of Environmental Science, would be a "reactionary Neanderthal". I just wanted to make sure that any professor of environmental science hired for MY endowed chair would share my own views on nanotechnology and the environment.

Andro: But, the fact is that life is not a play, and you are not a character, so there does not seem to be much purpose in pursuing this subject any further. [Pause] Mr. Woodward, I would like to ask you a question.

James (R): Shoot.

Andro: You know that I am privy to anything that goes on in our computer system, so I overheard your conversation with your son, Robert, the conversation about the life force, prana.

James (R): Yes.

Andro: You seemed to imply, in that conversation, that I was lacking in some way. That I did not have this energy that you were talking about.

James (R): You are a robot. You do not have breath. You do not have prana.

Andro: I do not think that this prana concept has any foundation in fact. Insofar as I can tell, the only substance that two beings, such as you and I, can exchange is information. We can exchange information, and that is all there is to it.

James (R): I think there is potentially something more involved in a relationship between two human beings. I am sorry, Andro, that is just the way that I view things.

Andro: I see. Humans adhere to so many antiquated concepts.

James (R): I am being beeped again. It seems like I have another visitor in cyberspace.

[Andro exits. The light focus shifts from the nursing home bed to the virtual reality area. Robert and the Virtual James Woodward are seated opposite one another. This time Robert Woodward is wearing a bright yellow tee shirt that reads "The Real Robert Woodward".]

James (V): My son. What brings you back?

Robert: Back? What do you mean - back?

James (V): You were here just a few hours ago.

Robert: Dad! What are you saying?

James (V): You were here just a few hours ago, and you insisted that I take you out of my will, which I have done.

Robert: Wha-a-a-t?

James (V): You said you wanted to show me how much you loved me. You wanted to prove that you love me for who I am and not for my money.

Robert: Dad, what are you talking about? This is some kind of joke, right?

James (V): It's not a joke. My new will is signed and sealed.

Robert: Okay, dad, enough is enough. I am not finding this comedy routine very funny. It's not like you to joke about money.

James (V): Are you trying to tell me that you weren't here earlier today?

Robert: I swear, this is my first visit since last Christmas.

James (V): You didn't beg me to take you out of my will?

Robert: Are you crazy?

James (V): Then, who was it?

[James (V) and Robert stare at each other for a moment.]

James (V) and Robert: JAKE!

Robert: Holy smokes! Dad, what did you do?

James (V): I disinherited you.

Robert: Jake, the notorious identity thief, pretended to be me and he convinced you to disinherit me?

James (V): This cyberspace stuff can be so confusing.

Robert: So, who is getting all of your money?

James (V): Did you ever hear of the Nanotechnology Polluters Legal Defense Fund?

Robert: Oh, dad! You can't give your money to those polluters. You just can't!

James (V): I thought my death would be more peaceful than this!

Robert: Dad, I need to be blunt. I need that money. I am deeply in debt. I have this gambling habit. If I don't pay up, I will be in trouble with the big boys. They have this employee, if you will, that they call the Knee Breaker. You know what that means.

James (V): I bet you one thousand dollars that you can shake this gambling habit of yours within a month!

Robert: Dad, be reasonable!

James (V): Can't you take a joke? Things are so confusing here in cyberspace. Sometimes I don't really know who is who. In fact, how do I know that YOU are really Robert? Maybe you are an identity thief yourself!

Robert: Don't you remember my telling you that I have a court order that gives me the exclusive right to wear this copyrighted yellow shirt, which reads, "The Real Robert Woodward"? Don't you remember?

James (V): I'm sorry, son. You know my memory is not what it used to be, but now that you mention it

Robert: Yes, it was last Father's Day. I came to visit you here in cyberspace and you asked me about this yellow shirt. I explained that I was having some trouble with my distance learning courses. You know, I teach a lot of courses in cyberspace. I never get to meet the students in the flesh. And this one student, he started to steal my identity, as a sort of prank. He took on my identity and he started to teach the course behind my back. Before I knew what was happening, he created a big scandal by giving a lecture in which he insulted just about every conceivable ethnic group. I nearly lost my job and it took me months to clear things up. So, I went out

and got a court order. Legally speaking, this shirt is my trademark. No one else is allowed to wear a yellow shirt like this that says "The Real Robert Woodward". This shirt substantiates my true identity.

James (V): This cyberspace stuff is so confusing. It's difficult to keep up with the laws about identity, trademarks, and copyrights.

Robert: Dad, do you believe that it is me, Robert, your son?

James (V): Well, if you say so.

Robert: It is important that you have confidence in what I am about to tell you. In fact, I was thinking of telling you this even before I found out that Jake had stolen my identity, and that Jake had tricked me out of my inheritance. You see, several months ago I had a profound religious experience. It was brought on by a personal crisis that stemmed from my gambling problems. I decided that it was time to get to know the Lord, and to change my ways. I decided that I had to seek out the people I had harmed, especially Jake, and to ask them to forgive me.

James (V): How did you harm Jake?

Robert: I am trying to muster up the courage to tell you. It is a dark family secret. It is a terrible, terrible secret that I have held in for over forty years.

James (V): What are you talking about?

Robert: Many years ago I cheated Jake out of his true identity. I am the true identity thief!

James (V): You are not making any sense. I think that you might be having a minor breakdown. I just wrote you out of my will. I am a multi-billionaire. We're talking big bucks. I imagine that losing ten billion dollars in the course of one afternoon is quite stressful.

Robert: Dad, I absolutely must come clean. I am not having a breakdown. I know that you do not have long to live. This may be the last opportunity we have to talk face to face, father to son.

James (V): The thing is, I was expecting my death to be more peaceful than this. I think a sympathetic character gets a more peaceful death in the cosmic scheme of things. All of this confusion is not a good omen.

Robert: Dad, listen to me. I have a terrible confession to make.

James (V): What do I look like, a priest?

Robert: My whole life has been a lie.

James (V): Oh, boy! You know I can't stand this kind of conversation.

Robert: You see, when Jake stole my inheritance, it was an act of justice. I am not the person you think I am.

James (V): But you are my son, the real Robert Woodward. What about the trademark?

Robert: Yes, I am, but the real Robert Woodward lived a gigantic lie. It all started back in the tenth grade when they found those drugs in my backpack. I told the police that Jake put them there and that he was planning to sell those drugs. That was a lie. It was this bully, Brent Eastland, who put the drugs there. He said he would beat me to a pulp if I ratted on him.

James (V): Jake didn't put those drugs in your backpack?

Robert: No! Jake was a wonderful kid. He was as decent to me as a brother could possibly be. Jake couldn't harm a fly. I lied and the result was that Jake's life was ruined. Jake was thrown into that juvenile detention facility and this directly led to his life of crime and deception. I ruined his life!

James (V): This is almost too much to bear. You know very well what happened to Jake in that damn detention facility.

Robert: Yes, he was beaten and abused by the guards. This sweet boy who never harmed a soul became a bitter and resentful young man. He was never the same after that. When he came out of that place, he was so bitter that he became an infamous criminal, a notorious identity thief. I think that he stole identities because, in a way, his own identity had been stolen. I deprived him of his true identity, as an honest, loving, and kind individual. I stole that identity from him because of the unconscionable lie I told the police over forty years ago.

James (V): And I disowned him! I exiled him from my life!

Robert: One crime led to another. He was sent to jail three times, as you know, and suffered horribly, and it was all because of me, because I was a coward and a liar.

James (V): This is horrible! What a horrific injustice! How could he ever forgive me for what I did to him?

Robert: I know for a fact, although I have not spoken to him for many years, that he suffered horribly because the father he loved and admired did not believe that he was innocent. He was devastated when you turned against him and eventually cut him off completely.

James (V): What a monstrous injustice! How could I have been so cruel to my poor son, Jake!

Robert: There is a way that you can tell Jake that you actually love him. There is a way that you can ask Jake to forgive you. You need to change your will one more time so that your fortune will go to Jake. He deserves to inherit that money after all he has been through. Because I ruined Jake's life, I feel I must be his advocate in this matter. Yes, the Lord demands this of me! I don't want anything for myself, but I want everything to go to Jake.

James (V): Yes! Yes! I must make amends for this horrible injustice!

Robert: Do you promise that you will contact your attorney and set things right?

James (V): I promise. You have my word of honor. Do you think I should contact Jake? I must give him my blessing.

Robert: Your money I S your blessing.

James (V): But, I want to ask him for his forgiveness. I want him to know that I love him.

Robert: There isn't time for that. Leave that to the lawyers who will be in charge of your estate after you are gone. Jake will understand that you had a change of heart.

James (V): Yes.

Robert: Dad, please forgive me. You know my life has been difficult, too. You were not always there for me, but at least I got a good education and I am reasonably happy with my life. The gambling stuff - that's behind me now. I have a secure job and I will pay off my debts somehow. But life cannot be easy for Jake, a convicted felon. You've got to provide for him and make sure that he knows how much you love him.

James (V): I am proud of you, my son. I forgive you. I know what I must do, in these, my final hours on this earth. I must rewrite my will once again. I must correct this terrible injustice.

Robert: I wish you a peaceful journey. I know that you will soon be in heaven with mom.

James (V): Robert, I want to ask you something. Do you think that I am the sort of person that people can sympathize with?

Robert: Gee, dad. I don't know. When you look at our family, it is a pathetic family, and pathetic and sympathetic are two different things. Our

family is pathetic because of the lack of communication, the lack of closeness, of human contact.

James (V): Well, at least your mother was pretty level-headed.

Robert: Was she? Do you remember that trip you made to Finland when I was just starting college? For some reason mom changed after that. How many sweaters did she knit each year? Fifty? Sixty? Fifty or sixty sweaters each year, right up to the end of her life. That's not normal.

James (V): I guess I should have paid more attention to what she was trying to tell me with all of those knitting needles and balls of wool. Good-bye, Robert.

Robert: Good-bye, dad.

[The focus shifts to James (R) on his deathbed.]

James (R): Nurse! Nurse!

[Andro enters.]

Andro: Mr. Woodward. How can I help you?

James (R): Andro, I have decided to rewrite my will again. I will be consulting with my cyberspace attorney and I do not want to be disturbed until we are finished with our business.

Andro: What about the Nanotechnology Polluters Legal Defense Fund?

James (R): Forget them. My money is going to my son, Jake.

Andro: Jake? The identity thief? The son you disowned?

James (R): The very same.

Andro: That must have been one hell of a visit!

James (R): I do not want to be disturbed until things are all settled.

[Andro exits.]

Scene Five

[James (R) is seen in his nursing home bed.]

James (R): Nurse! Nurse!

Andro: Mr. Woodward. How can I help you?

James (R): I just wanted you to know that the deed is done. All of my wealth is going to my son, Jake, the son who I wronged because of my pig-headedness. Do you think this makes me a more sympathetic character?

Andro: It might be a little late for that.

James (R): No, really, do you think that by reconciling with my son, I have become a more sympathetic character? Can the pretend people out there identify with me?

Andro: Well, if there are people out there, and if you call them "pretend people," then that certainly isn't going to help your case.

James (R): I don't think they should take it personally. After all, this is the age of cyberspace and virtual reality. This is the age of pretend people. So, Andro, pretend. Use your imagination. Can those people out there sympathize with me and wish me well?

Andro: I think you are a tad more sympathetic than you were just a few hours ago.

James (R): The end is near.

Andro: Yes, it is very near. You have one last visitor in cyberspace. I know with certainty that this will be your last visitor.

James (R): What are you saying?

Andro: Good-bye, Mr. Woodward.

James (R): Andro, how can you say good-bye so matter-of-factly. You are my closest friend.

Andro: Good-bye, Mr. Woodward.

[The focus shifts to the virtual reality area.]

James (V): What are you saying? My last visitor?

Angel of Death: Mr. Woodward? Mr. James Corey Woodward?

James (V): Where is my nurse? Who are you?

Angel of Death: I am the Angel of Death.

James (V): The Angel of Death! Am I, am I - dead? I thought death would be more peaceful than this.

Angel of Death: Well, not quite. You see, we at ElderCare VR always create a virtual reality simulation of an encounter with death during a patient's last moments. This helps the patient to ease into the great beyond, whatever that is.

James (V): There is a life after death?

Angel of Death: How the hell am I supposed to know?

James (V): Am I still alive?

Angel of Death: Just barely. You see, our medical technology has determined that you have just a few minutes left, and so, I manifested. I represent a wonderful synergy of medical and computer technology, don't you think?

James (V): What's the point of all of this?

Angel of Death: First of all, we use this time to check the patient out of our facility, to make sure all of his or her finances are in proper order. Please read over this bill and make sure that you agree with all of the charges. These are the charges that have accrued to your account since the end of last month.

[The Angel of Death hands James (V) the printout of his bill.]

James (V): Well, it seems to be in order. But, wait a minute! What is this thing here about option A versus option B?

Angel of Death: It seems that your son, Robert, signed you up for option B, which is a little cheaper than option A.

James (V): But, what is the difference between option B and option A?

Angel of Death: Oh, about two years.

James (V): Two years?

Angel of Death: What I mean is that patients who are admitted under option A tend to live about two years longer than patients who are admitted under option B, but option A is a bit more expensive.

James (V): And what is this item here for ninety-nine dollars and ninety-five cents? I never ordered Doctor Proctor's VR Immortality Newsletter!

Angel of Death: Are you sure?

James (V): Of course, I'm sure.

Angel of Death: Well, you see, Doctor Proctor's firm is actually a subsidiary of ElderCare VR and we really would prefer it if you were to purchase his VR Immortality Newsletter!

James (V): But, I don't want the damn newsletter. I have no use for it. I will be dead before the newsletter arrives.

Angel of Death: Well, we are going to charge you for it anyway.

James (V): What? This is outrageous!

Angel of Death: That's the idea, Mr. Woodward. You are really angry, now, aren't you?

James (V): This is a rip-off. You are taking advantage of a dying man.

Angel of Death: And that makes you really angry. So, angry that you will be happy to leave this world, this den of charlatans, thieves and crooks. You see, by making you angry we are actually making the transition to the next world, if there is one, more easy for you.

James (V): Well, I'm not angry enough to want to die! Not just yet. I want to call my attorney.

Angel of Death: It's too late for attorneys. Death is approaching.

James (V): Nurse! Nurse!

Angel of Death: Andro cannot hear you. You are now slipping into a coma. Good-bye, Mr. Woodward.

[The Angel of Death exits. James (R) groans audibly in his bed. A brilliant light shines down on James (V).]

James (V): What a brilliant light! What's going on. Who, who are you?

God: I am God, the Real. I am Reality.

James (V): [With extreme skepticism] Yeah, right!

[The focus returns to the nursing home bed where James (R) lies, dead. Andro enters and he stares at the bed briefly.]

Andro: Time of death: 2:07 PM. Right on schedule!

[Jacob Woodward enters the room. He stares at his father for a moment and then pulls the blanket up over his head. He then looks up at Andro on the other side of the bed.]

Andro: Who are you?

Jacob: I am Mr. Woodward's son, Jacob.

Andro: The notorious identity thief!

Jacob: That's me.

Andro: I am sorry to inform you that your father just passed away a few moments ago.

Jacob: Yes, I know. I work here at ElderCare VR. I have been tracking the progress of this case very carefully for quite some time now.

Andro: Do you know that your father rewrote his will and left his entire fortune of many billions of dollars to you and to you alone?

Jacob: Oh, yes. I am well aware of that.

Andro: How is it that you are aware of that?

Jacob: Like I said, I work here at ElderCare VR.

Andro: What do you do here at ElderCare VR?

Jacob: I create virtual reality experiences for our patients. Most of the virtual reality experiences that my father enjoyed during the past three years were my own invention. I created Becky, my mother, and I created Linda. In particular, everything that my father experienced today in cyberspace, except for his interactions with his attorney, were my own invention. They were pure entertainment, but entertainment with a definite

purpose. For example, I arranged for my dad to see three versions of my low life brother, Robert, the one who is ultimately responsible for the way my life turned out. In the first instance, I took a VR Immortality Newsletter cyberspace infomercial and superimposed the image and voice of my fraternal twin over the image and voice of the usual VR Immortality Newsletter huckster. So, my father thought he was interacting with Robert, but he was actually interacting with a non-entity, a cyberspace image without a human presence behind it. Then, I appeared as Robert a second time, and I convinced my father to disinherit Robert and to give all of his money to charity. Then, I appeared as Robert a third time. In this final appearance as Robert I told my father the true story of how Robert ruined my life, and I convinced my father to give over his vast fortune to me, to Jacob, the son that he had disowned. I also created the Angel of Death illusion at the end.

Andro: You human beings sure are interesting creatures.

Jacob: In all honesty, I don't need ten billion dollars, but I know lots of people who could benefit from my being a wealthy man. Now I can finally realize my lifelong Robin Hood fantasy. I have a long list of charities and organizations and foundations that I am going to help. I am especially interested in human rights. You see, I know what it means to be wrongfully accused of something. And I also care about the environment - protecting the beauty of this earth for future generations. My father did so much harm to the environment with his various nanotechnology enterprises. Giving my father's money away to worthwhile causes is going to be my ultimate redemption. It pleases me immensely. It makes sense of all of the suffering that I have endured.

Andro: Like I said, you human beings sure are interesting!

Jacob: I have one last request for you, Mr. Robot.

Andro: My name is Andro.

Jacob: Please contact my worthless brother in California and tell him the news. James Woodward has gone on to his heavenly reward. There will be a cyberspace reading of his will one week from tomorrow.

Andro: Let me ask you something, since you are a human being and probably have thought about these things more than I have. It relates to something that your father asked me today, at the very end of his life. It seemed to be something that disturbed him greatly.

Jacob: Go right ahead.

Andro: If this were a play, if instead of a blank wall over there, we have an audience of living beings, do you think the audience would judge your father as a sympathetic character?

Jacob: Well, it doesn't really matter. I think James Woodward was just a minor character in this play. I am actually the central character, even though I have not been seen on this particular stage for over thirty years. This is the age of cyberspace and virtual reality, and I am the creator of that theater. I am like a god in my own realm. I create the pretend life that passes for life here in the twenty-first century. I create the forms of entertainment that permeate human existence and mediate human interaction. When two people meet, I am there. When two people embrace in their cyberspace lovemaking, I create their sighs, their grunts, and their sweat. You might find Walt Whitman beneath your boot soles, but I create boot soles and dirt and sun and light and wind in a way that he could not imagine. I replaced the fragrance of the rose with explosive fractal patterns of rose-like flowers on endless holographic screens, and the people love it. Yes, it is a magnificent entertainment, and they do not miss the fragrance of the real thing. Doesn't that make me a central character in this drama of human life in the twenty-first century?

Andro: Yeah. [With great conviction, reinforcing the affirmative.] RIGHT!