

Welcome to Your Dream House

Welcome to Your Dream House

By Steve Bates

steve.bates.writer@gmail.com

About 4,100 words

Jessica never saw the bumbler that stung Trevor. The silvery, thumb-sized insect might have become agitated by the staccato flashes of her son's bright yellow shirt as he bounced around the playground. Or perhaps some of the older boys had thought it amusing to prod a low-hanging nest with a stick. All she knew was that Trevor was stumbling toward her with one shoe off and his cherubic face awash in agony, pleading in a heart-melting tone: "Mommy, make it better." Engulfed by confusion and fear, she squeaked out "What happened, baby?" and propelled herself forward, extending her arms to receive her son, to embrace him, to make it all better.

This morning, Jessica could not remember making it all better.

She gazed at the framed picture of Trevor on her desk, desperately seeking the peace of mind and the strength to make it through the day. Rubbing her forehead hard with the heels of both hands, she cursed the headache, fatigue, and fog that were the residue of yet another restless night. The high-pressure job assignments, the far-flung planets, the extended intervals apart from her son: Everything was becoming jumbled, getting fuzzier by the day.

How long have I been away this time? Six months? Or, as they calculate time on this edge-of-nowhere planet, 18 ten-days? How long until my work here is done, until I can hold Trevor in my arms again, until I can prove to him that Mommy always comes home?

Welcome to Your Dream House

When she had accepted her job with Dream Homes Limited, the deal sounded reasonable: Hustle around the galactic neighborhood assembling subdivisions for a few years, get some time off with Trevor between assignments, and earn a promotion allowing her to settle in one place—with her son back in her life every day. Perhaps there would be time for romance, too.

Tall and thin, with a generous spirit, Jessica had never lacked for suitors. But her nomadic existence precluded lasting relationships, and the years were passing all too quickly. David, a rising star in the military with an easy smile, had seemed a solid match for a birthing contract. She wasn't even sure where David was stationed currently. Not that it mattered; Trevor was her life.

Jessica cast her cognition across the void as if she could witness her son passing this hour on Rhys 2. She envisioned him on the cusp of a peal of laughter, his hazel eyes sparkling mischievously after winning a game of hide and seek. But with only one primitive communications satellite still circling Sibelius 1, and the distance between them so great, she could reach out to Trevor only through recorded messages. She drew a deep breath, exhaled deliberately for several seconds, simulated a smile, and activated the holoivid.

“Hi, Trevor. Your nanny tells me that you are doing really well in school, and I want to tell you how proud I am of you.” She struggled to maintain her cheerful façade. “I'll be home soon, real soon. I can't wait to see you. But you know Mommy has important work to do. I—I love you, sweetie.”

She waved a shaking hand before the device to end the recording. Her head sank onto a slender forearm and rested there for a long minute. Then she stacked the message for transmission once the commsat crested the horizon for another low, brief pass.

How long until it too hits the atmosphere and fails?

Welcome to Your Dream House

The front door alert sounded, driving nails into her nerves.

“We’re sorry to bother you,” said a short, sallow man with sunken, red-rimmed eyes. A similarly dissipated woman stood just behind him. They seemed like typical emigrants set adrift by the Great Diaspora. Generations ago, their ancestors turned their backs on a solar system rife with war and disease—and on everyone and everything they cared about—to submit to more than a century of coldsleep and an unimaginable future. Many descendants of those pioneers struggled to find purpose in life, and the escapes they pursued took many forms. The couple shuffling their feet at Jessica’s door probably spent most of their waking hours in their dream chamber, and perhaps many nights as well.

“We’re the Taylors, from 66 Reverie Road. There’s a problem with our programming,” the man stated.

Customer service wasn’t part of Jessica’s job description, but she was the only company representative on the planet. Making no effort to disguise her displeasure, she pushed past the couple and marched rapidly along the ochre-tinted plastic sidewalk. A few other dream home occupants ambled listlessly, caged by the grid of identical, perfectly spaced pre-fab houses. On a planet whose natives embraced all things natural, these structures scarred the soil like a pestilence. She kept her head down as she passed the five-meter-tall holosign proclaiming “Welcome to Your Dream House” in mammoth blinking letters and through a recurring jingle that could bring a grown woman to tears or homicide:

The house of your dreams

Is closer than it seems.

Dream Homes Limited

Will make up your mind.

Welcome to Your Dream House

She paused for a couple of breaths and to let the couple catch up with her. Despite her lengthy stay on Sibelius 1, she still felt beaten down by its strong gravity, the nearly perpetual twilight imposed by layer upon layer of clouds, and the paucity of seasons. To battle the bleakness, the yards of the dream houses were equipped with artificial foliage that owners could imbue with colors to suit their tastes. Today, imitation trees in several yards pulsed with bright reds and greens. A hazy recollection of an ancient festival tugged at a corner of Jessica's mind, but she brushed it aside.

She and the Taylors paraded through a sparsely decorated living room and into the couple's small dream chamber. Jessica settled into the nearest couch, an oversized recliner with controls on each armrest. She tensed involuntarily as millions of microscopically thin fibrous tendrils reached out and positioned themselves on the surface of her uncovered skin, bonding gently with her nervous system.

The dream chamber dissolved. Jessica was surrounded by exotic plants in vivid shades of green, splattered with bold crimson, orange, and white flowers. Acrobatic primates scaled towering trees in pursuit of succulent fruit, which injected tangy fragrances into the balmy breeze. Jessica recognized the distinct cries of more species of birds than she had believed could exist, though they were muffled by the constant splashing of a spectacular waterfall. Droplets of moisture tickled her face as she admired the rainbow that rimmed the scene. The Tropical Paradise dream software was among her company's most popular options, and she could understand why.

"What seems to be the problem?" she asked.

"It's the add-on programming," said Mr. Taylor.

Welcome to Your Dream House

Many dream house owners purchased supplemental software on the black market, usually porn. “I can’t fix it,” she said in a steely voice. “You should contact the manufacturer.”

“Oh, it’s working,” responded Mr. Taylor. “Too well.” He stabbed a button on the armrest of her couch. The erotic gyrations of U4ic--the lithe young chanteuse clad only in nearly transparent, form-hugging mist—were superimposed upon the tropical scene. “You see, this isn’t just my private program,” he stated, his face reddening as he turned toward Mrs. Taylor. “She bought it, too. Can you make her delete her copy?”

Jessica sprang from the couch, her anger blunting the abrupt transition from the simulated utopia to the drab reality of the dream house. She snarled “Get a life!” and stormed out the front door. Instantly, the comm chip positioned just below the surface of her cerebral cortex alerted her to a priority message relayed through the satellite.

“Display summary,” she commanded. Keywords scrolled across the top of her field of view: “Law firm ... David ... court date ... custody.”

Custody! David, you bastard, we have an agreement. Trevor is our son—my son! How can I get a lawyer and fight you from this backwater?

She paced and shook until the tears could no longer be contained.

* * *

The trading post could be mistaken for the remains of some horrendous spaceport accident. Irregularly shaped wooden buildings were rammed together as if hurled from the hands of careless gods. The interior--chilly, musty, and dim--was a hoarder’s paradise of exotic and mundane goods arranged in no logical order. Jessica passed well-worn saddles for some sort of pack animal and racks of simple, homespun tunics in shades of tan and brown. She held her nose as she maneuvered around crates of moldy root vegetables—a gesture that did not escape the

Welcome to Your Dream House

notice of four locals who were seated at a small corner table, sharing a pipe that emitted a bitter fragrance that she could not identify.

Truly indigenous populations of sentient bipeds had proven to be rare as the Great Diaspora sprinkled settlements across the galaxy. But here, the natives' short and stocky build strongly suggested the infallible hand of natural selection over the eons. Plus, the locals spoke several languages in addition to standard Galactic 'Glish.

What's more, they did not believe in private property. One used what one needed. Nor did they accept compensation for labor. When work needed to be done, someone did the work. From the outset, Jessica found the native laborers to be smart and effective. It troubled her that they rarely spoke to her or to other off-worlders, but she came to realize that beneath that veneer of aloofness lay a substantial reservoir of pride and serenity.

If I weren't in such a hurry to leave, I might actually learn to like these people.

Soon after arriving on Sibelius 1, Jessica was advised that Gert, the trading post manager, was the guy to see for scheduling labor. Like many of the natives, he was almost a full head shorter than her. With thick, black, unkempt hair, he looked the part of the suffering poet. His expressions occupied a narrow spectrum from subdued to stoic, as if he would perish if he betrayed even a hint of a smile. However, it was Gert's propensity for lengthy periods of eerie silence and stillness that distinguished him. Many a visitor would swear that he had vanished like a specter when he had merely receded into a shadowy corner of clutter.

Jessica sauntered up to him. "Hi, Gert. I'm starting my final subdivision. Can you help me line up eight workers?"

Garbed in a dark brown tunic with a wide, cinnamon-colored belt, Gert was inspecting hunting equipment displayed on a dusty shelf. He did not respond.

Welcome to Your Dream House

Jessica noted that the four locals were monitoring the interaction intently while trying to appear disinterested. She continued: “We’re not going to have a problem with the final development site, are we?”

Gert faced Jessica and clasped his hands in front of him. “There are other locations that you would find more ... convenient,” he stated.

For most of her time on Sibelius 1, Jessica had sensed that Gert was holding back something about the phase four site, a plateau about 40 kilometers from the spaceport. Surveys showed that it was uninhabited, though some of the largest settlements on the continent were clustered around the base of this and similar plateaus.

She decided to play her trump card. “Gert, we could make one of these last dream houses your new home.”

“I have a home,” he said without hesitation. “And the houses you produce are hardly conducive to dreams.”

“‘Dream house’ is a marketing term,” said Jessica. “A play on words.”

“I understand, but I fear that you do not,” Gert said in an atypically brusque tone. “Real dreams provide insight and guidance. They take us places that we cannot go during our waking hours.” He continued in almost a whisper: “Some of my people believe that dreams can accord immense power.”

“That--that’s very impressive,” she said, attempting to absorb his revelations, “but my bosses are determined to build on this site.” With her coping skills suddenly exhausted, her lower lip began to tremble. She felt that she was perched on a precipice, holding on by the slightest of gossamer threads.

Gert stepped toward her and placed his left hand gently on her shoulder.

Welcome to Your Dream House

Jessica floated, suspended in a realm devoid of time and space and meaning. Though she felt no fear or pain, she had a vague perception of vulnerability, of being rendered naked to her marrow. It was as if she were being dissected cell by cell and reassembled.

The sound of Gert pouring water into a pot shattered the spell.

Where was I? Oh yes, I need to prep for phase four.

“Can I offer you some tea?” Gert inquired. “I have a blend that is highly favored among my people for its calming properties.”

“Thanks, Gert, but not today,” said Jessica. “Too much to do.”

* * *

Pinpoints of light winked into existence across native villages as evening settled over the valley, meals of robust game and home-grown vegetables were prepared, and extended families gathered to share the day’s joys and frustrations in snug cottages fashioned from dense hardwoods. The view from the construction staging area atop the plateau offered Jessica a rare moment of contentment.

A simple life. And one I would love to experience someday.

She renewed her determination to complete her work quickly and return to Trevor. Pivoting, she strolled toward the fenced area that held the ’synths. “Synth” was short for biosynthetic creature, a product of the first successful fusion of metallic atoms with essential biological molecules. The breakthrough yielded creatures with unsurpassed strength and resilience—almost living, breathing machines. The ’synths simply ate everything in their path. Their enormous jaws filled powerful digestive systems that processed vegetation, soil, water, even rocks.

Each of Jessica’s ’synths was about six meters wide and three tall. When she walked up to one and placed her palm against the side of its jaw, an electric, almost sexual thrill raced through

Welcome to Your Dream House

her. Even when the 'synths were in standby mode, their hunger was palpable. At times, she thought that she could detect a gleam in their eyes.

I wonder if they dream of electric sheep.

But something was amiss. The plateau was too calm. At each previous development staging area, the arrival of the 'synths had sparked an immediate exodus of wildlife. Alarmed birds would blacken the sky as they streamed away, followed by galloping four-legged beasts and then by plodding and slithering animals, all sensing the annihilation that the 'synths would soon wreak.

It was the swarm of bumblebees that shocked Jessica the most when she appeared at her first construction site, on the distant outpost of Halstead 4. There must have been ten thousand of them, pouring from the gnarly scrub and stunted trees and assembling into a comet-shaped array of angry insects orbiting each other in a rapidly accelerating frenzy. They hovered less than three meters before her, resembling a single predator with barely restrained malevolence. Suddenly, they leapt above and past her and melted into the afternoon sky. Jessica stood frozen in terror and amazement for uncounted minutes afterward, the memory of Trevor's painful encounter with a bumblebee adding to her distress.

This evening, however, there were no bumblebees, no panicked or departing creatures of any kind. She walked a few meters into the woods. Birds chirped sporadically. A pair of small animals sequestered in shadow crept toward a babbling creek. Jessica shook her head before turning and heading down the hill for what she expected would be another night of fitful sleep.

* * *

Occasional shafts of sunlight pierced clouds the next morning, promising a good day to build. However, there was no sign of the native workers and the housing components Jessica expected

Welcome to Your Dream House

them to bring to the plateau. She decided to move ahead with site preparation anyway. On her signal, the 'synths commenced dredging earth, cracking boulders, snapping tree limbs, sucking up water, and expelling a fine loam in their wake.

After only a few minutes, they ground to a halt. Discovering no obvious malfunction, Jessica shifted them about 30 meters to the southwest. The 'synths resumed their devastation, but presently they stopped again. She encountered the same result at yet a third location.

Jessica perused survey reports, maps, and aerial views of the site. She determined that the plateau was formed by ancient volcanic activity and that it registered a strong concentration of certain rare minerals, but it was a fact that she almost overlooked that was telling: Each time that the 'synths halted, they were exactly 451 meters from the center of the development site. There was an imaginary circle around it, a boundary that they could not—or would not--cross.

What wouldn't I give for a real-time connection off this world?

She ordered the 'synths back into standby mode and entered the forest, outfitted with strong boots, water, a lightbeamer, a direction finder, and a map. On an upslope just east of a grove of nut-bearing trees, she thought that she could discern a narrow trail. Perhaps it was formed by animals seeking food or shelter; maybe it was an illusion. But it matched the direction she intended to travel. Soon after setting foot on the path, she realized that she no longer required her map or direction finder. She simply knew that she was on the proper course.

Several minutes later, she stopped dead in her tracks. Before her was a clearing that did not grace any map or image. A nearly perfect circle about 75 meters across was covered in knee-high grasses that undulated in the wind, the ripples recalling a pleasant sea voyage from Jessica's childhood. In the center sat a dilapidated wooden shack. The graying, splintered front steps and porch sagged under the weight of decades of neglect; small portions of the roof had caved in;

Welcome to Your Dream House

most window shutters had surrendered their positions; exterior paint was barely a rumor. The structure bore all the marks of being abandoned—except for a thin plume of gray smoke ascending from a stone chimney. Jessica approached the shack and sang out “hello!” repeatedly. She climbed the steps cautiously and knocked on the door. Hearing nothing, she tried the door, opened it, and stepped inside.

Her breath caught as she beheld an interior she knew all too well: one of her very own dream houses. She turned and discovered that the door was closed and locked behind her. She wrestled with it, lightly at first, and then furiously. It would not budge. She sprinted through the house, testing doors and windows. None would open.

There has to be some rational explanation.

Jessica sat cross-legged in the center of the living room. She sipped water and willed her pulse to slow. A modest measure of calm descended upon her. But soon she was gripped by the odd sensation that someone or something was with her, a familiar presence that she could not identify.

Kaleidoscopic colors flickered and swirled on the far wall, coalescing gradually into an image. Jessica was watching herself. She was watching herself from a few years earlier, judging by the clothes and hairstyle. She was on Rhys 5, the planet where Dream Homes Limited was based.

The picture shimmered and re-formed. She saw herself in a small bed surrounded by machines in a room bathed in white. There was something attached to her head. Nearby, people in uniforms were clustered around a monitor. The monitor revealed an image of Trevor as he appeared when he was about nine months old. Trevor!

Welcome to Your Dream House

But no, she could see now that it wasn't Trevor. It was a boy who looked very much like him. Jessica could make out a few words: "taller ... hair should be lighter..."

The colors on the wall faded and returned. There were more uniforms. A monitor displayed a slightly older boy whose face was morphing. At first, it was similar to Trevor's face. Then it took on a much closer resemblance. Finally, it resolved to appear just like him—in fact, exactly as he was depicted in the photo on her desk.

Jessica could watch no longer. Looking down, she saw that her fingernails had dug so viciously into her palms that blood was seeping.

Her primal shriek of rage rattled the building to its foundation. "No! No, it cannot be!" Jessica stood, placed her hands on her hips, and stared out at a horizon light-years beyond the wall. "Trevor, do you hear me? You're my son. Mommy's coming home to you, right now."

Jessica struggled with the front door, with the back door, with every window, until her hands bled even more. She threw anything she could throw, even ramming her shoulder against the front door, before collapsing beside it.

Five minutes, or five years, could have elapsed. At some point, she decided that she needed to make sense of this encounter. She sought to revive memories of her first awkward embraces with David, her seemingly endless pregnancy, those messy morning meals with her child. But it was the vision of Trevor stung by the bumbler and toddling toward her that came to the fore--the nightmare that never died, a ribbon of pain stretched into a Mobius strip.

Rather than endeavor to escape it, Jessica concentrated all of her faculties on that image. Her son's pain-wracked face and curly brown hair began to pixelate and break up. His plea to "make it better" degraded into an echo reverberating from the end of a receding hallway. The arms that she reached out were dry, brittle sticks, without strength or direction.

Welcome to Your Dream House

She sought repeatedly to grasp and examine any fragment, any detail, of that scene. But every time she fixed her attention on one, it crumbled like a sand castle.

Refusing to succumb to panic, she attempted to re-experience the relief that she felt when the boy finally reached her, the elation that they shared as his little arms circled her waist, and the love that suffused them as he buried his tear-streaked face in her pounding chest.

Even if I can't trust my memories, I know that my feelings are real.

Again and again, she sought to capture those emotions--to dredge them up to the surface, to the present, to reality. She encountered only an absolute void. And, finally, she understood, beyond all doubt:

She never felt the joy of holding him. She never could make it all better.

A sickening ache swelled within her. The contract with David, the birth of her child, the future with Trevor she craved so deeply: It was all a dream manufactured and planted deep within her by a heartless corporation in order to manipulate her—and how many more people like her?

She rose, sought to force down her anger, and faced the wall where the images had appeared. She announced: “I believe you, whoever you are. I—I have no child. I am alone.”

She waited for some sort of sign or response, but none manifested. She walked to the front door. As she expected, it opened readily. She stepped outside, went down the stairs, and strode six paces before turning around.

The shack, or house, was gone. Only a trace of chimney smoke remained. Jessica watched as it was swallowed by the afternoon breeze.

* * *

Welcome to Your Dream House

Gert and a customer were conversing with their backs to the main door as Jessica entered the trading post. After the customer departed with a bulging sack of gardening tools, Gert turned, matched Jessica's gaze briefly, then looked away. His eyes were steep craters on a lifeless moon; his face was lined with dark rivulets of exhaustion.

He looks like he hasn't slept in days. Then again, I probably look worse.

"The medical shuttle will arrive late this ten-day," Gert said softly. "It is likely that one of the practitioners can remove your communications chip, though you might need to offer a bribe." There was no humor in his voice.

He knows. Of course, he knows everything. He was there.

"I am sorry that this happened to you," he continued. "Is there something that I can do to help?"

My friend, you have already helped more than you can possibly imagine.

Jessica wandered around the room, running her fingers along oversized cooking pots and thick-crust loaves of brown bread as she weighed her words. "I suppose I need to find a new job," she said. "I don't think you can help me with that."

She wasn't sure which of them was more surprised when she approached Gert, placed her hand on his shoulder, and let it linger for a moment. "There is one thing you can do," she added, a thin smile playing on her lips. "I think I'm ready for that cup of tea."

END