



STORIES FROM THE

*Clarence Valley*

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# to the island

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## FANTASY I-LAND

By Kylie Fennell

‘*H*ashtag LivingMyBestLife – that’s my escape word,’ I say to the smiling face on the monitor. She says her name is Ai. She bears a passing resemblance to Grace Kelly but her features are a little too refined, as if she’s overdone it with a face filter app.

‘WE DON’T RECOMMEND USING hashtags in the virtual construct.’ The robotic lilt to her voice reminds me of Siri and the GPS lady.

‘How about just the phrase “*Living My Best Life*”?’

‘A phrase is acceptable. Please say “yes” to verify that your escape word is “*Living My Best Life*”, as shown on screen.’

My eyes flit across the monitor and I say, ‘Yes’. I’m eager to get on with it. I only have a one-hour slot in between my spray tan and hair appointments.

The video ad had appeared in my Instagram feed showcasing a pristine white beach lined with palm trees.

It said, 'Too busy for a holiday? Take an i-Break. As endorsed by Kylie Jenner.'

The accompanying post had read, 'Holidays for the time-deprived. Fantasy i-Land where one hour feels like weeks.'

'What the hell?' I had thought, conscious of my gruelling schedule. To many the life of a social media influencer looked glamorous but the reality of curating the perfect 'online' life was exhausting. It left me with no time for an actual life, least of all holidays.

After a few DMs back and forth, I had secured a complimentary Fantasy i-Land experience bringing me to this nondescript warehouse on the edge of town and a cube-shaped room furnished with nothing but the egg-chair I'm sitting in.

'Once your fantasy holiday has begun,' Ai says, 'the only way for it to end is by using your escape word. Please say "Yes" to indicate you understand.'

'Yeeees.' I'm unable to conceal my impatience.

'You must agree to the terms and conditions as shown on the screen.'

I give the small print on the monitor no more than a cursory glance.

'Please say "Yes" to indicate you understand.'

'Yes. Yes. Yes!'

Ai's mouth appears to twitch for a moment before her movie-star smile returns.

'Please make yourself comfortable.'

I lean back into the egg-chair and cushioning inflates around my neck and head. Wings extend from the side of the chair and swing into place so I'm completely cocooned. Ai's voice comes from a speaker on one side.

'Relax and sit very still. You may feel a small prick.'

‘What the— Ow! Did you just stick a needle in my neck?’

‘A light sedative is being administered to fully immerse you in your fantasy holiday.’

What else was in those Ts and Cs?

My chest feels cold and weighed down as if someone were sitting on it. My eyelids are heavy. I force myself to focus on the monitor in front of me.

A montage of images floods the screen. I recognise clips from *Fantasy Island* – a TV show from childhood. The host is wearing his crisp white suit and shirt. His offsider Tattoo animatedly waves at the arriving plane.

I feel as if I’m floating high in the air. Through clouds I see snippets of an island surrounded by crystal clear water. A sprawling resort takes form and I picture myself sipping a mojito at one of the pool bars. I take a deep breath, letting the sea air fill my lungs. I taste the salt on my lips. Then the vision below flickers like a buffering video stream. The island disappears from view and there is nothing but clouds. Dark clouds. No, not clouds. It was smog.

I choke on the air thick with the smell of diesel. The smog clears for a moment and the island is still there, but the resort has been replaced by a mass of towering buildings and factories spewing plumes of smoke into the sky. A never-ending landscape of grey and brown extends to a churning sea crashing at the edges of the island-city.

I try to say my escape phrase but gag on the smog. I am falling. I pray I don’t land on one of the spires of the skyscrapers reminiscent of the Empire State Building.

The falling sensation finally stops and I open my eyes to find myself strapped into a barber chair straight out of Sweeney Todd. I struggle against the leather restraints.

‘Living My Best Life!’ I scream to no effect. My voice sounds tinny as it echoes off the metallic walls. A single industrial light whirrs above me.

I’m wearing a mission-brown tunic with matching calf-length boots. The tunic could pass as monk robes or a bad attempt at steampunk cosplay. A projector screen flickers to life in front of me.

‘Welcome to Fantasy i-Land. I’m your Concierge.’ The picture is black-and-white and grainy but the person speaking could pass for Ai’s sister.

‘There’s been a mistake.’

‘Ai doesn’t make mistakes.’

‘Living My Best Li—’ My words are muffled as a helmet descends around my head. There’s a buzzing sound and cold metal runs across my scalp. Clumps of my long blonde hair fall into my lap. WTF.

‘Stop it!’ I struggle against the restraints but it’s useless. Eventually the clippers stop and retract. I feel the heat from the mechanical prod before it makes contact. A searing pain shoots through my neck and there’s the smell of burning flesh. They’ve branded me! The helmet whirrs out of sight and my restraints pop open.

‘You’re now ready to start your assignment,’ the Concierge says brightly.

‘You’re not listening,’ I say through gritted teeth. ‘I’m not here for an assignment. I’m here for a holiday.’

‘Let me confirm what you have asked for.’ She tilts her head for a moment. ‘Your file says no computers and no smart devices. That you want a break from technology and no pressure to look good. Is that correct?’

‘Yes but—’

‘Then there’s no mistake.’

I want to slap the Stepford-Wife smile off the Concierge’s virtual face.

‘You may leave. Your transport will arrive outside the door momentarily.’

‘I demand to speak to your boss.’

‘There are no bosses in Fantasy i-Land.’

‘Ai. I demand to speak to Ai.’

The smile falls from the Concierge’s face. ‘You are in no position to make demands.’ There was a sharp edge to her voice that sent a chill through me. ‘Exit the room so you can begin your assignment.’

‘Living My Best Life,’ I say but nothing happens. The projector screen fades to black and a door swings open.

I find myself in a train station of sorts. A glass ceiling soars high above a complex web of steel arches and frames. The station is dozens of stories high with ledges, like the one I’m standing on, jutting out from soot-covered walls and acting as platforms for single carriage trains that rattle along on cables. Cogs the size of a house crunch into place and steam vents from clunky engines around the station. I grasp an iron railing to steady myself against the sensory overload and the scorching pain radiating from my neck.

A train screeches to a stop at my platform and a man in a moss-green uniform, armed with something like a musket loaded with a barbed harpoon, ushers me into the carriage. There are about two dozen other men and women already seated. All with shaved heads and wearing the same brown tunic as me.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the carriage window. Blonde has been replaced by mousy brown stubble. I cringe. My nose is too pointy and I don’t have the cheekbones to pull off a number one cut. My gaze falls on the angry, red brand on my neck. It’s the letter ‘P’. P for pissed off. P for positively freakin’ furious!

The train lurches forward and I reach for a strap-hanger. I find myself standing directly in front of someone I recognise. It's Summer. A YouTuber who makes ASMR videos – those ones where a person whispers, eats or uses objects to make oddly appealing noises. Summer and I often attend the same product launches and events. Come to think of it, I hadn't seen her for a while.

'Summer,' I whisper but she looks straight ahead. She has the same 'P' neck brand.

'It's me. Bree.'

'Shhh,' the armed man says and points to a sign of a person holding a finger to their lips.

The train stops and without direction my fellow passengers form two orderly lines and file off. My harpoon friend shoves me in the back to follow suit. We proceed through a steel-lined tunnel that opens up into a factory. Here the lines split off with each person taking up position at a different conveyor belt or machine.

A beaming male version of the Concierge, dressed in a mustard uniform, materialises in front of me.

'Let me take you to your station.' He trots down the metal stairs and across the factory floor.

'There's been a mistake,' I say racing after him.

'Ai doesn't make mistakes,' he says over his shoulder before stopping at a rapidly moving belt delivering a stream of silver cogs. He hands me a clipboard and pencil.

'You count the cogs.' He turns on his heels and leaves.

'But—' I freeze as two harpoon men nearby raise their weapons at me.

So I count cogs. When I reach 2,376 a whistle sounds and we're herded into a cafeteria. Each of us is served a

mug of water and a grey cube of jelly, about the size of an orange. It tastes of nothing and the gelatinous texture turns my stomach. I push my tray away as everyone else eats their lunch in silence.

Another three thousand or so cogs later the whistle sounds again. This time we're directed back into the tunnel and onto a train. The carriage passes a series of stations before emerging briefly to the outside world. The smog-tainted daylight is fading but I can see people on the streets below. There are some of the mustard uniforms marching here and there but the majority of the people are couples, dressed in black, all walking at a leisurely pace. The women wear corseted gowns and carry parasols and the men are sporting top hats, jodhpurs and waistcoats.

The end of my train journey finds me in a communal dormitory with my fellow factory workers. Dinner is a repeat of lunch and as my stomach rumbles I force myself to eat the grey cube. I wince as the jelly sludge slides down my throat.

The 'be silent' signs are present everywhere but I am allowed to go to the toilet whenever I need to.

Alone at the washbasin I repeat between broken sobs, 'Living My Best Life'. Thankfully, there are no mirrors to capture my ugly crying face.

A toilet flushes and I spin around to see Summer emerge from the stall.

'You needn't bother,' she says matter-of-factly. 'Escape words don't work.'

I look around nervously for an armed man to appear.

'You can talk. It's the only place we're not under surveillance. Some condition in the morality clause.'

'Summer,' I cry and try to embrace her.

She steps away from me and frowns. ‘The sooner you realise you’re stuck here the easier it will be to accept.’

‘Stuck?’

‘In the new reality.’ She gives a wry smile. ‘A reality where we are stripped of our humanity. Identified only by function and colour code.’

I raise a questioning brow.

‘Workers like us wear brown. The Forgotten live in isolation and wear grey. Then there are the Elite in black who live a relatively free life. And of course there are the Concierges who wear mustard and the guards, or Keepers, that wear green.’

Summer’s seeming acceptance of the situation was baffling. ‘We have to get out of here.’

‘There’s no escape.’

‘How do you know?’

After a long pause, Summer speaks. ‘I heard two guys talking in here one day. Apparently they worked as developers on Fantasy i-Land. They said the AI program was performing exactly as it should but they wanted to go one step further. They wanted Ai to be completely independent.’

‘Ai,’ I mumble.

‘The artificial intelligence controlling this world. There were manual checks in place to vet people’s fantasies for criminal activities and the like, so the developers decided to feed Ai data to build a morality code. Ai became fixated on the seven deadly sins and the idea of purgatory. But the developers didn’t know until it was too late. They became stuck in here during testing.’

‘So Ai is using this virtual construct to deliver morality lessons?’

‘It’s like she’s scanning everyone’s online presence and measuring a person’s humanity by their digital foot-

print. Those she determines in need of a morality *adjustment* are drawn into Fantasy i-Land.'

I slump against the wall knowing my 'P' brand represents pride and I'm being punished for my vanity.

'Then we have to stop Ai.'

'We can't. She will have fail-safes in place to protect herself and this world.'

'Then we speak to the developers.'

Summer compresses her lips. 'They disappeared. We're stuck here.' With that Summer leaves me to ponder my new reality but I'm not so quick to give up. It occurs to me that if I can live without sin, Ai will have no reason to keep me here.

Over the next few weeks I conquered my sins, even pride. I was enjoying not caring about how I looked, but I couldn't help envying the Elite and their freedom. Then after a few weeks I started to see their forced smiles masked a stifled existence. I no longer envy them.

I make an appointment to see a Concierge at the factory. The same Grace Kelly-esque woman from my first day greets me from behind a counter.

'How can I help you?'

'I would like to leave Fantasy i-Land.'

'On what grounds?'

'That I don't live in sin.'

A capsule pops out of a pneumatic tube next to the Concierge. She opens the capsule and surveys its contents. Her face tics.

'The surveillance report confirms your claim. Your request is unorthodox but within the parameters of this construct. We will process your application.'

I exhale loudly, relieved this nightmare is coming to an end. 'So how long will that take?'

The Concierge flashes a bright smile. ‘One or two months.’

I recognise the feeling as it takes seed but I force it back down. ‘Can’t it be processed sooner?’

The Concierge blinks rapidly. ‘I have just been informed the process will take closer to three months.’

‘Three?’ my voice rises. I’m unable to control my anger. ‘Three more months!’

The Concierge blinks again. ‘I’m sorry but you’re no longer eligible to leave Fantasy i-Land.’

‘On what grounds?’

‘Wrath. Your wrath is preventing you from living your best life.’