

# THE DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION

*A lesson learned.*

BY NINAN TAN

“Mr Smith? Your safe room is ready.” The nurse motions me to follow her.

I toss the magazine back on the waiting-room pile, push up from the chair and grab my briefcase. The nurse indulges me with a courtesy smile as I follow her down the door-lined hallway. A man’s muffled cries from behind the padded walls startle me.

“Is this your first time with us?” the nurse asks.

“Yes. Is there anything I should know beforehand?”

“Don’t worry, Mr Smith. Our professional staff will make sure that your session goes nice and smoothly.”

As we reach the door to my room, a scuffle at the other end of the hallway grabs my attention. My heart knocks in my throat as a young woman, bawling hysterically, is removed from one of the safe rooms.

“Repeat offender. Multiple sentences,” the nurse remarks as she unlocks my door.

“Does it hurt?”

“It really depends on the crime,” she says, ushering me into the white, padded room. “May I suggest you remove your suit jacket, Mr Smith?”

I slip my arms out of the jacket and hand it to her. She folds it over her arm and waits until we are joined in the room by an Exec. He barely looks me in the eyes as he fixes a headset to my scalp. My stomach twists with anxiety.

“Let me know if it’s too tight,” he says as he adjusts the headband.

I glimpse at the name tag pinned to his chest. “It’s fine. Thank you, Eric.”

The Exec’s eyes shift to meet mine in surprise. I doubt many notice his name.

“Alright, Mr Smith,” the Exec says. “Once we leave the room and shut the door, there will be a 30-second countdown and then your session will begin.”

“I understand.”

The nurse and the Exec depart and the door locks shut behind them, triggering the longest 30 seconds of my life.

At the end of the countdown, the headset comes to life and I’m no longer in the room. Instead, I find



myself in a Brooklyn street. It’s night, and the pavement is dotted with puddles from an early afternoon shower. I hear the deafening wail of an ambulance as it rushes by. As I inhale, the smell of damp cement and wet trash hits the back of my throat. I shiver from a gust of wind and pop my collar up.

I turn the corner and climb the steps up to a pre-war brownstone building, fumbling for my keys. Inside, the house is newly renovated with a modern touch. A blonde woman in a long, blue dress glides down the stairs. A wave of adoration warms my chest at the sight of her.

“Robert. You’re back. I thought you’d be late again tonight,” she says.

“I couldn’t. Not on our anniversary,” I say. But it’s not my voice. It’s Robert’s. I pull out a bouquet of flowers and offer it to her.

“Oh, Robert, darling.” She takes the flowers from me and presses her soft lips to mine.

The bell rings.

“Who could it be at this time?” she asks.

I open the door and my chest tightens from a mixture of surprise and disquiet. Standing at the top of the steps is me — Simon Smith.

“Mr Smith? What are you doing at my house? I thought we were done talking.”

Simon Smith doesn’t utter a word. The raw redness in his troubled eyes is evident even in his partially shaded face. His hands hide inside his overcoat pockets, tense and curled into fists.

I swallow, uneasy.

“Robert, who is it?” the woman asks from behind me.

I turn to her. “It’s alright, Vanessa. I’ll take care of it.”

Her eyes open wide in shock as a disorientating pain rips through my abdomen. I look down at the knife lodged in my stomach. Blood instantly saturates my white shirt. I topple to the floor. Vanessa’s screams send a rippling wave of panic through me. Fear, confusion and hatred overwhelm my senses as my eyes fix on Simon Smith, my murderer. The pain intensifies. Jagged white lights cut across my vision, until everything fades to black.

I come to, gasping for breath. The lock clicks, and the Exec and the nurse re-enter the safe room. The Exec kneels beside me and removes the headset. My heart continues to pound and I hug myself, trembling.

“Your first session is complete, Mr Smith,” the Exec says. “Elapsed time is 3 minutes and 17 seconds.” He grabs my arms, hoisting me up from the floor. My shirt is soaked in sweat. “The first time always proves to be the most demanding. But don’t worry. Your nervous system will gradually adjust to the program.”

The nurse grabs my briefcase and loops her arm around mine as she helps me out of the safe room and back to the front desk.

The receptionist hands me a receipt for my session. “Mr Smith,” she says. “As required by law, after every session, I am obligated to remind you of why you are here: you have been convicted of the murder of one Robert Clement on 10 October 2051. Your sentence is to relive the aforementioned murder from the perspective of the victim, once a week, every week, for 25 years. You currently have 1,299 sessions left.”

Behind me, the nurse still smiles. “Thank you for choosing Clarion Correctional Facilities, Mr Smith. We hope to see you again next week. Please, don’t forget to fill out our customer satisfaction card for a chance to win an upgrade to our deluxe suites. Have a good rest of your day.” ■

*Ninan Tan is a social-issues filmmaker and science-fiction writer based in New York City. She also frequently migrates to Rome and Beijing in the summers and winters. Learn more at: [www.theorphanclassifieds.com](http://www.theorphanclassifieds.com).*

➔ NATURE.COM  
Follow Futures:  
@NatureFutures  
go.nature.com/mtoodm