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Life Without

Timothy Nunes

Because there can't be a downside to having the world at your fingertips...can there?

James stood there, shivering, a fine sheen of sweat glistening on his bare, exposed arms. He was surrounded by a hoard of sweaty strangers, feeling claustrophobic and wishing he'd never left his comfortable little apartment... His comfortable little existence.

It all started out innocently enough. He'd been chatting up Jackie in a Fourth Life coffee shop, talking about this and that. She was so easy to talk to, seemed to share so much in common with him... The same taste in eBooks, movies, music. It was like they'd known each other forever, like they were soul mates. And her avatar... man, talk about HOT! Sometimes it took all his will power to stop ogling her voluptuous physique and pay attention to what she was saying.

Anyway, they'd been progressively discussing more and more personal things lately (a sign of how close they were becoming, he was sure), when he brought up the subject of his [foot pain](#). It was a topic he'd never have raised with another girl, but she'd just shared how a particular [homeopathic remedy](#) had helped cure a bad [rash](#) and, without thinking, he mentioned how the celery seed extract capsules he took for his [gout](#) no longer seemed to help. That's when she brought up the topic of fresh-squeezed celery extract.

"It's all the rage!" she'd said, going on to promote fresh-squeezed celery extract as a [cure](#)-all for everything from gout to erectile dysfunction... At least according to her new-age book club in Fourth Life. Supposedly, it was the closest you could get to actually eating the vegetable itself... And who wanted to do THAT?? "You should definitely look into it," she'd told him.

And so he had. James had looked EVERYWHERE, in fact... all throughout the world of Fourth Life. He even resorted to trolling through the primitive, three-sense limited world of Third Life. In desperation, he finally visited the two-sense, digital slum that was Second Life... all to no avail. Though he did find out something useful in Second Life, from a very seedy looking avatar staffing a little drug store on Bourbon Street. Apparently, pure celery extract couldn't BE ordered. You actually had to GO TO A STORE.

It had been years since he'd stepped outside. There was never a need. He shopped via the 'net, McD's Direct delivered his food, and his job as a freelance VR architect didn't require clothing, much less a commute. No, he was more than content with his private existence, thank you very

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much, and saw no need for actual physical interaction with his fellow man...or woman, for that matter. Interacting with women face-to-face had always been painfully embarrassing... except in Fourth Life.

Fourth Life changed everything for him, providing him with the human interaction he'd longed for his entire life but never had the physical appearance or social skills to secure. In Fourth Life, his avatar looked, sounded, even smelled exactly how he wanted it to, and beautiful women seemed to long for his company. Fourth Life brought him happiness, personal fulfillment and, combined with everything else his iPadX allowed him access to, had eliminated any need to venture beyond the familiar confines of his own 'man cave'... Until now.

The [pain](#) in his foot had become unbearable lately and, as he was self-employed and didn't trust the med techs at the local Obama Clinic (which also would have required James to step outside), he'd turned to homeopathic alternatives... And now he simply needed to find a better one. Getting to his local Whole Foods though, where he'd been told he'd find fresh celery extract, wasn't going to be easy.

First of all, he no longer owned transportation. The snazzy turbotrike he'd used all through college was long gone, traded in for a shiny new iPad6 years ago. And the store was almost a mile away! Still, the thought of mass transit was unbearable, so he'd simply have to limp the distance and back. Yes, that's just what he'd do. Or so he thought.

By the time he'd made it half a block, James was completely winded and his [legs](#) felt like jelly. Looking up, he noticed the mass transit sign and thankfully collapsed onto the nearby bench to await the arrival of the next hydrobus. Which is how he found himself surrounded by a press of ugly, sweaty people he just knew were thinking bad things about him... Judging him, looking down on him. He knew that's what they were doing because that's the way things worked on the outside, how they'd always worked.

The five minute ride to Whole Foods was the longest five minutes of James' life, and it was with extreme relief that he stepped off that hideous bus. He wasn't looking forward to entering the store though, as it would be full of people too, a thought that had him hesitating at the door. Still, the longer he waited, the longer it would be until he was safely back in the world of Fourth Life. So he steeled himself to the hellish experience that surely lay ahead, stepped through the front doors, and...was completely surprised by what he found.

Soft lights, polished, expensive Trex flooring, and beautiful food displays were everywhere. And everything seemed so REAL, from the vibrancy of the colors to the depth and contours of each display. Though the stores in Fourth Life utilized state-of-the-art holo- and senso-technology, those stores now seemed but pale copies of what he saw before him. And the PEOPLE....

The people, who he'd feared the most, were actually SMILING at him! One young woman hailed him from behind a display case of the most delectable looking pastries. "Good afternoon, sir! Interested in a fresh-baked peach and berry tart?" Her enthusiastic greeting drew him to her. "Um..." he mumbled uncomfortably, sure her smile would disappear the moment he said no. "Which would you recommend?" The young baker's smile widened even more as she responded, "This one, definitely. I just made it myself!" She took the colorful little tart out of the display, boxed it up and passed it over the counter. As he accepted the package, their fingers touched briefly, causing him to actually smile back.

The rest of his time in the store was equally as enjoyable. In every department, he was greeted with a smile and a kind word, and presented with purchase options that delighted his senses. In addition to the fresh celery extract, James arrived at the checkout with a small basketful of goodies.

He'd actually enjoyed being somewhere outside, for the first time in years; so much so that, when the young man started packaging up his purchases and asked, with a ready smile, "Did you find everything you were looking for today, sir?", he found himself smiling in return as he responded, "Yes...yes, I did. I think I found JUST what I was looking for."

