

Artificial Everything

by [Joshua C. Frank](#) (February 2024)



I gazed lovingly at my wife and son on the screen while we all ate dinner. With me living in Ohio and them in Vancouver, we were three hours apart. It's rare that husbands and wives are able to eat together despite time zone differences, and rarer still that they both want to. Still, I wasn't satisfied with just sitting there and listening to them talk to each other, at least not lately.

"So, Addison, how was work today?" I asked.

My wife looked over at me. She could never point her face at the camera at an angle that made it look like eye contact. "It was fine." Addison went back to her meal.

"And Jayden, how was school today?" I asked.

My son looked up. "I coded my first reality game."

I beamed. "At ten? Wow. When I was your age, I'd have had to pay money for a game like that. You had to touch the screen with your fingers! Can you imagine?"

Addison sighed loudly. I and Jayden both knew better than to say anything more after that, so we just finished in silence.

After an hour or so, I called Addison back. She answered her screen in her bedroom, dressed in her pajamas. "What?" Her tone startled me, and her stone expression didn't help matters, either.

"What's wrong, honey?" I asked.

Addison sighed again. "I don't like how involved you try to be. It's intrusive. You talk a lot lately, and we just want to enjoy our dinner. My son and I have our own life together. You have your place in it. Don't overstep it."

"He's my son, too," I said. "I don't get to see him except at dinner. You have him at home all day; even when you work, he's doing school next to you. Am I just supposed to be a picture on a screen and a paycheck?"

"You're the *father*," she said, exasperated. "You provide for us. When I wanted a child, you sent me your DNA. You're at dinner every night. We have screen-sex once a week. Now all that's not enough?"

"I'd like a connection with my son," I said. "I've never even seen him in person or touched him—or you."

"What, you want to be his *mother* now?"

"Of course not. I just want more than a short video of you

two. At least sim-families give something back for all that money, even if they aren't real people."

Addison stiffened. "Well, you don't have to show up if it's too much bother. I like our relationship the way it is. I thought you did too. What brought this on?"

I took a long, deep breath. "If you must know," I said calmly, "I was with another woman."

Addison's eyes widened. "You cheated on me?"

"No, it was better than screen-sex. She and her children actually talked with me. I've been getting to know them, and we're talking about me marrying her and moving in. Don't worry, I'll still send the payments."

"You're leaving me? What about our son? He'll be devastated!"

"I'm hardly in his life now."

"If that's what you really want..."

"No, Belinda showed me what I've been missing. Just say I can move in with you and Jayden, and I'll break up with her."

Addison's image disappeared. I tried calling her back a few times, but she didn't answer.

I called Belinda. She answered with a huge smile on her brown face, lit by the bright Philippine daylight. "Hi, Tom!" Her enthusiasm almost seemed too good to be true.

"I broke the news to Addison," I said. I told her how it went. "So, I want to marry you and move in."

"Wonderful! The kids will be so happy. Just think of it: you, me, my-soon to be our-four kids, sitting on the couch, or at the table, hugging; you and me kissing and even having more children..."

My mind raced; I couldn't wait. "So when do you want to meet in person?"

"Well, we can't right now, I've got a few things to clear up, to allow one more in the house. Hopefully it'll all be taken care of in a few weeks."

"I hope so, I can't wait to hold you."

"Me neither. I love you."

My heart raced at those words; she actually said them with feeling. "I love you too."

Her image disappeared from the screen. I jumped up, cavorted around my apartment, and giggled like a little girl. I sang for the first time in many years. I didn't care who heard me. I hooted and hollered while running around, tears streaming down my laughing face.

After all these years of artificial relationships, artificial marriage, artificial everything, my whole life filtered through a screen as a bunch of glorified shadow puppets, I'd finally have a family I could experience in person! Not just talking, but touching, kissing, the smells, and more! I had trouble sleeping that night; I couldn't stop thinking about the possibilities.

The next morning, when I woke up, I checked the time. Quarter past seven. That meant Belinda would be getting ready for bed. I called her, heart pounding, anticipating another delightful call.

Instead of Belinda's overjoyed face, I saw a news article dated that same day, about a man in the Philippines arrested for catfishing. Apparently Belinda and her children were merely a simulation programmed by him to lure men to financial ruin. I didn't believe it at first, but a quick online search

confirmed it.

My good mood crashed. Could Belinda really have been fake? Before I could think about my disappointment, I tried calling Addison back. I rehearsed what I was going to say: I was sorry for my foolishness, and should have been grateful for what I had; I'd never step out of my place again if only she'd take me back. Instead of her image, my screen displayed a confirmation email showing that she had filed for divorce on grounds of abandonment not long after I last spoke with her.

"Just great," I muttered. "Now I have nothing. At least before, I had screen images of my wife and son to look at each night." Then came a brilliant flash, after which my mood brightened. "That's it! If Belinda and her family were just a sim-family, and they could make me so happy, I'll simply buy another one, with lots of children. It'll just be on screen, but it's better than any option I've got." Rather than wallow in self-pity, I got to shopping right away. It wouldn't be a real relationship, but perhaps it's the best a man can hope for in this day and age.

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Joshua C. Frank works in the field of statistics and lives in the American Heartland. His poetry has been published in *The Society of Classical Poets*, *Snakeskin*, *The Lyric*, *Sparks of Calliope*, *Westward Quarterly*, *Atop the Cliffs*, *Our Day's Encounter*, *The Creativity Webzine*, *Verse Virtual*, and *The Asahi Haikuist Network*, and his short fiction has been published in *Nanoism* and *The Creativity Webzine*. His website is [here](#).

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