

SUPRA LIFE

A short story by

Sébastien GRISEY

1 DAISUKE

Daisuke was 20 years old and had been living in Kabukicho for a few months, in one of those tiny apartments that were sublet two or three times. He had never met the landlord, did not know his name and could not care less. He was there to work.

His petty well-ordered provincial life had taken a radical turn on that fated December day in 2019. He had taken the train to the capital, as he did every Friday, to kill time and do some shopping. That was before the first wave of the pandemic. He had time to spare, free as the wind, all the time in the world, so much so that in the long run doing nothing to such an extent might well have ended up killing him. He had got out of the school system at the end of high school, unable to find any incentive whatsoever in academic education. What's the point of thinking about the future when, whether you like it or not, it offers itself in virtually the same way every morning.

It was in one of those papers that are freely available near the Bento vendor of Ikebukuro station that he had read the inconspicuous ad: "Wanted: man or woman in good health, who likes walking and speaks English." As far as walking was concerned, he had the right profile. Strolling was his thing, he liked covering as little distance as possible in as much time as possible. It was his own way of slowing down the onset of the future, that vague concept that seemed to be his parents', his teachers' and even some of his friends' constant preoccupation, and if not carefully prepared for, only bode disaster and trouble, so they said.

Daisuke had decided to ignore it, and to keep at a distance by going as slowly as possible towards it. Until now, one could say that his strategy had worked rather well. For 20 years nothing of note had happened to him, absolutely nothing and he congratulated himself for it. It made him a model citizen, he thought. Someone who

does not cause any problem, who does not stand out from the crowd, does not make any noise, does not disturb anybody.

The third requirement of the ad was more problematic. As every Japanese child, he had studied Shakespeare's language by ticking the boxes of lengthy MCQS all along his short education. He even had rather good results to these questionnaires, a success he put down to his lucky star, an innate good luck that had enabled him for that matter, to catch many plush toys with the claw-cranes of the amusement arcades and to tick a majority of right boxes without even reading the questions. Actually, he had chanced upon a sort of recurring combination of answers that you had to permute alternately a certain number of times, and if you scrupulously applied this rule, you were sure to get a good mark.

On the other hand, speaking the English tongue, uttering words with your mouth in order to build sentences was quite another kettle of fish. He had of course been approached on some occasions by English speaking tourists when strolling in the tourist districts of the capital city, but every encounter had ended in an embarrassed silence on his part, a moment of hesitation, and his pathetic escape, mumbling a few words of apology in Japanese.

Even so, out of curiosity, he had decided to go to the address mentioned by the ad. The small office was on the sixth floor of an office block in the Akihabara district, and, as there was no lift, he arrived slightly out of breath. The office was staffed by a little old woman who, without even raising her head, pointed at a door at the far end of the room. The sound of machines and the drone of an imposing ventilation system issued from it. The door was ajar, and Daisuke could catch sight of the racks of computing servers from which bunches of network cables burst forth. The orange and

green lights of thousands of transmission signal blinked constantly. Daisuke pushed the door open: a tall thin man in a white lab coat, was busy at a workbench at the other end of the room. The man turned round and with a broad smile, waved at him to come over. Daisuke felt a thrill along his spine, his life was going to change, he could feel it.

2 VIC

Since March 2022, when the second wave of the pandemic started, Vic no longer went out. For almost 8 months, she had holed up inside her tiny one-room apartment. Venturing outside was too dangerous. They had tried everything: wearing masks, sanitizing systematically, social distancing, closing practically all the places where you could meet, to no avail: the virus was still there and killing masses of people. Even the vaccine, that for a few months had given mankind an enormous surge of hope, had proved useless. No sooner did they think that they could defeat the disease, than the European strain had mutated like a bolt from the blue, leaving the scientific community utterly disheartened. People succumbed just about everywhere. Whether young or old, sick or in good health, you might wake up one morning with a splitting headache, a papery taste in your mouth, and short of breath. You first thought it was flu but within a few days, it got worse and worse, so much so that it was impossible for you to move without suffocating. Every breath you took felt as if it filled only half of your lungs, then a third, then a quarter, then it was over. You could have been kept alive on a ventilator of course, but that was during the first wave of the pandemic, when the number of patients was still manageable and the equipment was roughly sufficient.

This time hospitals had been overwhelmed in barely three weeks, and the numbers of the frontline medical staff were decimated within barely three months. Today, hardly anybody among the survivors would accept to run the risk of taking care of the sick. Equipment had been asked to perform well beyond its capacity and for too long. Most of the ventilators that still worked had become useless in hospitals turned into morgues.

There was no exception to this utterly dark picture. No area of the planet had been spared. At best the disease had spread sporadically, giving the illusion for a short period of time, that such or such country was doing better because it had made the right choices in

handling the epidemic. Those who could afford it had fled to these so-called oases, but all of them had been caught up at one moment or another and the borders had immediately closed in on them. As of now there was no escape. Vic knew it. Now the issue was all about surviving without going out. As soon as the first pandemic came to an end, the manufacturers of mass-produced food, sensing that it could start again one day, prioritized automated food production. Supply networks that involved virtually no human intervention were set up and, in the end, all this worked rather well. There was no shortage of food, all the more so as the human population was fast on the wane, and animals were not touched by the disease. Vic could have food delivered to her every week without ever seeing anybody. Refrigerated delivery lockers had been installed by Food Corp. on the ground floor of every block of flats. You only had to wait for the little green lamp on top of your fridge to switch on, to go down in the 12 minutes slot allotted to you, and pick up your parcel. Beyond this time-slot, the locker was automatically bolted until the next day. They had been careful to make sure that only one lamp at a time went on in every building. It was out of the question for two tenants to cross paths in the communal areas. Too risky!

Vic was lucky enough to be able to work online, her job allowed it, and all in all, it suited her not to have to go to her former office any longer. She had never really enjoyed having to meet her colleagues every morning, having to listen to the too detailed accounts of their uninteresting weekends, and to their endless moaning about work, politics, sports, their neighbours, the weather.... It had always bored her to death and she was finally rid of it. Above all, and it may be her greatest joy, she no longer had to comply with the custom she had always abhorred: having to greet others with a kiss on the cheek/ with a “bise”. In the world before the pandemic, some men made a point of kissing to signify a special friendship, it was a choice. Women, on the contrary, were left with no other option but to submit to this practice that

demanded a proximity that often made Vic feel sick. All that was over now, and to her great relief.

The more months went by, the more advantages Vic found to this forced retirement. She was a stay-at-home person and had always favored developing virtual passions rather than meeting her fellow countrymen in bars, hanging out with her colleagues, or subscribing to a fitness club. Her computer was her best friend, and as long as her internet connection worked, she could get on with her life, she felt happy.

Yet, she missed something, something that she had planned to do when it was still thought to be possible to go back to a “normal” life: travelling. The idea of going far away, alone of course, to a modern country where people would leave her to go about her business without asking questions, where she would feel absolutely safe, strongly appealed to her. She had been thinking about it for years and had spent hours surfing information sites, gathering data. She had read dozens of accounts by travelers of the world before the pandemic, and thought she would give it a try, provided that she found a suitable destination. Cleanliness, technology, lifestyle, and cat worship: Japan met her expectations a hundred per cent. After dithering for months, she was about to book a flight to Tokyo when the second wave of the pandemic broke out. A hard blow. Over the past six months, she had come to terms with it but the longing was still there...She spent hours watching You tube videos of city walks, she knew some districts of the capital like the back of her hand. But this experience was still too far from reality, she always ended up falling asleep, frustrated at being only the observer on a journey she had not chosen, and that was always too quickly over.

There was indeed another solution: she had heard about it on a forum of Japan-crazy geeks that she occasionally visited. Generally speaking, browsing the titles of its posts was enough to discourage her. Most of its members were technology enthusiasts, driven by the

most incredible passion for detail. You could come across a 120 pages discussion about the suitability of changing the texture of the latest hack book 's touchpad. Even so, Vic could sometimes find topics that were within her grasp, and there was an item on Japanese cooking that she particularly liked. It was when looking for a recipe of okonomiyaki made from dehydrated eggs, that she came across an ad that made her stop in her tracks, feeling that her life may be about to change: "SUPRA LIFE -looking for volunteers- SUPRA LIFE a new service-provider that will enable you to travel without moving".

3 SUPRA LIFE

The “service”, such is the rather commonplace name given today to one of the most profitable inventions of the XXI century. The idea had existed for a long time. However, for this concept to become a reality, they had to wait for the technology and communication networks to be ready, and for the circumstances to make it necessary. Today the “service” is illegal, but it has not always been so. The first prototypes appeared in 2020, between the two waves of the pandemic, in several places on the planet at the same time. It was the zeitgeist, the world was ready.

The travel restrictions during the first lockdown had exacerbated the frustration of the most hardcore geeks, and discussions on social networks had done the rest. At first, they fiddled with the virtual reality headsets that were available on the market. The images reproduced were of poor quality, and some people felt nauseous as soon as they started using them, but being able to “pilot” another human being in real time that was thousands of kilometers away, to virtually be in another place, to see and hear everything that happened there, offered to the most confined body ever, an extraordinary sensation of freedom. They might not have invented teleportation, but if they could make a body standing in a place named A believe that it was moving in a place called B, our mind was quite ready to play along.

The sensations experienced, and the realism only got better and better with the development of prototypes and, within barely two years, they had achieved an image quality that made the experience quite bearable for a vast majority of the population who threw themselves body and soul into it. The thirst for consuming “Real Time VR” was boundless. The list of the situations in which Real Time VR enabled a self-quarantined person to act outside without having to leave the house, seemed unlimited. You could shop, walk along the aisles of a shop, stop in front of a shelf, take a product, read the label, speak with a salesperson

through a small loudspeaker. And provided you had chosen an avatar whose physical characteristics were identical with your own, you could have him try on clothes for you. Changing avatar because of weight gain happened a lot, which meant good business for body rental agencies.

You could safely visit cities, remote places, as never before. The multi-mode that allowed several spect-actors to hire the same avatar simultaneously thrilled the former patrons of partner swapping clubs. There were no limits. Every self-quarantined person could find a suitable use and the demand for equipment rocketed.

There was a shortage of headsets that lasted for months, and they had to wait for the big manufacturers of computing materials to produce in big quantities, for the market to regulate itself. The shortage problem was thus solved, but only for the hardware half of the concept: the equipment of the spect-actor sitting on his couch. But they had to find volunteers' bodies to be at the other end, the moving half, that had to go out and circulate in the infected world. That was the weak point of the concept as long as only a handful of cranks that were willing to play the game was available. The American giant SUPRA, who for several years had developed a fleet of humans in the service of others, whether in the field of taxicab transportation or of food delivery, saw in "Real Time VR" a natural extension of its outlets. In just a few months, they managed to train avatars all over the world.

In the very beginning, the avatar was voice-controlled by the spect-actor. It was limiting: both had to speak the same language (even if the avatar was not supposed to answer questions, so that you could forget him entirely). It all depended on the avatar's goodwill. It often happened that, pretexting a poor sound signal, an avatar wouldn't do what was asked of him, and ignored the demands that he disliked. It was also quite taxing to keep repeating over and over: look left, look right, look down. SUPRA worked quite hard to find a technical

solution in order to automate these commands. If it was easy enough on the spect-actor's side to grasp the movements of his VR headset: transcribing them automatically on the avatar's side was quite a different story. The only solution that was found at first, was to constrict the head of the avatar in a sort of mechanical helmet. The avatar's head was held by its forehead and by its chin in a sort of metal frame that rested on the avatar's shoulders. A complex system of rods, equipped with small engines then moved the avatar's head in the direction indicated by the commands of the spect-actor. When the idea was put forward by SUPRA's department of research and development, the executives of the company, swore that no avatar would accept to wear such an equipment and to be thus constrained. They carried out life-size tests all the same. Comfort on the spect-actor's side was greatly improved and, feeling a need to keep their job, the avatars grudgingly accepted these new limitations.

Very soon, the company wanted to go a step further in automation. Customers were always asking for more autonomy, and SUPRA knew that becoming totally free of the constraints of language was a giant step in business terms. That was achieved when the 2.0 version of SUPRA LIFE came out and there was a boom in sales.

To the automatic command of the head, they added the movement controls with a joystick. The spect-actor sent electric impulses to six different points of the avatar's body. Chest to move forward, back to move backwards, shoulders to go left or right, back of the thighs to squat, and front of the thighs to get back on one's feet. The electric impulse was weak, just a light signal, without any danger they said, but one might suspect that if constantly repeated on a man's or a woman's body, there might well be after effects. The SUPRA executives were well aware of it, but the benefit for the customer was such that they couldn't not incorporate such improvement. As before, the avatars didn't have much say in the matter,

the door of the firm was wide open and the number of unemployed eager to come in was much higher than the number of those wanting to go the other way.

This system of electric impulses provoked little jolts that the avatars could not easily control. This would give streets a rather comical aspect when on either side, bodies seized with light spasms, would stop and start again like ancient times robots. The spect-actors did not really enjoy these little jolts and the lack of fluidity that resulted from them. Consequently, the avatars were required to control their reactions better if they did not want to be subjected to penalties.

The development of the first implants marked an important step. Gone the mechanical devices, gone the electrodes. When he joined the company, every new avatar was implanted with a command receiver and a series of triggers that acted on different spots of his body but this time “from the inside”. Responsiveness was greatly improved and avatars at first thought that they had regained some freedom, as they no longer had to carry mechanical devices all day long. But that was without taking into account the side-effects that would soon be discovered.

The true catastrophe happened when they decided to generalize the use of a unique brain implant. It was a logical outcome: the brain is the organ that controls the whole body, so you only had to control it, to be able to pilot an avatar 100%. A few obstacles had to be overcome of course. Moral difficulties first. The idea that an avatar should count himself lucky to have a job, what is more of a life that he could never have afforded without the generosity of self-quarantined spect-actors who hired their body, had long been accepted.

The chances of being infected and the life expectancy of an avatar depended a lot on the use the customers made of him, but doesn't a lot in life happen by chance?

The use of brain implants rarely had any after-effects. Using the "natural" control center of the body made it possible not to disrupt its usual functions. No, the main difficulty did not come from the body but utterly from the mind. Total control of the body by the brain implant made it necessary for the avatar's mind to let go, at least during working hours. Even though the use of an avatar was regulated by a contract and submitted to strict rules that guaranteed that the spect-actor would not voluntarily put at risk or damage its rental, it had been observed that even the mind of the best avatars could never entirely comply with the instructions sent by the customer. Conflict happened on a regular basis. Contradictory thoughts started revolving in the mind of the avatar whose body no longer knew how to react. Control of the brain was so deep that it clashed with the conscience of the avatar itself on the one hand, and also with the primary instincts that man had retained since his arrival on earth, a few billion years ago. Scientists and the R&D were helpless when confronted with this problem. They could not, for all that, remove such a profitable product from the market, it was unthinkable. They did not know it yet, but the SUPRA LIFE product had never been so close to perfection and to its own destruction.

The avatars were becoming crazy, spinning round and round, throwing themselves out of windows, under trains. Some of them had even been seen to exchange a few words and help each other to commit suicide in the middle of the street.

Revolt was rumbling in their ranks, and its leader was a very old type, he had had the same spect-actress for over 30 years who had always refused to have him modified and he had never received any implants.

He bore number zero.

They said his name was DAISUKE.