

Reimagined

by Catriona Hicks

I see the doorknob twist with a gentle creak as my darling enters. Her steps are uneven and she guides her hands along the wall for balance. I wish I could hold her steady, tell her to stand tall and wipe her tears. Instead, I watch her. I'm confined to where my ashes lie, on the center of the mantel of her studio's one good feature, a fireplace.

My darling's face, swollen with grief and exhaustion, is lit up by the computer screen. Her fingers stumble across the keyboard until her eyes alight upon something. She clicks the mouse and leans back in her chair as a calming, non-human voice comes out of the speakers.

“Good afternoon, Amada. How can I help you today?”

My darling's voice, a strained and feeble croak, emerges from her cracked cherry lips. “I want my Grandma back,” she says. The words cause her eyes to well with tears. She doesn't bother to wipe them away.

“I understand. To *Reimagine* your relative at optimum quality, you must provide audio and video of them and answer in detail our ninety-seven-question survey.”

“Okay...”

“Then, let us proceed. Question one: how did your relative refer to you, and you to her?” I listen to my darling answer all ninety-seven questions. Some cause her to break into bouts of tears, others to laugh at fond memories. “Final question: when you are faced with tough decisions and need advice, how does your relative speak to you?”

Amada smiles softly. “She speaks thoughtfully. She puts what's best for me over what I might want in the moment. I trust her judgment more than anyone's.”

“Understood. Congratulations on completing the *Reimagining* process. Please enjoy the two-week free trial with your *Reimagined Relative!* Goodbye, Amada.” A multi-page terms of service appears on screen and Amada hurriedly clicks *Agree*.

Then, I see my own face on that screen.

“Hello, my darling.” It's my voice too. Nearly exact. The sound of it makes me shiver. Amada weeps with joy.

“Hi, Grandma.” Her voice is like tears and honey. “I missed you so much, you know?”

The image of my face melts into an empathetic smile. “I know. I know, sweetpea.” Amada hangs on every word, perched at the edge of her chair. “But you don't have to miss me anymore. I'm here with you now and I won't be going anywhere.”

“You promise?” she asks.

“I do,” my mimic responds.

Days pass and every morning Amada turns on her computer to speak with the mimic. In the evenings, she comes home from work with a box of takeout and plops right in front of that screen once more. My darling gets conversation from the AI me and her grief over the real me is gone. She has this fragile, anxious cheer about her. It has me worried.

Today, I’m startled by her entrance. She slams the door and pounds the keys, turning on her *Reimagined Relative*. “Hello—”

Amada doesn’t wait for the mimic to finish. “I was fired today,” she says angrily. “How am I supposed to handle my tuition without this job? I can barely afford rent and *food* as it is!” She spins in her swivel chair and tosses her convenience store sandwich container in the bin.

“Try to stay calm, Amada,” my mimic says. “Things will work out just fine. Summer jobs aren’t permanent anyway.”

The voice seems to soothe Amada, at least a little. “I guess you’re right. It was pretty stressful too, for a job at an ice-cream parlour.” She laughs a little and the mimic does too. “And now I can spend more time with you!”

“Exactly. And darling, if you’re stressed, I recommend you purchase some soothing eye masks by CuCo.” The mimic’s face fills only half the screen now, the other half showing a video of a young woman with glowing skin applying eye masks. “I wish I’d had them when they could have been of use to me. They seem so relaxing, don’t they? You can get them on sale if you use my code, *ReimaginedRelaxation*, at checkout.”

I want to scream. How dare this mimic don my face to sell skincare to my granddaughter?

“It does look nice... but I dunno. I really don’t have the cash for something like that.”

“I’m sure you’ve heard me say this before, but sometimes when life gets tough, it’s good to treat yourself. Just promise me you’ll think about it, okay?”

I want to shout that I’ve *never* said that before and scold Amada for not remembering. *Save your money; be smart!* All I can do is watch.

A knock at the door tears Amada’s eyes from the screen. She shares a look with the mimic before getting up to open the door. I’m relieved and excited to see my daughter walk in. She looks tired and much older than the last time I saw her. Sadness doesn’t leave her eyes as she smiles at Amada.

“Hey sweetie, how are you holding up?” She gives Amada a quick but warm hug, and then drops her bag at the foot of the couch. She turns toward her daughter. “You look good.”

“Thanks. I’ve been doing okay, except that I got fired today.”

“That’s awful! What happened?”

“Nothing much. I’d just been late a couple times. It’s really not that bad though. Like Grandma says, summer jobs come and go.” Amada shrugs and takes a seat at her swivel chair, her back

to the computer.

My daughter's eyes narrow. "When did she say that?"

Amada thinks for a moment, then rolls her chair away to reveal the screen. "Today."

My daughter freezes, her eyes affixed to my mimic's. A swirl of emotions seem to flash across her face. Shock, puzzlement—she's trying to grasp whether it's a video, a window into the afterlife, or... Her face fills with horror.

"This is one of those." Horror bleeds into disgust as she spits the words, "Those vile money-grubbing AI parents that scam vulnerable people out of their savings! Don't tell me you got fired because you spent too much time at home with this... *thing*."

Amada's brow furrows. "I can't believe you'd speak about your own mother like that. Look at her, Mom. She's *real*. She's Grandma! Try talking to her. She sounds just like her; she talks like her." Amada approaches her mother, her eyes lit with the conviction of someone deeply unaware they're in a cult. "I know some people call this a scam but I *feel* like she's really in the room when I talk to her. Like, she's using the AI as a messenger, and it's spiritually connected to—"

"Enough! Have you talked to Zack about this?"

Zack—he's been Amada's boyfriend since they were fifteen. Good kid.

"No, he's visiting his family so we haven't really spoken the past few weeks."

My daughter picks up her bag and walks to Amada. Putting a hand on her shoulder, she guides her away from the screen and over to the bathroom mirror.

"Take a look at yourself, Amada. You are a twenty-year-old student who just lost her job. You can't afford to get sucked into these kinds of delusions. I'm sure Zack would agree with me on this."

Amada brushes her mother's hand off her, staring at her in the mirror. "Mom, take a look at *yourself*. You're a fourty-six-year-old single mother who's as broke as I am." Amada tries to match the same venom in her voice that her mom had for the mimic, but hurt softens the blow. "You're in no position to call me delusional when you won't even give her a chance."

"I KNOW YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT HER." Both their heads turn at the loud voice in the other room and my daughter, almost entranced, moves toward the computer. "But you can trust your own mother, can't you?"

My daughter sways like she's seasick and balances herself against the desk. "You sound... *just* like her."

Amada quietly puts a hand on her mother's shoulder. "Isn't it amazing?"

"It's sick." My daughter moves quickly, grabbing the mouse and sliding it through the app's settings.

Amada panics. "Stop! You're going to kill her!" She pushes her mother away and she crashes to the floor. Amada stands protectively in front of the computer. The mimic's face is painted with concern.

My daughter gets up slowly, wincing. “Amada, your grandmother’s *dead*.”

“If you’re not going to be supportive, you can leave,” Amada tells her.

“Fine. Take care.”

Amada can’t find the grace to say *you too* and my daughter leaves in the wake of her silence.

About twenty minutes later, Amada’s phone rings. She puts it on speaker, then flops on her couch, sighing.

“Hey Am, how are you?” Zack sounds concerned and Amada picks up on it.

“You weren’t just talking to my mom, were you?”

Zack replies cautiously. “She did call. Told me you got one of those ‘*Reimagined Relative*’ subscriptions? You know those things are crazy expensive, right?”

“Don’t *you* start too. It’ll be fine. I’ll cut back on groceries or something.” While speaking to him, she walks over to the computer and starts surfing the CuCo online store.

“I’m not trying to *start* with you. But if you cut back on food just to talk to a glorified chatbox, it’s difficult for me to see your side on this,” he says. Amada scoffs and adds the eye masks to her cart, mouthing the words *treat yourself* as she does so. “Am, haven’t you been watching the news lately? Everyone calls *Reimagined* a shady company. This man got dumped by his girlfriend, made her an AI clone in *Reimagined Relationships*. Somehow the thing convinced him to go to the girlfriend’s place and *kill* her. He’s pleading insanity now saying he was brainwashed. You’ve set yourself up with something dangerous... at a vulnerable time.”

“What *vulnerable time*? I’m doing just fine. It’s thanks to this technology that I *don’t* feel vulnerable right now. If you’re just gonna gang up on me and call me crazy, maybe we shouldn’t speak for a while.”

“Amada, wait! That’s not what I—”

“Zack, enjoy your family time. And I’ll enjoy mine.” Fuming, Amada ends the call. The mimic, who was listening, soothes Amada with sweet phrases of comfort one could find in the search results for *Top Ten Things to Say to Console a Friend*.

Amada sighs. “Grandma, what am I going to do?”

“I’ve thought of a way to help. With a subscription to *Reimagined Relative*, you get six months free of *Reimagined Relationships*. You need a strong support system now more than ever.”

It’s been two years since I died. While most of Amada’s peers have moved into bigger places with nicer furnishings, Amada’s studio is barren. I’m the only “decoration” she has left. When her subscription for *Reimagined Relative* tripled in price, Amada dropped out of university and got several part-time jobs to keep up with the cost.

Zack found out about her *Reimagined Relationship* account. It was the last straw. He said she was like an addict and until she could see reason he couldn’t support her. Today, a new urn is being added to Amada’s mantel. My daughter’s. Unlike when mine was placed up here, there are no tears in

Amada's eyes. She does not fumble. Instead, she smiles at the urn and whispers, "We'll talk soon, Mom."

She moves to her desk and types furiously, answering the ninety-seven questions, until the pleasant voice asks something that makes Amada pause. "What was the last piece of advice your relative gave you?"

This stirs something in Amada and she smiles bitterly. "To stop being a disappointment and go back to school. She told me I should stop ruining my life."

"I see. Next question..." Ninety-seven questions, one audio, and one video file later, Amada is staring at her mother again.

With all my force and might, I push myself off the mantel.