

Full Spectrum Life

By Robert V Aldrich

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FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

Under the ominous lights that cast a green hue over the room, the floating remains hung suspended in viscous liquid. The glass cylinder stood atop a pedestal, capped with surgical steel and a tiny crown of bubbles along the top of the lip. Within the clear liquid was an organic form of chaos and distortion, the ruined remains of some unimaginable horror. Beyond the cylinder, the smoky air was vivid and textured with the smell of cleaner and surgical protections. The walls were shrouded by black drapes that insulated the chamber, fixing all attention on the solitary cylinder in the very center of the room.

Tamika Simmons tilted her head a little bit, eyes dancing over the remains on display, and realized aloud, "It's a cow's stomach."

"That poor alien," Vinnie told the float mass of guts and gore in the cylinder. "Why must we destroy all life that we meet? Why? WHY?!" she demanded melodramatically of the heavens.

"It's not a real alien," Tamika told her friend. Half a foot taller than Vinnie, Tamika had to look down at her. "It's not a real...anything, really. It's a cow's stomach."

"We'll not forget your sacrifice," Vinnie pledged to the alien, ignoring Tamika. Her cheeks sparkled subtly with eco-friendly glitter. "We'll not forget that you came to this planet, so far away from your home, in an effort to befriend us, only to learn that we humans are barbaric savages."

"Stomach," Tamika repeated. "Cow's stomach. Stomach of a cow. Stomach that once existed inside a regular earth cow. Not an alien cow."

"Ooh, maybe the cow died in the alien's crash-landing," Vinnie realized.

Tamika nearly fell over, she rolled her eyes so hard. "Oh my god."

Vinnie's shoulders slumped and she scowled at her friend. "Would you get into the spirit of this? We paid good money to see the remains of an alien. We're here; the stomach is here. Let's just try to enjoy this as best we can, huh?" Tamika rolled her eyes. "What?" asked Vinnie. "Was that too close to what Richter said to you in bed?"

The jab at Tamika's ex ruptured her mood and she burst into a fit of giggling. "God, would you stop?!" Tamika demanded, even as she laughed.

"What?" Vinnie argued. "Minute Man can take a hike as far as I'm concerned. You should've let me take a bat to his headlights." She mimed a golf swing at the front of an imaginary car. She added sound effects of the glass breaking and then apparently the whole car exploding. There may or may not have been some cackling that followed.

"Let's go get some funnel cake," Tamika grumbled, departing.

Through the billowing drapes of sparkling, starscape black, Tamika exited the extraterrestrial stasis placement and returned to Pigeon Forge's walkway. The garish tourist trap bombarded her with light, ugly colors and clashing neon vying in desperate attempt to get her attention. Despite it being nighttime, Tamika had to cover her eyes and squint just to make out the road from the buildings.

Vinnie followed her, having to glare down the lights too. "Sheesh, this place's electric bill must be insane." Tamika spotted a fair food vendor and pointed, saying nothing and needing to say nothing. The pair approached as a man in a white t-shirt, apron, and paper hat, wiping down the stainless-steel counter of the oversized trailer. "Ello, Guv-nah," Vinnie announced in a cockney accent so bad, even Dick Van Dyke would have winced. "We'll have two of your finest funnel cakes, please."

"You don't want to split?" Tamika asked.

"Do you?" Vinnie returned. "You always get weird stuff on it, like strawberry."

"It's good," Tamika insisted.

"Fruit just waters down the experience. Funnel cakes deserve powdered sugar and nothing else," Vinnie insisted. "The way god intended them."

"Nothing about funnel cakes is divine," Tamika said, handing over a twenty. "That's what makes them so good."

"My first girlfriend said the same thing to me before our first kiss," Vinnie nodded sagely.

Tamika gave that only a passing thought, then looked disbelieving at Vinnie. "I thought Karen said something like 'don't sneeze' or something in the third grade."

"That was my first kiss, but not my first kiss from my first girlfriend," Vinnie explained. "I was a precocious little slut. I'd hold hands with any girl."

"Uh-huh," Tamika said. "I remember you dated Maggie Jenkins because she said you could play her Playstation after school."

"See? What'd I tell you? I was a slut," Vinnie accepted her plate of fried batter from the server. "Nice to know at least some things don't change."

Tamika accepted her funnel cake and they pair began to wander along the boulevard of the southern American city. "This changes," Tamika said, after finishing her first savory bite.

"Funnel cake? Funnel cake has always been bliss," said Vinnie. She looked down at her pants, now matted with spilled sugar. "Messy bliss, but still bliss."

"If you had to choose between an orgasm and funnel cake, which would you choose?" Tamika asked.

Vinnie gave it a moment of thought. "I'm going to go with an orgasm, because there's cuddling afterwards. Funnel cake is almost perfect – almost – but it doesn't make for a good cuddler."

"True," Tamika agreed. She had another bite, scooping up the drizzled strawberry juice. She licked her fingers, and then just sighed. "It's weird how tragedy is so liberating, isn't it?"

"You still taking about Two-and-a-half-inches?" Vinnie asked.

Tamika just stared off into the traffic, the headlights of passing cars half-hypnotizing her. "Yeah." A patch of quiet and dark broke the spell and she resumed eating and walking. "I'm always so clean with my eating, you know? Fruit and veggies, lean meats only. And then Richter goes and..." She shrugged. "And now I'm pigging out on everything."

"Ain't it grand?" Vinnie asked her friend.

Tamika gave a laugh. A bittersweet laugh, but still a laugh. "A little bit, I guess."

Vinne patted her friend on the shoulder and kept her moving, literally and proverbially. "Romance is hard and even if two people want to make it work, it doesn't always. It sucks, it's not fair, it's not right, but it's how the dice fall sometimes."

"Yeah," Tamika said. She stared just ahead of her steps, nibbling now more than eating. "And it's not like I thought Richter was The One or anything, but...but he was like the first guy I ever thought about that question and wasn't immediately sure he wasn't."

"See, this is why you need to switch teams," Vinnie teased her with an energetic grin.

"Oh god, here we go again," Tamika groaned. Vinnie laughed and bit her tongue, hip-bumping Tamika as they walked. Given their height difference, it was more like Vinnie rammed her hip into the side of Tamika's thigh. The couple staggered a bit, but kept walking.

They reached a corner in the vibrant and colorful tourist spot and looked at their options, still working on their respective funnel cakes. "I kind of want to go back to that place with the cookies," Vinnie remarked. "Since we ain't worrying about beach season tonight, I say we get some chocolate chip."

Tamika was pondering it when she looked down the other direction and spotted a series of spotlights flashing into the sky. "What's that?"

Vinnie leaned and looked down passed the gas station and other spots. "Oh, yeah, that's that place where they've got the experiments or whatever."

"The experiments?" Tamika tried to remember.

"Yeah, where the – I don't know, I guess the department of tourism or whatever – where they're trying out new exhibits and stuff."

Tamika seemed intrigued and started towards it. "B-but the cookies," Vinnie whimpered, pointing the other direction. When she realized Tamika's curiosity had set their course, she grumbled and hopped into a trot to catch up. Arriving at Tamika's side, Vinnie crumpled the remaining half of the funnel cake into one fried ball of powdery breading and shoved it into her mouth.

Tamika turned into the opening area along the secondary road through the town. The public parking lot had been transformed into a veritable county fair of new exhibits and displays. A whole host of short-term structures had been erected on the pavement, creating a maze of captivating sights. Posters and signs, walks and flashing lights, every tool imaginable was being employed to get the attention of passers-by.

"This is..." Tamika's words trailed off as she looked at Vinnie and saw her cheeks puffed out like a chipmunk. She stared, astounded, then just shook it off and walked into the exhibit. Vinnie checked behind her, trying to figure out what Tamika had been looking at, but gave up and followed.

The pair walked by a virtual reality game and passed a local music sensory tank. They slowed before an air-fryer that cooked at multiple temperatures at the same time. They passed some fun houses that incorporated hi-technology as well as classic jump scares. Mirrored houses with projectors and choose-your-own-sequence wrestling shows. The displays were as varied as the techniques used to draw attention to them.

As they reached the back of the exhibit walk, Tamika developed a confused, quizzical look and stopped completely. Her head jugged back as she tried to understand what she was seeing. "Da funk?" she asked, pointing.

“Bring it in with da noise?” Vinnie joked, checking Tamika’s face to make sure she got it. Getting no reaction, she followed her friend’s pointing. Before the pair was a simple white trailer that connected to a larger inflated tent the size of a modest restaurant. “Emotional Escape Room?” Vinnie read off the sign. Her head jutted back as well. “Da funk?”

The pair approached a young agendered person at the entrance, tapping on their phone. “Hey, what’s this?” Tamika asked.

“It’s an escape room, but for emotions,” said the world’s most unenthusiastic barker. “Ten bucks a person.”

Tamika and Vinnie looked at each other, both of them sneering a bit. It was Vinnie who shrugged suddenly and declared, “I’m game.”

The two women sat on the bench in the middle of a sterile white room. They looked up at a large panel screen as it showed a teacher standing over a cowering elementary school student, yelling at her. The video was more visceral than visual, meant to elicit a sympathetic reaction from the viewers. Instead, it had Tamika shaking her head in minor disapproval while Vinnie tilted her head, as if certain a different angle would produce results. Any results.

“Well that was weird,” Vinnie said as they exited the escape room.

“I mean, I guess the idea has merit,” Tamika suggested as they returned to the thoroughfare of the exhibit. “Building tension emotionally instead of physically. I mean, like...I don’t know, I get it.” She looked back at the exhibit. “I don’t get THAT, but I get what they were after.”

“I still say we get cookies,” Vinnie reminded her.

Tamika slowed as they returned to the road and were once again faced with the challenge of picking a direction. “I don’t know,” Tamika said, looking at the blitz of lights and neon with dwindling enthusiasm. “I’m kind of thinking we go back to the hotel room. Let’s order some pizza and watch premium cable.”

“I’ve heard good things about that Game of Thrones dealie,” Vinnie admitted.

Tamika balked. “Honey, that went off the air years ago.”

Vinnie shrugged. “What? You don’t think they’re rerunning it?” As Tamika looked back down the road, Vinnie spotted something out of the crowd of the neon night. “Let’s check that out.” She pointed across the

street, and further down from Pigeon Forge's main road. The subject of her interest was another experimental exhibit, set up in a parking lot. This one was a winding tent tunnel, like some sort of indoor maze. On the front was a sign reading: New Art.

"New Art?" Tamika read and asked simultaneously. "How's...what?"

"Like a new artist or, like...what?" Vinnie asked, grinning. She looked at her friend and smiled. She grabbed her hand and started to run towards the exhibit, Tamika swept up physically and enthusiastically alike.

Across the street, the pair jogged, coming before the exhibit opening. A young man, almost a boy, stood out front of the booth, playing a game on his phone. When he saw the two women approaching, he slipped the phone away, tugged down his usher's vest, and said, "Hey, g-good evening." He clicked a few times, his eye twitching. "Sorry, Tourettes'," he told them.

"Hey, so what is this?" Tamika asked as Vinnie practically vibrated with giddy excitement.

"It's a sensory art experience," he told them. "It's a walking display. It does involve flashing lights, aromatherapy, and magnets, so you need to sign a health waiver."

"Cool!" Vinnie grinned, excited by the danger.

"But what is it?" Tamika said.

The boy hesitated uncomfortably, and just shrugged. "I really, I really can't describe it. Or, the description wouldn't—" He let out a few more clicks. "—wouldn't make any sense. It's like a walk through an art gallery, but the gallery are your own emotions." He shrugged.

"We just came from the emotional escape room," Vinnie volunteered.

"Yeah, they tried to rip us off," said the man, nodding like he was well certain of who they were referring. "They tried to do the same thing but they got no clue how it works."

"How does it work?" Tamika asked.

Again, the usher gestured blindly at the entrance behind him. "Smells and lights," he told her, sympathetically and knowing full well how unsatisfying the answer was.

"Gimme dat form," Vinnie told him, making infant-like grabby hands at him.

"Vinnie," Tamika groaned, turning halfway away.

“What?” she argued, accepting the form. “We’re trying to try new things. This is new.” Vinnie left the obviousness of her win and resumed filling out the waiver.

Tamika wanted to argue but simply accepted her own form.

Once they filled out the surprisingly comprehensive forms and handed them over, the usher stepped out with a metallic wand. “We’ve got some lockers for your personal things,” he said as he waved the wand over them. “Anything metallic needs to wait out here. The locker keys are plastic, so they can go with you. This is video monitored and I’ll be out here, so don’t worry about nobody—” Some more clicking “—bothering your stuff.”

Tamika set her purse and her phone inside the locker and used a quarter to get the key. She slipped it into her jeans pockets as Vinnie unzipped her boots and left them inside. Tamika looked down at Vinnie’s bunny socks and tried to keep from giggling at their adorableness. Vinnie noticed and put her hands up to her head, wiggling her nose and doing her best rabbit impression. Tamika chuckled.

The usher gestured for them to pass through the door. It was a simple transparent plastic door, like those used by so many convenience stores and gas stations. Inside was a white hallway that looked unremarkable and softly lit. The floors were made of slate tiles closely pressed so there was no gap between them.

The hallway turned immediately to the left and the two women found themselves facing a few meters of multi-colored lights cast against the white walls. “Is something supposed to ‘appen?” Vinnie asked in a cockney accent. Tamika shrugged and gave her a ‘you wanted this’ look. The pair began walking.

Two steps down the hall and both women slowed. They registered a scent beneath blue lights that cast their varied shadows on the walls beside them. They paused and looked at each other. “Is that...new car smell?” Tamika asked.

Vinnie grinned. “Yeah, I think so,” she beamed. She stepped forward and looked back the way they’d come, then resumed walking.

The transitions were gradual, from one light to the next, and with it was an equally gradual change from one scent to the next. Many were indistinct; smells for which the two women didn’t know, but could clearly pick up. At the corner of the hall, the slate floors changed from large plates to tiny stones. Just as flat and just as pressed, but now they were a myriad of colors scattered over the floor. The new hallway was long and slightly taller than the previous one, with copious headspace to walk through.

The scents endured, and the air was moist and thick. The lights were smoky, the colors no longer distinct but a vibrant mash of prismatic clouds through which the two women walked. More than that were the noises. Not quite sounds and not quite music, there was an aural movement in the air, like singular notes struck and held, slowly merging into one another. Their source was as enigmatic as their origin.

Tamika walked through the mist, passing her hand through the air, leaving wafting patterns in the haunting texture. Her eyes watered as she felt like her skin was absorbing the smells. Like some simulated rose, she felt herself opening. She heard a far-off noise that sounded too distant to be in the hallway or even in the town itself.

Tamika kept walking and looked up, realizing the ceiling was folding away from her. The space was opening and she felt the surge of an approaching storm. She turned in the air and could see the wind moving as it swept through the moisture-saturated light. Vinnie was behind her. Tamika held out her hand and they grabbed hold of one another and kept walking.

At the next turn, the hallway opened into a great open room. Far larger than could have been held in the building they knew they were in, they felt a wind like that of the mountains come rushing down. It was hot and abrasive, but invigorating, like a rush of desert air untouched by human pollution. The sounds of the universe surrounded them, not crowding them or bombarding them but merely drawing close, like the whole of the cosmos was standing with them as equals.

Vinnie gasped suddenly and Tamika turned to her. Her friend was staring into the light, her eyes leaking huge tears. Her face twisted in ugly crying as she began to sob heavily. Tamika grabbed Vinnie and pulled her close, the two friends overwhelmed by the majesty of what they felt. "It's so beautiful," Vinnie whispered, bawling uncontrollably into Tamika.

"Oh my god!" Vinnie moaned before having another slice of pizza. She rolled her head back and looked at the roof of their hotel room, then told Tamika. "I feel, like, legitimately, like a different person. Like...like, oh my god."

"Right?!" Tamika agreed. "It's like, it's like my brain got detoxed or something. It's like, it's like, it was so much bliss that just washed over me and it's like my whole brain just totally reset." Tamika sat at the head of her bed, the door-side queen. In silk pajama pants and a tanktop, she had her legs crossed as she tried to understand her feeling of wholeness. "I mean, I keep thinking about Richter. You know, still. But it's like, it's like it's been

put into some perspective or something. He's...it's a...the whole break-up and everything. It's a thing that happened, but it's...it's just a thing."

"Uh-huh," Vinnie agreed, chewing her pizza from the bathroom-side bed that she claimed the minute they'd entered the motel room.

"I just...I want to go again," Tamika said.

"Yeah, me too!" Vinnie said. "God, it was SO intense. It was like all my sadness and bitterness and, like, all these toxins in like my whole damn soul just, just purged out of me like sweat or something." She exhaled with intense solemnity. "I genuinely didn't think I could ever feel like this. I feel like I was...like some kind of soft reset on my, my soul."

Tamika grabbed a slice of veggie pizza and bit into it, relishing the taste. "I just...it's all so...I..." She laughed and shook. "I just, I don't have the words."

"Yeah, well, I do!" Vinnie grinned. She threw her head back and groaned with exaggerated relief.

Tamika laughed and play-scolded her. "That's not a word."

"Sure it is," Vinnie insisted. "It's a primal, emotional word."

A thrown pillow was returned with velocity and childhood exuberance was joined with giggling and joy.

Dawn meant sneakers and earbuds.

Tamika left Vinnie buried under a pile of blankets and pillows on her bed and departed from the hotel room as quietly as possible. With a bounce in her step, she took to the street. With upbeat dance music guiding her rhythm, she began jogging down the roadways of Pigeon Forge.

The tourist trap was a wholly different sight in the daylight. Bereft of the glitz and glamor of Smoky Mountain pageantry, the city was strangely subdued and bland. A placid demeanor had fallen over the sleeping town, still not roused from its daily hangover. Traffic lights turned slowly, while even the morning wind seemed lackadaisical. Birds chirped from the leafy trees and the blue sky overhead still had some hints of the orange sunrise. Traffic was sparse and at times, lanes were still as the buzzing street lamps finally deactivated and let the sun claim the world.

Tamika's running wasn't exercise but moving meditation. A chance to be alone with only herself, unburdened by phone calls and residents on rotation and emails and prescriptions and charts and paperwork. It was the only real time she could be alone without a single distraction. It was the

only time her mind could ebb and flow, could truly expand without fear or consequence of interruption. Jogging for Tamika was more for her soul than her body.

Her run felt like something totally new, though. She felt free of previous pain, free of previous burdens. Her awareness of the world – both all around her and in her own life – was still there, but so many troubles and considerations from before had just fallen into place. A thousand tiny pains had been rendered into perspective and she ran into the full world as if seeing correctly for the first time in ages.

Her jog took her passed the very exhibit she and Vinnie had gone to see the night before. As she passed it, she noticed a young woman stepping out from the exhibit door. She was a younger woman, almost young enough to be Tamika's daughter, with frizzy hair paired with jeans and a puffy floater vest, almost like she was cosplaying as Marty from Back to the Future. Tamika found herself unable to resist slowing to a stop.

The woman was locking the exhibit, a toolbox in her hand, when she glanced across the street and saw Tamika gawking. She gave an awkward smile and a half-wave, then turned. Tamika was crossing the empty street before she knew it.

"Hey," she called ahead as she neared the woman who was going to her truck. A white truck with rusted holes in the frame, it looked more like what a low-quality handyman would drive, not a college coed. "Hey, sorry," Tamika said, suddenly out of breath now that she'd stopped running. "I saw you and..." She paused to breathe. The girl checked around, like she was worried. "I, my friend and I, we came by last night and did this." She waved at the exhibit.

"Cool," the woman said, a bit relieved to have some context for why she was being stopped. "I hope you had a good time."

"Yeah, it was...it was amazing," Tamika gushed, almost frustrated to have no better words. "Do you, do you know who made it?"

"Me," said the girl, smiling at first, then grinning. She laughed nervously and brushed her long hair from her face. "Yeah, this was originally an art instillation for my thesis. Got a grant, shopped it around." She gestured at the display before them and made a nondescript farting noise.

"But I mean, it was amazing," Tamika continued to gush.

The woman blushed and told her sincerely, "Thank you. I'm glad."

"How does it work?" Tamika asked. She remembered herself with a sudden shake of her head. "I'm so sorry. Hi!" She laughed and extended her hand. "I'm Tamika Simmons. I'm a veterinarian. Me and my friend, we're here on holiday and..." Her vocabulary ran out of gas.

"Hi, Tamika, I'm Lauren," the woman said with a laugh. "Um, I...it's..." She shrugged and said, "Here, you want to see it?"

"What?" gawked Tamika.

"Yeah," said Lauren. "I just came to check the oil levels and stuff. I have to check it daily, to make sure it doesn't run out." She unlocked the front door and turned back to Tamika. She reached behind the door to a camouflaged console. She began to flip on switches, causing the hallway to light up. "So the thing is basically just a massive sensory deprivation tank," Lauren explained. "We use light-diffusing paint on the walls to help meld the colors of the lights overhead. These sprayers keep the humidity high, which further helps diffuse the light as well as creates an atmospheric pressure that sort of..." She worked for the words. "Sort of insulates you. Or it makes you feel insulated but without getting claustrophobic."

With Tamika following her, Lauren turned around and walked backwards down the short hall. "A lot of this is using sensory system hacks to get around the body's sensory collecting bias."

"Sensory collecting bias?" Tamika asked.

"Yeah," Lauren said. "Our eyes, our ears, they actual don't pay that close of attention to stuff. We see a round-like shape and our brain just jumps ahead and assumes its round. It's part of why most people suck at drawing. It's not because we lack the hand-eye coordination; it's because we haven't learned how to calm our brain down. But because the brain rushes through sensory acquisition so much, if you expose the brain to certain stimulus, it goes ahead and assumes all sorts of stuff. Cross-stimulate it and it starts to get really turned around."

"So we use humidity and air pressure, light, sound, tilt in the floor," she said, gesturing at the tiles they were walking, "even magnets, to cause these very subtle distortions in sensation." They came to the turn and when Lauren led Tamika around the corner, she found another hallway every bit as long and unremarkable as the one they'd just walked down. "Let me guess," asked Lauren, "you remember this being much longer."

"Yeah," Tamika marveled.

"Yeah," Lauren sympathized. "You were basically experiencing a sensory-deprivation-induced hallucination."

"Wow," was all Tamika could think to say.

"See, when the brain gets overwhelmed, it starts filling in the missing gaps in information," Lauren told her. "It also tends to finally calm down. Some people respond with stress, or fear, but if the stimulus is gentle enough, then instead what happens is the brain goes into a really benign form of shock. It starts to really calm down, like when hypnotized or lucid dreaming."

"Like a muscle spasm and a relaxant," Tamika realized. "The muscle gets all tense, but the relaxant allows it to relax and once its calm, it has the chance to recalibrate."

"Right," Lauren nodded, delighted to exchange words with somebody who had an idea what she was talking about. "Human beings go through their life with what is essentially phantom limb syndrome but for the brain. Whether it's trauma or mental illnesses, because it isn't physical, we deal with it like it isn't real. But because the brain and the mind interact with the world through physical sensation, then we can use physical sensation to induce meaningful adjustments in the brain. Some people do this with mind-altering chemicals, but I thought, why can't we do it with environmental stimulation?"

"Wow," Tamika repeated as she turned the next corner. A nigh-identical hall awaited them. No huge room, no towering cathedral-like space. A hall like the previous ones. "Is this just a square?"

"Yep," Lauren told her, guiding her all the way back to the entrance. "What you see is not what is, but what you see can be what is real to you."

"Wow," Tamika said, waiting at the exit door. Lauren unlocked it and held it open for Tamika, smiling happily. "This is incredible," she told the artist.

"I'm glad you think so; I certainly did," Lauren told her.

Tamika thanked her, then returned to her run. Into a new dawn, the same as every previous dawn and at the same time unlike any dawn before it, Tamika resumed her jog. The rest of her day and her life awaited, now at least momentarily freed from the burden of what she thought she'd felt.

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