

## **THE DOME OF DREAMS – BLACK MIRROR EPISODE**

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Crisp fall leaves crack under Catherine's feet as she walks in the silent forest. Fall colours on the trees glisten like gold as the light from the setting sun hits. Catherine takes some deep breaths and looks around as all the peaceful happy memories play back in her head. She hears playful chatter in the background about who'll cook dinner that night. And smells the fresh muddy smell from the forest. When suddenly, the sky filled with calming warm hues, turned grey. Clouds begin to thicken, and winds blow that make the leaves go in almost a whirlpool. Black shadows start to rise and move closer to Catherine. Her heart races, eyes widen, and no number of deep breaths seem to help. The feeling is eerie.

**\*Screen fades\***

**\*4 weeks before\***

Catherine works as an event planner at Events.co and has been having a tough time defining social boundaries at work. Added to the intense field pressure of event management responsibilities, constant client interference, and on-ground crew management leave her anxious and overwhelmed on most days. She enters the empty studio apartment with the same life-less matter staring at her, and a box of frozen mac and cheese awaiting her. The same dull walls, 2 yellow lights on far corners of the room, an unkept bed, and rings of the wine glass on the side table from last night. It was almost mocking her.

She pours a glass of water, takes her medicines, and stares at the emptiness for a few brief moments. Whips her phone out, 'I haven't been sleeping well, do you suggest a dosage change?' to which her psychiatrist replies, 'I'm available Wednesday evening, let's schedule it for then?'. The protagonist has been on medication for a few weeks now as she suffers from anxiety and insomnia. After multiple visits to the therapist, meditative groups, and yoga retreats she found her help through medication. But the body is surprisingly quick in getting used to things. The medicine doesn't numb the thoughts anymore, and like a roulette, a series of – thoughts, griefs, fears, and regrets play in her head every night. As she tosses and turns in her bed that night, scrolling through social media and looking for new job roles is what keeps her company.

With no actual rest, she wakes up in the morning tired. Puts on her gym wear, packs her bag for the day, and leaves home. She sits in the car, feeling stuck in the loop but somehow manages to attend the yoga and meditation centre that she 'needs' to go to as prescribed. In each session of meditation, when she closes her eyes, the same set of memories of her family echo in her head. Moments of loud laughs come from the kitchen as her mother prepares food in the kitchen and they chat through the living room. Moments of watering the plants outside while her father sowed seeds of fruit trees in the garden. Some brief moments from her grandparents' house, when she would fall asleep in the treehouse they built together. The people are still here, but the moments are somehow not the same. The conversation now revolves around *"You could've taken up a tech job, this job is messing with your head"*, *"Aren't you old enough to settle down now?"*, *"Why is accepting money such a big deal for you? Why have you always been so full of pride?"*. Engrossed deeply in the same thoughts, is when the yoga trainer interrupts (thankfully), and subtly brings them back from all the places a mind would wonder while meditating. Catherine has strong opinions about meditation being unhealthy for one, which she delivers through strong and consistent eye rolls. "It only gives me more time to think about things", she thinks.

Opens her eyes, bows down in a namaste, and starts to pack up. Avoiding any chance of social interactions with her Yoga 'friends', she races to her car. On the way out, the bulletin board read – ***Craft Your Dreams. Promise yourself a good night's sleep with The Dome of Dreams.*** Dreams, and sleep both she is in constant need of. She scans the QR code, drives to work, and goes through the same madness that engulfs the day.

The scenes after she gets back home are dull, linear, and repetitive - She heats mac and cheese, scrolls through a series of updates about random people online, takes her medication, changes her clothes, and lays down in bed. In a desperate need to sleep. When the app chimes a notification. The app that she almost forgot about, and trails back to the yoga class bulletin board. The notification read – Are you ready to design your dreams? "If it works like it says, this is creepy..." She murmurs. Her pupils widen, and fear of the unknown along with some levels of excitement and anticipation start to surface.

She sets up the app and participates as one of the first few in the community. Assuming it's still under the testing phase, that doesn't bother her. Quickly read the reviews about how this app helps them sleep at night, relaxes the mind, cures anxiety, and makes the world a better place. She is convinced. To continue the app, however, they would need your address to ship a projector. This would project a dome, almost like a screen around you. This is the dome one would sleep in. The app works by blending features of Augmented and Virtual reality.

Until the dome is shipped to her, she tries out the AR feature powered by Artificial intelligence. The app prompts her to scan the space around her and give a brief description of where she would like to be transported. She follows the instructions and enters a description of being around mountains. After a quick eye scan – which is equivalent to pairing her eyes to the app, she sees the world being built around her. She couldn't believe it. The bed, lamps and the rest of the bigger pieces of the *real world*, were constant and that made her feel connected to her surroundings. The virtual environment she built was a quiet peaceful night. She stargazed and heard the calming sounds of a stream of water around her. Cricket noises filled the background. She slept better than most days. The same number of hours passed in the real world, as in augmented space, and the sunlight wakes her up. She pinches herself out of this augmented world and stretches as she looks out of the window as if she feels like a new person. She feels better, rested, and ready for the day. Hums a tune as she makes her bed and walks to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. "We feel good today, how do eggs sound?" She thinks to herself.

Heading to the yoga centre also seemed like a peaceful drive. The sun was shining, and however cliché this sounds, things started to look good! *Yes, all of a sudden.* She passed the same brochure on her way out today. To show support and appreciation, now the app includes a review by Catherine. It reads: This works like magic!! I'm still waiting to get my dome in, but without it too, I'm sold!"

In her everyday life, this AR works almost as a filter. Filtering out things. Be it people's judgmental reactions, traumatic instances, or something as small as a gloomy day. The app fixes it. Due to this she doesn't get triggered as often and doesn't feel bad about saying no, because now she doesn't have to face people.

Catherine's phone pings: The sleep-changing dome has been delivered! That night Catherine ate dinner, jumped into the comfiest pyjama sets she had, and took a lot of small but mighty steps to make sure she got the most out of the dome! It asked her to scan the room, mark boundaries for the dome to be projected, and made her fill out a brief survey form about her typical sleep positions. She again described a scene she would want to sleep in, and the dome like a chameleon, reproduced visuals about the scene around her. Catherine studied the manual and followed the tutorial for hand gestures. She then toggled the scene for tweaking basic settings like brightness, and colour contrast, and then for the more complex elements like scene composition. That night she felt the constant need to sleep in a specific position to not break the Dome, but even if she did accidentally venture out of the marked territory, the dome would instantly widen the diameter and ensure a smooth immersion.

She saw the most vivid visuals. Her family and loved ones were in an imaginary world filled with camping, bonfires, barbecue dinners, and comfortable tents that she slept in, in the dream. She had the option of saving or deleting dreams from the Dream Library which would help the system to study her preferences and hence design personalized Experiences. As the story proceeds, the effects of the app amplify experiences and add layers of VR with the 180-degree projection around the user and simulate other haptics through vibrations, surround sound, etc. The dome was multi-sensory which meant she felt the cold breeze, heard it as if in the real world, and felt the cold splashes of dew it brought. *All this made it just like it would be.*

She starts sleeping well. “I think I’m doing much better. How about we cancel the appointment?”, she texts her psychiatrist. Days pass, and she orchestrates the most complex dreams – by connecting her memories, uploading snapshots of old photographs, and using other means of feeding data to the system. She leverages technology to *fix herself.*

Until one day, while she was driving to work. She stops at a red light. When a homeless man slammed the window of the car and yelled curse words at her. This was weird because this is exactly what the app filters and protects her from! Any traumatic instance that could be a source of bringing back harsh memories, gets filtered out. As the day passes, she forgets about it. Until it happens again in her dreams when a bright sunny day at her childhood tree house turns eerie and haunted. She wakes up in a shocked state, sweating, and her heartbeat is at an alarming rate. The app was glitching.

It was a pleasant day and Catherine decided to take a walk in the park and catch up with her parents. She calls her mother excitedly, which caught her mother by surprise, however, to not jinx anything she avoided mentioning it. After some awkward minutes on the phone, they started talking. They chatted about a lot of things ranging from social meetings at the club that her mother leads, to how well does the new maid cook, and so on... Then Catherine mentions about how Isabella (*one of the chefs at their home at that time*) made the best potato casserole and how they playfully fought over getting it patented. There was a long pause, the laughter faded... Her mother with a concerned tone said, “We never had a maid named Isabella, baby. You might have your wires crossed!” and slightly chuckled later. Catherine didn't believe it, she vividly explained how she looked, and how she said, “Dinner’s ready ma’am”, but her mother still stuck to her word. Catherine felt confused. She hung up without a proper goodbye.

This incident got her thinking about multiple scenarios that happened to her at work. A lot of times when her colleagues had no recollection of the meetings/instances, she referred from. Even after presenting physical notes as proof. They would say, “Oh you must be dreaming about that!” and burst out in laughter. Catherine sat on the bench thinking, “was I really dreaming? But I have notes from that day, and I remember the exact taste of the cheesiest potato casserole.” She would catch herself zoning out in the real world as if building this imaginary dome around here at all times of the day. This would be through mind wanderings, one sided conversation, hallucinations, and much more. This became her escape.

After a rough day, the night came once again. Even though Catherine had this intense urge to resist, she found herself turning the dome back on. She felt addicted to it, a dependency she couldn't quite shake off—it had become a crutch, something she needed just to make it through the night.

But this time, it was different. As soon as the dome enveloped her, she was thrown into a vivid, disturbing nightmare. Except it wasn't just a regular bad dream—it was made up of fragments she thought she had deleted. Old dreams she had erased, mashed together into something monstrous. This time, her most painful memories, the ones she tried to bury, were right there, playing out in front of her, more real than ever. Gasping for breath, she finally woke up. Her body was covered in sweat, and she felt like she had just run a marathon. Everything felt wrong. She got out of bed, heading to the dresser for a glass of warm water to calm herself. But as she stood there, she noticed her reflection in the mirror—dark spots and deep wrinkles that hadn't been there before. She touched her face, but the spots only seemed to spread. In a panic, she rubbed harder, desperate to get rid of them, but it was useless.

Then suddenly, the mirror cracked with a loud, jarring noise. Pieces of glass began to rise into the air, hovering like they were being pulled by some unseen force. Catherine's heart pounded as she turned around and saw it—the dome, still glowing softly in the corner of her room.

And there, inside it, was... herself. Sleeping.

She froze. How could this be? She was awake—or at least she thought she was. Her hands trembled as she crawled toward the dome, trying to shake her sleeping body awake, but nothing worked. Instead, her eyes rolled back. The more she tried, the more everything around her seemed to blur and distort.

The walls flickered, revealing glimpses of an unknown world outside. A place she had never seen—storms raging, streets abandoned, everything decaying. “None of this was supposed to happen! The app was supposed to create peaceful dreams, not chaos!”, she yelled.

Frantically, she grabbed the instruction manual that came with the dome, flipping through to the section titled “Wish to make it stop?” Her eyes scanned the last page: “*This doesn’t stop. Welcome to the ultimate side of resting.*”

And then it hit her. The whole thing was a trap. The company wasn’t just helping people sleep—it was trapping them. Minting money from her most private memories, the things that made her who she was. Her nightmares, her fantasies, her darkest fears—all turned into an agenda. For what though she wondered... She murmured, “Money, entertainment, data, or to end the world. How are they doing this?” Everything slows down and Catherine faints.

**\*Screen fades\* Narration continues:**

The Dome of Dreams was using Catherine’s dreams to train an AI, feeding it all the data it needed to create custom dreamscapes for other users. Her mind had become a source of content—fuel for the app to sell personalized dream experiences to the highest bidder. The XR industry, movie studios, and even corporations who wanted to manipulate emotions—they were all in on it.

And now, she was trapped in her own dreams. The dreams that once brought her comfort were now consuming her, blurring the lines between what was real and what wasn’t. There was no escape.