

Prologue

Memories from that first life are difficult to describe. They're more impressions, fractured, non-sequitured.

Things I remember; I remember living in a crowded city. I walked around a lot but hated it. Any time of day the streets were choked with a never-ending jam of angry vehicles and angrier people. The claustrophobic feeling of it all continued underground, into the stifling air of crowded subway cars. The reek of body odor and unwashed clothes mixed with perfumes and takeout, all layered over the cleaning chemicals. The awkwardness of standing too close to a stranger and the floor beneath your feet pulling this way and that as your car lurched through the tunnels. And the crushing noise of it all...

I have these human shapes and angles in my mind, extreme closeups of features I can't attach to an individual person.

I know I had friends, maybe, I think. A couple of guys and girls I'd drink with... after work? But names and personalities, they may as well be posters hanging next to me in those memories. There's no emotion there, no attachment.

When I hear an old song, I do get a dreamlike flash of something. Of what I felt like at that time. There's this one song, an old, moody, folk-type song with this buzzy, electronic drone behind it; called something like "Longing, Leaving, Lost" or "Loving, Lonely, Locked," or, you know, some variation. I'm sure the version I knew was a cover of a cover, of a cover, and it's a travesty that I couldn't tell you the original lyrics, but the moment I hear that melody... and I still hear it played to this day, slow and sad, I'm right back in my skin. It's both a calming and a restless feeling. It's an "old me" feeling.

It's like this one displaced room in my head. Not sure if it's mine, or someone else's; but it's childish, a kid's room. It's my place in it, in that room; my mood, who I was when in that room, which of course I don't remember the details, but... the stuff that's hard to describe, of course. I couldn't tell you any events that took place there. There is a young face I see in that room, but who it belongs to? I couldn't say. Was that my face? I don't remember what I looked like back then; at all, as a kid, as an adult. I do this face has no reason to match it, which, don't worry, I'll explain in a bit. For now, I guess you could say memory of my own appearance had been overwritten by what I became.

I don't remember my childhood at all, anyway. I know I had a mother and father, but I couldn't tell you what they looked like, what they sounded like. Much like my "friends" they're just these vague, shadows and flat stand-ins. I'm not even sure that's a real memory, or just how I imagined I'd remember them. It's all very academic for me most of the time. I had a "mother" and a "father," as everyone did. Then I stop to think about it, and then it feels so strange, and I'll get this pang of loneliness, and it's like my mom is just on the other side of a door and I'm so close to seeing her

face, or hearing my dad's voice, but it all fades just before anything reaches me.

There are a few memories that I'm fairly certain come at the end of this life. They're sharper, in a way, more coherent. I'm unhappy. Not over anything specific, I think. I don't think I was a jilted lover, and there was no great failure I was regretting. I don't know. Maybe that's why I was unhappy. 40 years of nothing. Looking back, it's like the air itself is saturated with weariness, I was drowning. I wanted to do something. I was desperate to pull myself out and escape in some way.

The clinic; I couldn't tell you if I found them or they found me, but there was this call for volunteers, and I answered the call. They needed brain scans. More than just mapping arteries and nerve connections, they were seeing if they could immortalize a person's knowledge and memories, the structure a brain creates throughout life, as part of a virtual archive. As I walked up to this unassuming door in painfully drab office building, I remember still having this feeling of excitement and... relief. If I could have this piece of me live on and contribute something to science or history, then the pressure was off. That's what it felt like. I was being relieved of my duty to the world, to myself.

The technicians were in spotless, white lab coat and were chipper enough as they led me through the process. They had me methodically sign and initial literally a hundred pages of release forms. I didn't know what I was really signing away at the time. They offered to explain and even tried to give brief descriptions, but I honestly didn't care.

Finally, it was time bring me to the scanner. I had been expecting a huge CT type machine, with a conveyor bed to slide you into a claustrophobic, sterile monster. I found myself, instead, told to sit in a flimsy fold-out chair between tables lined with computers and other equipment, cobbled together like someone's garage project. Suction cups attached to wires were stuck to various places around my head. The one tech manning the computers while another aimed at me hand-held wands of plastic and metal, emitting god knows what as they hummed. They were waved over and around me like the technician was cleansing my aura. It was all very soothing.

What came next was like... one of those nightmares where you keep waking up only to find you're still dreaming? It was something like that.

I'd be blind, and dumbly answering these questions without really understanding what was going on.

"What is your name?"

"Richard."

"What is two multiplied by two?"

"Four"

"The boy took the girl's doll. The boy laughed. Would the girl laugh?"

"Probably not."

“What color is the sky?”

“I don’t know, is it cloudy out?”

“Hmm, interesting response.”

“Thank you.”

I swear to you, I can remember hearing a short laugh and then I was, I don’t know, it was like falling back to sleep. Then I’d realize I was answering the same questions again. Math questions, morality questions, cognitive question, questions about my past, my feelings.

“What was the last meal you remember eating?”

“Cereal, with bananas, I think.”

“Could you tell me if you are any of the following: heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, something else?”

“Heterosexual?”

“How many girlfriends have you had?”

“Four... five. Maybe three, seriously.”

“How are you feeling?”

“I can’t see.”

“No, I asked how you were feeling.”

“I can’t see. What’s going on? Who are you?”

There would always be a pause when I started to ask questions like this.

“I am Hassan.”

“Where am I, why can’t I see anything?”

And then I’d be waking again, realizing that I was answering the same questions as before.

I remember all of these moments as voices I heard, his and my own. It was much later that I realized this was done through a virtual environment. I had no ears, but I heard this communication.

The first time he realized I could recall the earlier sessions, he didn’t speak for a very long time. I say speak, but you know what I mean.

“Hassan? Are you still there?” I said.

“Yes, Richard.”

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No.”

Still, it was a long time of silence before I finally spoke up again.

“Did something go wrong? With the scans?”

No response.

“Hassan. When will all of these tests be over? I didn’t realize I was agreeing to all of this. When do I get to go home?”

There was another long pause.

He said, “It may be a while, Richard. Give me a moment to see if I can’t make you more comfortable.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“I’ll explain everything, just... let me get some things sorted.”

And then I was asleep again.

When I woke up, it was to a dull, gray light. I hadn’t opened my eyes. I hadn’t any eyes to open. My view filled with a featureless space; without floor or sky, just this uniform non-blackness. If I was turning my vision here or there, I would have had no way to tell. It was more disorienting than the complete lack of vision I’d had before. And then came the voice to steady me.

“Richard, can you hear me?”

“Hassan?” I said without a mouth, without vocal chords. “What’s going on?”

“I have created this virtual space for you.”

“Where’s my body?? I can’t feel anything!”

“Try to stay calm.”

Calm, he said. As if I still had a heart to be racing, or lungs to hyperventilate, or the glands to pump adrenaline through nonexistent veins. But I was panicking. This space was too void, too flat, too infinite; and my own sense of self too absent. I was lost in this place and my mind couldn’t take it. Hassan was still talking to me but the words flowed through my thoughts without making any impact. I was freezing up in a literal existential crisis.

And then I wasn't. As in I wasn't anything, again. And then I was relieved to find I was asleep, and I knew that because I was waking up.

I opened my eyes mechanically, thankful for the sensation of having eyes and eyelids to open. How long had I been existing without that sensation in that place? There was a light, a spot waving back and forth, my eyes grabbed onto the movement and shape and could see that it was a pen light. The pen light was held by a gloved hand, and behind that glove, a concerned face came into focus. Swarthy brows over large, serious eyes. He seemed much younger than I had imagined, boyish despite the neglected scruff left to grow on his face.

"Welcome back, Richard," he said. "I am Hassan."

I didn't know what to say. I recognized the visuals in front of me, but they seemed foreign as well, flatter maybe. His movements seemed off, like they were happening too quickly and then the vision slowed like a video to real time, with the images skipping ever so slightly.

"Can you hear me?" He asked, a light accent adding a Hindi lilt his words. I hadn't heard that when we'd spoken before, in the other place.

"Yes."

I was confused for a moment. It registered that my voice had not come from me, but from a small speaker behind me. Don't ask me how this registered. I mean, when you think you hear something behind you, how are you really aware it's behind you? Just the brain, interpreting the sounds of the room... sounds you don't even notice consciously... well, that's what I'm going with.

I tried to look around but found that I could not move my neck. I couldn't tell if I had a neck. I realized I couldn't move my eyes either, my vision fixed dead ahead.

Hassan glanced at something behind me.

"Now Richard, I'm going to need you to keep calm this time. You're okay. You just can't move your body right now and it's making you feel claustrophobic. You're not trapped, Richard. I'm going to teach you how to use your new body."

My new body, as he put it, was nothing you or I would have recognized. Instead of two eyes, I had one, a single camera which I could turn on and off at will. That sensation of opening my eyes had been the device warming up. Instead of looking around, I learned how to focus my attention on different objects in my view, different fields and depths of the lab.

Did I mention we were in a lab? Computers and robotic limbs and wiry guts strewn about everywhere. For a scientist, Hassan always seemed to me very disorganized and hoarder-like. Fortunately, it was very well lit, with industrial fluorescents embedded in the ceiling.

I had no limbs at first. Hassan didn't seem to think I needed them. So, my "new body" was this camera, my speaker and the stereo microphone I heard the room through. It took some convincing before he would place the speaker beneath my eye.

"I don't understand, Richard. Is it that you can't hear yourself?"

"My voice should be coming from me."

"But it is."

"No, it is coming from behind me."

He got a glimmer in his eye that I would come to recognize, and loathe, and he jotted something with his finger on a nearby notebook screen. "Interesting; and does that bother you?"

"Yes."

It took some maneuvering with all the chords and junk, and after the speaker was below my eye he looked at me expectantly.

"Try it now."

"H-hello?" The voice now seemed to come from a phantom throat, and something in me calmed a bit. "Yes, that's better."

"Good, now I'd like to continue on with the questions."

"Hassan."

A sigh. "Yes, Richard."

"Why do you keep asking me these questions over and over?"

Hassan had picked up the notebook but let it rest on his knee as he sat before my view.

"It's a fair question. I'm... trying to determine how stable you are."

"Stable. Am I crazy?"

Hassan breathed a short laugh, "Ha! No, no. You... what do you know... about you? What's the last thing you remember?"

"The white space. Not having a body."

"No, before that. Before... when you had a body."

"Volunteering for an experiment. An experimental brain scan of some sort."

Hassan nodded encouragingly. "Yes!"

"For historical records and for... science."

Hassan smiled and nodded more emphatically. "Yes! And..."

"And did something go wrong? Did I have a seizure or... get paralyzed?"

Hassan deflated a touch. "No... Richard. You... you are the result of that scan."

His words flowed through me again without making any impact. I'm sure if I'd had a head to shake, I would have been denying it.

"Richard? The man who volunteered for that scan was not you. You are that snapshot of him. A picture of his DNA, a sculpture of his neural network. A... video of his last moments, as he was at the time of the scan. I am the... science he volunteered the results of that scan to."

I couldn't reply. I couldn't think. What he was telling me was clearly wrong. There had been some mistake. The claustrophobia had begun setting in again.

"Richard, come on. Not again." Hassan had some urgency in his voice, but also defeat.

"This has all happened before." I managed to say. "This talk. We've gone through this before. Why can't I remember?"

"Try not to think of anything. Imagine yourself taking a deep breath."

I heard myself bark out a staticky, ironic laugh.

"I know, I know, you have no lungs, but pretend you do. Imagine, just like your voice is coming from you now, and not from some speaker behind you, you also have lungs. Use those lungs. Fill them up, slowly. Deep breath in. Let me hear it, Richard. Deep. Breath. In."

With that Hassan took his own deep breath, his chest swelling under his lab coat, his posture straightening as he sat on the stool before me.

I watched him, enviously; hating him; terrified. I tried to imagine a chest extending below my phantom throat. I imagined my chest swelling, and air passing through my throat. I imagined that his chest was my own chest. To my surprise, I heard myself breath a heavy sigh through the speaker.

Relief spread across Hassan's face. "Good. Now again."

Again, he took in a long, deep breath, and I heard myself do the same. It worked. I felt myself begin to calm down, somehow.

Once I felt more in control, I repeated, "This wasn't the first time this has happened."

Hassan shifted on the stool.

“Richard, you may be the only viable result to have come out of that experimental scan. So successful, in fact, that you... this virtual mind, when given the proper stimulus and extensions, continues to act as if it was operating in flesh and blood. You... well, so far the limitations of my equipment and the virtual environment I am able to build around you have caused you to... react poorly. Like a program that shuts itself off when it runs into a fatal error.”

“I keep killing myself.”

Hassan thought for a moment, his head cocking sideways as he considered. “I’d say it’s more like you keep passing out, and like any brain recovering from a trauma, those last few minutes are forgotten.”

Hassan at first experimented with fitting prosthetics to me. I’m not sure if I was testing the limbs for their responses to impulses from a brain, or if he was testing how my brain handled control of these artificial limbs.

I couldn’t tell you how he could afford all of this expensive equipment, at least not in the beginning. I did get the feeling he was desperately trying to find some way to make money off of me and my virtual brain.

It wasn’t long, it seemed, before I had enough parts cobbled together to have my own body. I was probably terrifying to look at. A junkyard mess of what amounted to mismatched, mannequin-like limbs that I could control to some extent, attached to an articulated, spinal cord construct, with my single camera, stereo microphones and speaker sitting on top for a head.

I remember, relearning how to walk, dragging a trail of power cords, and optic cables behind me, as I was still tethered to the computer where my brain truly resided. I remember solving children’s puzzles, picking up and putting down small objects over and over to prove my mind’s dexterity with the fingers of each hand; all the while still answering those damned questions.

“How do you feel?”

“Fine.”

“What do you mean by ‘fine?’”

“I’m not hurt... I’m not upset. I’m a little bored. I’m fine.”

“What is your last memory?”

“You, asking me to clarify how I feel.”

“Richard, you know I meant before the scan.”

“Oh, of course. My mistake.”

Hassan had this way of sounding both annoyed and please, when I answered this way, exasperated and amused. I can still picture his head rocking side to side as he chided me.

The moment came when Hassan thought he'd perfected a portable computer that could handle the extreme requirements my virtual brain needed. That was bolted to me along with a battery pack where my ribcage would be. I was no longer tethered to the computer at his desk.

He even managed to get me prosthetic eyes with little cameras of their own. They weren't the best quality, prosthetic eyes that could see being a novelty still at the time. My virtual mind instinctively compiled the data to give me a 3-dimensional view again. The sensation of depth in the world, even in just that little room, it was as tangible as if I was reaching out and touching everything with my hands... almost. My limbs only gave me the most cursory data for the sensation of touch, and now my eyes seemed to overcompensate.

It's possible my brain was just recalling the sense of touch from my old memories. I'd see a glossy surface, and it felt cool and smooth. The cloth of Hassan's lab coat would conjure a soft, woven texture if I pinched it between my rubbery fingers. I would touch things compulsively, much to his irritation. I would find a pen and pencil to grip in each hand, certain I could tell the difference by touch.

"Richard, I need you to focus." He'd say.

It was only a matter of time before he thought to test a synthetic skin, I guess. It replaced the plastic and rubber that covered the prosthetic limbs. Hassan's own design, he said. There was a lot of trial and error when it came to properly setting the synthetic nerve fibers' sensitivity.

A lot of, "Nope, still numb," to "THE AIR HURTS! WHY DOES THE AIR HURT!"

I'm not even getting into the trauma of seeing that skin tear or get crushed under my weight or from gripping an object too hard. The ability of animal skin to bruise, tear, and then heal itself is so vastly underappreciated. My synthetic skin couldn't be fixed once damaged, so every little accident equaled thousands of dollars in the garbage until he was able to work out a balance between tough skin proper sensitivity.

Hassan's patience with me was that of a saint. He was a proud parent watching his toddler repeatedly destroy a priceless work of art.

One time I took it upon myself to test my gripping power, gripping a glass cup too tightly causing it to shatter in my hand. The pain was blinding, and when I able to refocus, Hassan was trying to calm me down so he could examine my hand. Thick chunks of glass cut into the skin, but there was no blood to ooze out, and I nearly raged again.

"Prosthetic limbs are meant for normal people, Hassan! I shouldn't be able to do this! It's not safe!"

"There are limitations on prosthetic limbs sold to the public, don't worry."

"But not for me."

“I need to see what you can do, Richard. I need to be able to tell if where the limits are with the limb, your mind, and the connection in between. But please, let me lead the experiments, for your own safety.”

I couldn't pull my eyes away from my hand as he carefully removed the shards.

“My own safety. What do I need safety for? This hand isn't alive, and I'm already dead.”

Hassan sighed, “You're not dead, Richard.”

“I probably killed myself the same day I sat down for that fucking scan.”

“Richard. Language, please.”

Hassan had to turn off my connection with the artificial limb before he could remove the shredded skin. His head bent over the crook of my elbow.

“Sorry.”

I can't tell you how disconcerting it is to see your skin pulled away from your arm. Even if you can't feel it. Even when you see metal and plastic hydraulics underneath. It's the sensation of your body no longer being your body and becoming something other.

That sensation was something I could never get used to.

My memory gets a bit out of sequence at this point. When Hassan created the mobile computer for my brain, he'd still back up the data I'd created each day, my memories, to the original copy of my brain scan on the computer. One day, after running this program to save the day's memories, he accidentally left the program on. That program had access to the old camera

I know this, because I was that program, or the program that housed my brain scan somehow allowed me to feel the camera as if it was an extension of my body, and when I opened what I thought were my eyes, my vision was no longer from the middle of the room, but from that old corner of the lab again. I could see my prosthetically adorned self still sitting on the table.

All I could do was watch that first day as Hassan came in, flipped a switch on my other self's abdomen and brought him back to life. Aside from a twitch as energy flooded back to the limbs, he was still and vacant. Hassan then came over to the computer, noticed my program had been left running but made nothing more than a slight frown and left me on as he awoke whatever else he needed to get my other self's senses going, and his parts responding.

That day was torture. Watching with this flat, shitty vision again as Hassan worked with what was supposed to be me. Testing his balance and movement, the new sheet of skin's sensory levels, joking and having silent conversations. All the while I am stuck without sound, without touch, without movement, without even the ability to... scream in frustration. The claustrophobia, it nearly overtook me several times, but my consciousness clawed at itself to stay present, to stay awake. I didn't want to accidentally kill the program and forget.

I don't know how I managed to do it, but I made it through to the end of the day. I watched Hassan walk over to the computer, type a few commands on the keyboard that lay outside of my field of vision and suddenly the day's events were there. Every single thing I'd watched them do stretched out into the past behind me in a flash from my other self's point of view. And before I my mind could finish reeling from this flood of new memories, Hassan must have turned us both off.

My next few days of memories are solely from the other self, from my mobile self; and then Hassan forgets to turn me off and the memories double up again.

She thought she'd just stumbled across an old synthetic servant prototype. I'm not even sure I was much more than that after all Hassan had done to me.

I awoke to her face looming in the darkness. I had been left by Hassan, sitting on the center table as always, but instead of seeing him, I saw her. Her hair had been tucked up into a dark, knit cap, and a medical mask looped around her ears had been pulled down to cling to her throat. She illuminated us both with a small flashlight bit between her lips. Her dark eyes were black as they peered at me with a hard look of suspicion. I watched as her hands replace the smock I was wearing back down over my torso, the ON switch still located on my abdomen.

Had I been myself, my full, true self, I'm not sure I would have known what to do. By this time, however, Hassan had successfully implanted a series of protocols into the program that dictated my behavior.

"Good evening, ma'am," I said cheerily, "How may I-"

"SHHH!" The woman spit the flashlight out of her mouth as she clasped her hands over my own. She leaned in close, turning her head to as if to listen for hints of footsteps. We held like that in the shadows for several moments until she was convinced no one had been alerted.

Slowly, her hands released from my mouth and she picked up the flashlight from my lap. She pointed it at me accusatorially.

"Set speech to whisper. If you can't, don't talk."

I reset my voice to whisper.

"Is there something wrong? Can I help?"

She cocked her head and trained the flashlight down the length of my body.

"Yes," she hissed, "if you can carry these bags."

She used the flashlight to gesture toward two large duffel bags, full and stretched by hidden, oddly shaped objects.

"I'm sure I can," I whispered back, and hopped off the table. I noted a cloud of dust shook off my shoulders and hair into her beam of light. "I apologize for the dust."

She pulled the medical mask back over her nose and mouth.

“Don’t worry about it, just shut up. Don’t talk unless you have to.”

I nodded and reached for the bags. More dust floated off my smock. The bags were heavy. I’m not sure she would have been able to carry both of them on her own. What had her plan been before finding me, I never thought to ask.

“Good,” she breathed, “now follow me.”

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