

Tommy uploaded Mother right before the Mets won their third World Series. She died coughing blood six days later. In the hospital, he held her hand and told her that the uploading was his tribute. He guessed in a way, he really meant it.

"It's like insurance," he said, clasping her cold wrist right below the IV needle. "I know you're sure you're going to Heaven, but you know, it can't hurt to have a copy of yourself around." Tommy didn't want to tell Mother he didn't think there was any heaven at all.

"I don't believe in this," Mother said. "When I go, I go. Jesus will come for me."

Tommy didn't believe in Jesus, either, though he didn't mind Him as long as he stayed on bumper stickers.

Mother's skin was parchment-yellow. Her lips were dry and cracked. Dark blood showed in some of the faint lines.

As he poured water from the plastic ice-water jug, he said, "don't be afraid. It's not like people have to die—dead-die—any more."

She smiled. "I'm not afraid. But I will miss my boy."

Right then, Tommy did want to cry.

She sipped the water, then closed her eyes for a long moment.

"Yes," she said at last. "But it's for you, Tommy. Not for me. Because I know it will make you feel better."

Then came the lonelytime. Two, maybe three years of it. After that, Tommy found Katie.

Three years they were together. A thousand days. Tommy had been married before, of course, but it was nothing like Katie. Some days, he could only remember his first wife's name and nothing else about her.

He'd met Katie coming out of Pep Boys one spring day. She had a bottle of Armor-All. Tommy had three quarts of 30-weight oil.

The sun was so bright that day that he could hardly make out her features. He had the impression of a pair of bright, glittering eyes and a broad smile.

Katie was a children's librarian, he learned later as they talked over a cup of coffee and a couple of cookies. Walnut chocolate chip. Tommy's favorite. Tommy told her what he did for a living. Even though most people didn't understand much about network administration, Katie said she thought it sounded very interesting. A few weeks afterward, when she'd moved into the house, Katie told him that her favorite cookie was peanut butter, but she'd eat the kind Tommy liked, since they were good, too.

And that said everything anybody needed to know about Katie, Tommy thought.

Tommy remembered the day he knew that something had changed in his life forever. The day Katie

imprinted herself on his heart.

Turning in bed, he saw the long, straight shadows from the Venetian blinds falling across her soft, golden brown hair and her bare shoulders downed with faint golden hair. He touched her cheek, and she sighed. The corner of her mouth curled upward in a faint smile.

Then, he touched her eyelid, tenderly.

She woke.

"I may not be a handsome man," he said. And his voice sounded so strange. Strange even to his own ears, as if it was someone completely other who was speaking, though these were his words. This was what he wanted to say.

She smiled and said in a sleepy voice, "you are a handsome man, Tommy. You're my love."

"I may not be a handsome man," he said again, because he did not believe her, no matter how he loved her. "But I will take care of you always. I'll never would leave you, Katie. I never could."

This, too, was true. For it was not Tommy who left Katie.

But before that, he had uploaded her as well.

#

"Pot roast?" Tommy smelled the rich meat. Gravy and potatoes and carrots and a tender slab of beef that he could cut with his fork.

Mother was in the kitchen, polishing the silverware.

"You don't need to do that," he said.

She smiled, shaking her head. "It's Friday night." She knew Tommy was tired by the end of the week. His boss was a cold bastard who didn't know a thing about networks or programming. Tommy didn't think that the man had ever actually looked at him. He wasn't sure whether he even remembered his name five minutes after he stopped ordering him around. He figured that his holographic I.D. tag was the only reason the guy ever called him "Thomas" instead of "hey, you!"

During lunch, Tommy had fantasized about punching his boss in the stomach. Just one good one. Bang! Like that, the guy would double over. Maybe vomit all over his effeminate patent leather shoes.

"Long day?" Mother asked.

The table was set. She'd lit tapered white candles.

And they sat down and ate.

It was as good as he remembered. They talked. Tommy told Mother about some crows he'd seen in the park at lunch, dozens of them, circling overhead. He thought they were on their way somewhere, perhaps flying south for the winter. Even though they were ugly black crows, he'd found a kind of beauty in them.

"You have a poet's soul," Mother told him.

Tommy did sometimes write poetry. He never showed it to anyone. Except Katie, of course.

The meat suddenly went dry in his mouth.

"I can change it," Mother said.

"It's okay," Tommy said. "It's wonderful." But she knew he was lying. Now it was like stale beef jerky: tough and tasteless.

"How about some fried chicken instead? Or chicken and dumplings? Meatloaf? It's your—"

"I'm not so hungry any more," Tommy said.

As he watched, Mother's face changed. Softened. Her gray hair darkened and her eyes, too, changing from light gray to blue.

She was Katie.

"Tell me about the birds again, Tommy," she said. She lowered her head, then looked up at him through her long, dark eyelashes. It was something she'd done often when they were together. He loved to remember it. He loved to see it now.

Now Katie had a glass of wine. She sipped from it and some of it remained on her lower lip, glistening like faint red garnets. Tommy reached across the table and ran his finger along the curve of her lip, then brought his finger to his mouth. He closed his eyes to savor the bittersweet trace of wine on his tongue.

So it had been on the night he'd first forgotten himself with her. Making love to her.

"Katie," he said.

And she smiled. She just smiled.

As her lips cracked and grew dry and there was red on them; not red from wine, no, red from blood. Dark red blood in lined cracks deep in the flesh.

"I'm so tired," she said.

Tommy couldn't say anything, because Katie's face wasn't hers any more. It was Mother's face.

No, the eyes were Katie's. The mouth was Mother's. The hair snaked back and forth, part Katie's golden brown and part Mother's silver-gray. Skin a mix of parchment-yellow and fresh, downy peach.

"Just let me go, Tommy," his motherwife said.

"Fuck," Tommy cried, leaping up, then stumbling away from the dining table, hurling the heavy oak chair away as it blocked his path. Loud crash as it hit the floor.

He had been about to kiss like a lover . . .

"Tell me about the birds again, Tommy," she said.

He kept backing away. He hit the dining room wall and pressed—hard—with his mind. He'd go now. It would be like Jell-O and melt and give. That would be it. Gone.

He had to reboot.

Rewrite.

Whatever the hell had happened, mixing the two of them together, Tommy knew he had to stop the program. Start over; he knew that as clear as he knew his own name.

"I luh-" she said.

Motherwife.

Mouth stopped, half-open. Face frozen, in mid-word. People looked awful frozen between expressions, Tommy thought. Like a terrible photograph. No one should ever have to look like that.

"Vee-you," he heard her say as everything went blue and the wall finally gave and he was back in his black naugahyde VR seat, can of diet Coke by his side, half-empty pizza box at his feet and his palms slick with sweat.

#

Tommy rewrote Mother. Then he rewrote Katie.

It was all he could think of. He knew it was wrong, them mixing like that, but he couldn't help but think it was something he'd done wrong, some glitch in the initial programming. Tommy was very good at what he did. They were back to normal the next time he booted up the VR set. He had pot roast again that night and a wonderful talk with Mother. Later, in the dark, Katie came. And they made love. It was as good as the very best times he could remember.

Some time during the night, Katie woke him, stroking his side.

"Mmmmmm," she said into his neck.

"Babe, I'm pretty tired," he said.

"I'm lonely."

"Let's just curl up and sleep," he said.

"Please," she whispered. Her hand kept stroking his side. Now it was itching where she'd touched him and tickling a little.

"I really am tired," he muttered.

"When did I ever say no to you? You are such a fucking selfish bastard," Katie said. And there was something about her voice that reminded him of Mother, though Mother had never used a word like that in her life.

Had she?

Tommy didn't know.

He felt Katie move away, shift in the bed. She was sitting up. The covers rustled. She was reaching for the light.

And Tommy did not want her to turn on the light.

He was awake now. Alert. Horribly so. He rolled over and grabbed for her arm.

Too late.

Silver-gray hair, parchment skin. Mother's eyes. Katie's lips. Soft, velvety neck with a down of light golden hair. Delicate collarbone. Round, full breasts. But Mother's arms. Mother's thin, age-spotted hands.

Tommy pressed against the headboard. This was the quickest way out in the bedroom. But nothing happened.

She held out her hands in a gesture of supplication.

"Please," she said. "I'm lonely."

Her palms were marked with horrible wounds. As if someone had stabbed her with a steak knife, over and over. Spots of blood on the white sheet, too, farther down. She threw the sheet aside and he saw her feet. There were the same wounds there, too.

"Who did this?" he asked.

"A boy," she said.

A boy? How the hell did a boy get in the program? There was no boy in Tommy's life. There never had been.

"It hurts to be this way," she said.

And then she tried to touch him with her bloody hands.

Tommy rolled off the bed and started for the door. Just three steps. He was there. He grabbed the knob, but it was locked. God, there'd never been a lock on the door! Not in his bedroom. Not in his house.

As he tugged at the knob, he thought to turn once more, looking over his shoulder.

She was still on the bed. Not looking at him. Not coming after him. Instead, she was looking at her hands, almost wonderingly, and then she drew her wounded palms across her chest and stared at the long, brilliant red streaks on her flowered cotton gown.

Then, she looked up at him and smiled uncertainly.

It was Katie's face again, almost entirely.

And in a voice like a child she said, "it's so pretty, isn't it? Like a bright red flower. The little boy is here and he's calling to me. I have to go now."

As he rattled the doorknob with one hand, Tommy twisted his body and, without understanding what he was doing, he extended his arm toward her.

"Katie, what's happened? You're my wife! I've done—"

"I'm tired," she said. And her face was once again Mother's. "Just let me go, Tommy. Let me sleep."

Tommy said nothing. He threw all his weight against the door, and it flew open with a crash.

Everything went blue.

He had to reboot again.

Rewrite.

He'd correct the mistakes he'd made. He would have back both his mother and his wife.

#

Tommy was talking to himself.

"I never did a thing wrong," he said.

There were routines to write. Subroutines. Code was like Zen. He didn't precisely write it; he thought it. This was the way with the new machines. Language was thought and if you thought a certain way, then you wrote a certain way. And what were minds but a collection of chemical imprints here and there and why couldn't that be transferred to the kind of parallel computers pretty much everyone had these days?

They could be put in there. They had been. People did it.

Tommy did it. Mother and Katie, they lived in the brain of the computer just as if they were in front of him in life itself.

And he could not understand how things had gotten so mixed up. He knew who his Mother was, and he knew Katie as the woman he'd lived with and loved for that precious three years. Lived with and loved right up to the day she'd sat down beside him on the couch and said in a soft, sad voice, "I don't love you any more, Tommy. My feelings are just gone. I want a divorce."

Loved her each and every day since in the long lonelytime after.

How long?

He couldn't remember, exactly. How long had Mother been gone?

Ten years. She'd died right before the Mets had made their third miracle and won the World Series. Tommy remembered that. Remembered wishing Mother had been there to see that. She'd always loved the Mets.

And it came to Tommy, as he struggled to untangle the threads in his mind and write the code the right way—damn it!—that somebody had once described life to him as a series of moments.

That was true, he thought. How we lived those moments made us what we were. Are.

"You have the soul of a poet," he remembered Mother saying.

"My time is out of joint," he muttered. As if Shakespeare could give guidance in programming parallel computers and uploading someone's memories and personality whole and fine. Who could give guidance about something like that? No one.

Oh, and Katie. Katie was so fine. Her features. Her voice. Her daily patience and sweetness. All anyone needed to know about her was that she was the kind of woman who'd eat the kind of cookies her man liked to eat instead of the type she liked best.

She'd like what Tommy liked best. One time she'd said that to him. He thought. Maybe he

misremembered.

That was Mother, too. Liked what Tommy liked. Always told him good things. Happy things. Liked to cook for him. Listen to him. She paid attention.

"Oh, fuck," he whispered.

He saw half his face reflected in the dark blue screen and he wanted it to melt like Jell-O, but it didn't. And he didn't have the courage either to look fully at himself, or to look away.

And it was both their voices, mixed together like MIDI tracks, that started talking. Inside his head.

Fifty-two years old and you're still called Tommy. There's no one in your office that's even half your age. How does it feel to be a man doing a job better left to boys? Your boss thinks you're a piece of meat because that's what you are, Tommy. Your heart isn't so strong. Didn't your Dad, that lousy sonofabitch, have his heart blow out at 50? That's two years younger than you are now. One day you're just going to wake up dead.

They were silent a moment.

Tommy pounded the table. Hard. Until the skin on the side of his fist cracked and began to bleed.

It was just the computer talking now. A dry, measured, toneless voice.

In what way is the world a better place because you lived in it, Thomas?

There was a pause.

Have you ever thought for a second about anyone except yourself?

Tommy screamed something filthy at the screen. He punched it. He threw his chair back and kicked viciously at it.

"Stop!" he cried.

Then he was shaking. His hands, then his arms, then his legs.

"Just stop," he whispered.

He had to reboot. Start over. Take a walk. Calm down.

Rewrite.

#

There was not a software or network problem Tommy couldn't solve. He would not give up. Nor would he give in.

He'd rewritten everything; twice now, and run every test there was. Three days later, he was ready to boot up the VR unit once again.

It was Labor Day weekend. Three whole days to work on the problem. And Friday evening as he drove home from work, he was relishing the challenge, and thinking about his first normal visit with Mother and

Katie in weeks.

It was all rewritten. All the code.

And about ten minutes after six, Tommy sat in the black naugahyde chair, wired himself up, and turned the VR unit on.

Mother sat at the kitchen table, sipping coffee from a brown cow-shaped mug.

Her soft reddish hair curled around her face. She wore a bit of lipstick, and a tiny gold cross around her neck.

"You colored your hair," Tommy said as he sat down. "It looks great."

Mother rolled her eyes. "You know I'd never do something so foolish." Of course she wouldn't. Mother was practical. She had plenty of common sense and he'd heard her say many times that women were fools who colored their hair. A racket, she called it.

Then she winked at him. "I've got a date," she said.

And he noticed her dress. Something silky and form-fitting. He'd never seen her wear it before.

"I'm tired," Tommy said. "I was hoping you'd have something nice for dinner. Meatloaf. Your pot roast!"

"Tommy," she said, taking another sip of coffee and shaking her head.

"Quit teasing me," he said.

"There's a casserole in the refrigerator," she said. "Don't wait up. We're going to a movie and then . . . I don't know. Dancing, maybe."

Tommy laughed. "That's great," he said. Mother loved to carry a joke. Then the doorbell rang.

Tommy looked at Mother. Now he was beginning to wonder. He'd see who was at that door.

He opened it, looking out into the night. His car in the driveway. The cars across the street. The mailbox. No one there at all.

"Mother!" he said. He ran back to the kitchen and her cup of coffee was on the table, half-empty.

Mother was gone.

He ran through the house, calling for her. But she was gone. Utterly. Absolutely.

Reboot.

Everything went blue. When things came back, Tommy was in the bedroom and there was a figure on the bed, curled under the quilt Mother had sewn for him when he was four.

"Kiss me," Katie said.

Her face was under the quilt. All of her was under the quilt except one small, bloody foot.

And Tommy did not want to draw back the quilt.

"I'm cold," she said. "Lie next to me. Warm me."

She drew the cover away.

Her face was beautiful in the way that some women are beautiful at the moment of death. There was blood on her lips, yes, and still the blood on her wounded hands.

"The boy won't talk to me," Katie said. "I've just been here alone. Sometimes I think I fall asleep."

"Katie," Tommy said. The boy? Who was this boy? Where the hell did he come from? He tried to hold her, but she didn't respond. She was stiff. And cold. Her shoulders felt like they were carved from marble.

"I know who the boy is," she said. "He told me when he wounded me. You need to talk to him, Tommy."

"Oh, God," Tommy said. "Why?"

Katie began to weep.

"He said he was your conscience." She sighed. "Why didn't you ever listen to me?"

"I did!" How could he be so angry? He'd felt tender only a moment before.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "You didn't. I left you once. Now I can't leave."

Tommy tried again to embrace her. This time, she relented. Felt a little warmer.

"Let's just hold each other," he said. "Like we used to."

She sighed in his arms.

Better. This was better.

She was still crying. He wiped the tears from her cheek and kissed her, gently.

"I had a wife, once," he said. "And I loved her very much. I still love her."

Katie smiled. "Your mother's on a date," she said. "We can do anything we want as long as she's out."

Tommy shivered, but he tried to keep smiling. "Sure," he said.

"Just you and me," Katie said.

Tommy nodded.

"Let's hurry," she said, touching his thigh. "Before she gets back."

Her fingers were like slivers of ice slick against his fevered flesh.

#

Tommy heard the front door click shut.

"I'm home!"

Mother's voice, from the bottom of the stairs. Katie stirred and made a little moaning noise, but she didn't

wake.

Mother's heels, clicking up the stairs.

"Wake up," Tommy said, shaking Katie's shoulder. It was like she was drugged. She wouldn't stir.

"We had such a great time," Mother said. "I know you're up. I see your light is on."

"Katie," Tommy said, jostling her again. This time, he grabbed her waist. Finally, her eyes opened and she looked up at him, smiling slightly.

The bedroom door flew open and Mother stood there, smiling, one hand on her hip.

"I hope you're not too tired," she said.

She started to unbutton her blue silk dress.

Tommy stared at her in horror.

She was a Mother he'd never imagined. Younger than he'd ever known her, and lovely. Firm-fleshed, with a pink glow to her skin and freckles on her chest.

"You look so nice, Susan," Katie said, raising up on one elbow. Mother's name. Tommy hadn't known that she'd even known it for certain.

Katie didn't have a thing on and her breasts pointed perkily upward.

Tommy struggled to draw the covers over her as she giggled.

"Silly," Mother said. "Why bother? We'll all be—"

"What are you doing?" Tommy cried, as Mother came closer and sat on the bed beside him.

She was disrobing.

Laughing.

She squirmed over Tommy and reached for Katie, who moved over eagerly, touching her shoulder and neck. She looked like she was about to—

"Stop!" Tommy cried. "What are you doing?"

There they were together. The two of them in the same room. And him, too. This was something the program wouldn't allow. Couldn't allow.

They'd never known each other, Katie and Mother. Mother had died three years before Tommy had even known that Katie existed.

They were completely separate parts of his life.

One was his mother.

One was his wife.

And they were rolling on the bed like two animals.

"Stop!"

Tommy rolled out of bed. They hardly noticed.

He ran for the door. It was still open. He'd have to go all the way downstairs.

Reboot.

Rewrite.

They were behind him now, giggling, making horrible lewd noises that he would never, ever forget. Wet, sickening noises like animals eating raw flesh.

Everything went to blue.

When Tommy came back, he saw that the video set in the corner had been left on. The screen showed gray static the color of cheap wet toilet paper.

Tommy pulled off all the wires and lifted his visor. The video screen rolled and rolled now, then it gradually resolved.

Katie's face and shoulders appeared.

"Let us go," she said.

Mother appeared behind her.

"I'm so tired," she said. "I wanted to go all those years ago. But you wouldn't let me."

"If you love her at all, you'll let her go," Katie said. "There never was much real love in you, Tommy, but there was always something."

"You had the soul of a poet," Mother said.

Tommy understood the past tense. He "had" the soul of a poet. Once. A long time ago. Maybe when he was a boy.

"How could you do those things?" he asked them.

Mother closed her eyes, her face a mask of grief. Her hand was on Katie's shoulder. Katie patted her hand. Tommy thought he saw her crying.

"You," Katie whispered. "That was you. When you try to rewrite the way things should be so many times, you don't know right from wrong. You don't know what love is. Or life."

"Or anything," Mother said.

"You get like an animal," Katie said. "Without any soul."

"I don't believe in that," Tommy said. "We don't have souls. We're a collection of memories. Moments. That's what I uploaded. Neither of you is real. You're just—"

"Tommy!" Mother's voice silenced him.

"What do you think a soul is?" Katie asked.

Tommy had no answer.

"Let us go," Mother said. "It's our right."

"It's what is right," Katie said. "Won't you listen even now?"

They stood together, facing him silently from the video set. Tommy stood on shaky legs, meaning to turn the thing off, turn them both off, but before he reached the set, it blinked off by itself and the screen went to black.

The radio clock on top of the set showed that it was 11:45. P.M. Sunday. He'd been wired the whole weekend.

He looked down at his body. Open shirt, stiff with dried sweat. Chest thin and covered with tufts of gray hair. Sagging belly beneath that. Filthy pants. Of course he'd soiled himself. Anyone would who sat in a VR chair for almost 72 hours.

God, he was tired, and he had to be at work in eight hours.

How he'd rewrite the program in that time and manage to get to work, he didn't know.

What he needed was a shower and a shave and something like a decent night's sleep.

He turned toward the computer anyway. Maybe there was something he could do. Some tiny thing he'd overlooked. Programs were like that. You made some infinitesimal error and it multiplied itself until the whole thing was ruined.

It was often subtle, easily overlooked. Especially when you were exhausted.

And as he leaned over to click on the power strip, a small hand covered his, stopping him.

Not Mother's hand. Not Katie's.

He looked into the face of a young, freckle-faced boy.

"Do not," the boy said.

And that was all he said.

After a moment, Tommy recognized the boy. He'd been the one who had wounded Katie. He'd been trying to get through, all that time, but Tommy hadn't listened and hadn't seen. Until this moment.

Now Tommy's boy self took his finger from the power strip, and Tommy he knew he was no longer alone. And that he would no longer rewrite.

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