

DEAD MAN by ALEXANDER JABLOKOV

Our last story from Alexander Jablokov, "Market Report," appeared in our September 1998 issue. After much too long a hiatus, the author is writing again. He is most of the way through a novel, *Remembering Muriel*, and has several other stories in the works. In his new tale, he relentlessly hunts down the...

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Near Bellefonte, Pennsylvania

The breakfast rush was over. Pushed-back chairs stood at angles around tables sticky with syrup. The waitress had slowed down and finally gotten the hair out of her eyes. She poured the dead man another cup of coffee.

"These yours?"

The waitress didn't answer the dead man's question. She turned, instead, to me. "Had too much Thanksgiving?"

I pushed the turkey and stuffing around on my plate. Chasing the dead man had made me miss the holiday itself, and this had been an attempt to give myself a treat. "Not hungry, I guess."

"So why did you order it? You didn't have to. I'm not your mother."

"No," I said. "You're not."

She prodded my backpack with a mustard-stained sneaker toe. "A gal could trip." Before I could stop her she stooped and tried to pick it up. "Damn! You travel with your barbells?"

"Sensing equipment." I had to say something. "Look for stuff along the old rail lines. You'd be surprised at what you can find."

"Really."

"Yeah! All kinds of things. Lantern pieces. Spikes. Once I even found a telegraph key. Imagine the messages it must once have sent." Boring is best for concealment. It's the one thing no one ever tries to fake.

A big guy at a table near the door had been leading her with his eyes the whole time I'd been there. She'd managed to serve him steak, home fries, three eggs sunny side up, an English muffin, a bran muffin, three cups of coffee, and a mint-flavored toothpick without ever glancing at him. He'd been glancing at our conversation, which made me uncomfortable, but he now clapped on a fluorescent orange hunting

cap and lurched out, leaving a \$10 bill folded into an origami swan balanced on top of a napkin dispenser. The waitress scooped it up and, again without looking, unfolded it and put it into an apron pocket. She snapped a wet rag and wiped down the checked plastic tablecloth.

“Well, don’t get your ass shot off out there,” she said to me. “First day of the season, everything that moves looks exactly like what they’re after.”

“Don’t worry. I found what I was looking for.”

She shifted her gaze to me. “Oh?” Her eyes were gray. Nothing spectacular at all. “And what was that?”

I was getting too chatty. “Just some leftover junk. It’s not really what you end up finding. It’s the sport.”

She snorted. I had just demonstrated that I was as dumb as the rest of them.

The dead man was waving his cup again. When she stooped to pour, he held the cup away, balking her of her prey. “These yours?”

“What makes you think that?” A half-dozen watercolors hung on the woodgrain-vinyl wall, between a clock that peeked out of a print of mallards taking off from a slough and a rack of state capital plates with most of the states missing.

“I don’t know.” The dead man put on a sucked-in-cheek connoisseur expression. “Something about the style.”

She shrugged resentfully. Though slender and flexible, she was older than she looked at first. But that shrug had no doubt always looked the same, distinctive even in a prenatal ultrasound. “Yeah.” It was a confession.

“Nice work.”

“Sure.”

“No, really. Got a minute?”

She gazed out through the window at the parking lot, where silent trucks waited on the gravel for their hunters to return.

“You’ve, ah, got a theme, right? What would you call it ... industrial crap versus weeds. Right there on the edge, where one becomes the other.”

“If you say so.” She started clearing the dead man’s plate.

“I’m not done.”

The way she yanked her hair back showed she didn’t believe him, but she put the heavy plate, with its pink rim and smears of yolk, back down.

“I like this one. Rusted pump housing among spring skunk cabbages. And this ... crumpled paper bag rhyming with the dried oak leaves around it. You don’t call that a theme?”

“I call it something I saw.”

“You saw this one too?”

A pause. “Sure. I had to look. Made me late to work. Would you pass it by?”

“I wouldn’t pass it by, but I wouldn’t know what to do with it either.”

I snuck a glance, even though I didn’t want the dead man to know I was paying attention to him. A pair of frog legs stuck out of freshly rolled asphalt. I couldn’t figure out how she’d done it, but it really looked like steam still rose from the pitch. The spotted legs gleamed with pond.

“Well, I didn’t either. Boss says it puts people off their feed.”

“He still lets you hang it.”

“He’s got to, doesn’t he? Who else would work here?”

The dead man’s body had been through a crash into a bridge abutment and a lot of fugitive life he could in no way have been expecting. He looked pretty good, considering, even heavy, with a roll pushing out against his corduroy shirt. When I got hired, I’d spent a bit of time talking to the dead man’s uploaded personality. His voice had been synthetic, so I hadn’t been able to get any clues about what his body would be like from that. He’d sent me a picture of someone a few years younger than he’d been when he had supposedly died. Vanity never disappears, I guess, even when the body does.

Although this body had not. That was the problem I’d been hired to fix. I hefted the bag that carried the upload gear I’d be using on him. Not quite barbells, but it was heavy.

It kept me in shape.

* * * *

Near Monticello, Utah

“What are you drinking?” the speaker asked from the railing where I’d balanced it.

“Bourbon.”

“I always liked bourbon.”

“What do you do now instead?”

“I still have the taste, but it makes no sense to me now.”

I swirled the bourbon in my china teacup, wondering if the mike mounted behind the speaker was sensitive enough to pick up the slosh.

The speaker chuckled. It sounded too much like a real person’s voice, all the way down to the occasional phlegmy throat rattle. If it was intended to put me at my ease, it failed. That voice was a deliberate choice. I preferred those that came down with roaring multi-octave voices like cherubim. I could always turn down the volume.

“Don’t get ticked off, Ian. I could taste that stuff better than you can. But there’s no surround, no context. No associations with buddies, with status, with sex. Until I uploaded I never realized how much I depended on clever marketing to enrich my phenomenal world.”

The cottonwoods in the wash creaked in the dry breeze. A cottonwood is less a tree than a giant weed. Dropped boughs littered what was supposed to be my lawn, but was actually a place local teenagers came at night to confirm, yet again, that beer cans did not burn. The last cloudburst had traded a shopping cart for the two radials that had formed memorial arches in the bed of the wash for the past year. It lay with its wheels up, half buried in the sand. Someone must have pitched it off the highway bridge a mile or so up.

“So the question is,” he said, “if I take a sip of Maker’s Mark, and I’ve never seen an ad for it, have I really enjoyed it?”

I drained the china teacup and filled it again. Once, a few months ago, I’d thrown it at a 4x4 that had speakers blasting from the roof, in case a mountain goat on a cliff somewhere had missed out on how often hearts get broken. The next morning I’d found it, standing pertly on the yellow line, handle snapped off but otherwise undamaged. It was now my good-luck drinking cup.

“It pays to keep old paradoxes updated,” he said. “Who cares about trees? It’s just this: our minds are created by interaction with other human beings. Being social is why our minds exist in the first place. We can never escape that.”

“You want to know if I’ve made any progress.”

“The thought had crossed my mind, yes.”

“I—No.”

“None at all?”

“You’ve vanished completely. I have absolutely no idea where you are.”

He chortled, delighted despite the setback. “So I’m smarter than you thought.”

“No,” I said.

“What?”

“I mean it’s not that you’re so smart. That’s not why I haven’t found you.”

“It doesn’t pay to insult your employer like that, Ian.”

“Look,” I said. “When you had a body, do you think you could have gone on the lam and evaded a sophisticated surveillance net for a month? Tell the truth now. Because, you know what? If you don’t tell me the truth, I’ll never find you.”

“My body. You’ll never find my body.”

“That’s you, you know. Not some zombie. It’s you. You inside a body. Kind of the way you lived your entire life.”

“That’s like saying, ‘it’s you, only it’s somebody else.’”

“Okay,” I said. “It’s tough talking with an under-evolved grammar that doesn’t have a clear distinction between third-person silicon and third-person carbon. Sorry.”

“Ian,” he said. “I hired you to find me—the non-uploaded version of me, the leftover me, the me that somehow didn’t end up dying the way it was supposed to. And you haven’t gotten anywhere. That’s not making me happy.”

The uploaded always have issues. They won’t admit that, but they do. The body was, if nothing else, a very hard-to-counterfeit seal of authenticity. Lacking a watermark with quite as much heft, uploads always suffered from a bit of imposter syndrome, though they would never have admitted it. The problem’s way worse if there’s a body running around with a version of the original mind in it.

Though this time the problem was more complicated. My client thought the upload had been interrupted before the positions of the last little vesicles and the voltages of every action potential had been coded and transferred. He felt out of focus, not quite all there. He needed access to his old brain.

Of course, complete access would destroy that old brain. That was just part of the way these things worked. He was the legal owner of the body, and was responsible for “funeral expenses, or other expenses incidental to disposal of remains.” My fee was that incidental expense. Legally, I would be completing an upload still in progress, and then taking care of what was left over.

“If I’m going to get anywhere,” I said, “I need you to answer my question.”

A long pause. “No, Ian. I couldn’t have gotten away from you.”

“So you had help.”

“Looks that way.”

“But you told me—what?—that you died in a car crash. Out on the highway somewhere.”

“A road heading for I-80, west of Grand Island. I spun out on some wet pavement.”

“I’ve heard of people planning things like this. Going up, leaving their bodies too: it’s like some weird kind of sex, where you reproduce your mind instead of your body.”

“I’ve already told you, Ian. You think I’m yanking your chain? If so, I’m paying well for the privilege. But there’s no conspiracy here. I thought I’d died in a car crash, and been successfully and fully uploaded. Then I find my body still lumbering around. I don’t like it.”

His body—the dead man—had popped up on a security cam in a 7-Eleven in Davenport, Iowa. The image was fuzzy, but you could see he looked like hell: bandages, splints, an osmotic minipump hanging under his arm. But definitely, defiantly, alive. He shaved in a service station bathroom in Moline. The DNA trace on the disposable razor was definitely my client’s. His body’s. And that was the last trace I’d found of the dead man. There, somewhere on the high bluffs above the Mississippi, he’d vanished.

I’d staked out every place he knew, or could take comfort from, the homes of friends, the town he’d gone to college in, kept an eye on art exhibits and cafes he might be drawn to. Nothing. He didn’t even visit the grave of his wife, Carol, who’d died, for real, a year or so before his car accident. He had advice. Someone was

helping him.

“Run me through that accident,” I said. “Tell me what happened.”

“Crummy driving,” he said. “That’s what happened.”

* * * *

He’d been in a hurry, on his way from his motel to a dinner meeting with an important client, and running late. It was late fall, and a patch of ice had stayed in the shadow of an overpass, while every other remnant of the freezing rain of the day before had melted. He’d been moving at the limits of the safe speed of dry pavement. When he hit ice, he had no margin for error.

And that was it. He spun out, slammed into the abutment, and bled out there, far from emergency services. He did remember being pinned in the wreckage, metal pushing into him through the vain protection of the deflated air bag. And he remembered approaching headlights turning the concrete abutment into a hazy column of light.

Then he’d come to, screaming, bleeding, dying. Not in an ambulance, as he might have expected, but, instead, in the back of a minivan crammed with electronic gear.

And that was the last thing he remembered. Presumably there had been a lot more, as his mind was transferred and beamed up, but the hippocampus stops converting short- to long-term memory during the transition, and protein synthesis went haywire, so there could be no memory of that time. So all we’d had to work with was a flash of red LEDs and festoons of cable harnesses, the fevered vision of a dying man.

“I’d interrupted him,” he said.

“Who?” I asked.

“The guy. Whoever it was. The one who upped me. I was all bloody, you know, but still, when he grabbed me to pull me up onto the pallet, he got barbecue sauce all over me. He even got it in my hair, when he was sticking the electrodes on. I mean, didn’t he even have a Wet Wipe, or something? Sharp, sweet smell, like amplified blood.... What a way for me to go! What was wrong with him? The bag from the takeout was crumpled on the floor, and the ribs were lying in one of those cardboard trays. He even took a few more bites while he was working on me, like I wasn’t dying right in front of him.”

If there was a decent place for barbecue in Grand Island, Nebraska, I knew who’d be able to find it.

What the hell was Barnaby up to, uploading random dying strangers he found on the highway? And then coming up with elaborate schemes to enable the body to escape detection? He'd dropped out of the business a long time before. None of it should have mattered anymore. My old friend and mentor. I had no desire to track him down.

My mother would know where he was.

* * * *

I yanked at the slider. It ground to a halt in its track. "Dammit!" I put my weight into it, but that just wedged it deeper.

"You should clean the sand out of that regularly."

Like any parent, my mother knew how to offer utterly necessary advice in such a way that it would automatically be disregarded.

"I know, Ma."

"How's everything going?"

"Good, good. Sorry it's been a while. I've had some demanding clients."

"I'm sure some of them take a lot of emotional investment."

"You don't know the half of it. I knew you'd understand, Ma. Hey, I was just remembering some things, and I was wondering..."

"You should just say things, honey."

I took a breath. "I know that."

"So..."

"You talk to Barnaby lately?" It came out in a rush. "I mean, I know you guys used to keep in touch. No Christmas cards, I bet, but he felt some kind of bond with you, right? He used to tell me that. And you knew he'd just been doing what he was supposed to...."

I trailed off. I'd filled as much void as I could, but of course, there was an infinite supply.

The night had really cooled off, and the bourbon had lost any ability to keep me warm. I stood with my heels on the edge of the porch. It creaked under my

weight, but held. Out in the darkness, I heard the childish yip of a coyote.

“What do you want?” I could barely hear her.

“It’s like this. I—”

“Can you take some constructive criticism?”

I bit back on words I would have regretted. And which would have made sure I never got what I needed. “Sure. Love it. Lay it on me.”

“When you start out with ‘it’s like this,’ I know what you’re going to say next is a bunch of crap. So don’t say it, okay? That way we can both pretend we’re talking sense.”

“I need Barnaby.” I squeezed the words out of a tight throat. “For this job. He knows something I need to know. I have to talk to him. He would tell me, you know. He was really happy—relieved, I guess—that you would communicate with him. He’d never have given up on that. It absolved him of something. Where is he? I know you know.”

“Leave him alone,” she said. “Leave *me* alone.”

“I can’t do that. He’s out there. And he knows something I need to know.”

“I’m so sorry, honey. About ... everything.”

“That’s all right, Ma.”

There was a long pause, and I thought she was gone.

“Honey. Just ask him, okay? Nothing else.”

“I just need a lead. Something.”

“You’re sure he’s the one who can help you?”

“Yes.”

She told me.

“Thanks, Ma. I’ll call you.”

I went into the kitchen and made a peanut butter sandwich for the road.

* * * *

Near Bellefonte, Pennsylvania

But I hadn't called her—not since I'd talked to Barnaby. And she hadn't called me. That had been the longest time we'd gone without talking since I met Barnaby in the first place.

Let the dead man enjoy himself critiquing the senses and flirting with the waitress, I figured. He didn't have much longer, now that I'd finally caught up with him. I finished my coffee and went to call my mother.

The diner no longer had a phone of its own, but people still used the bathroom hall for a little communications privacy. The wall was covered with penciled numbers, in between editorial comments like “Bitch!” “Get on with ititititIT,” and “Big crusty loaf of French (Italian?) bread.”

“Ma. You there, Ma?”

Static, way more than I usually got. But I could feel her presence on the other end, like when I was a kid and would go into her room to hear her breathing, and know she was alive.

“Ma!”

“What did you do to him?” Her voice was suddenly sharp in my ear.

“Barnaby? I just talked to him ... I swear. He, um, he looks pretty good, considering. I mean, he's really getting on—”

“He was picked up by an ambulance. He's in intensive care. He might live, they think.”

Poor Barnaby. He'd looked like crap, but I'd really thought he'd live forever.... “I didn't have anything to do with that. He was absolutely fine when I left him.”

Silence.

“Ma! Please....”

I waited for a long time, but I got nothing else.

* * * *

When I came back into the dining room, the waitress was cleaning the dead man's empty table. I slung my gear and ran for the door.

“You want me to wrap this?” she called after me.

“Have a good holiday season,” I said. “If I don’t see you.”

His car door hung open. I’d taken care of the starter before going in. Clearly, he’d figured that out in a couple of seconds. Quick thinking. My client kept telling me how smart he was, but considering the source, I hadn’t paid much attention.

The ridgeline rose steeply above the gravel parking lot, hazed with bare oak branches. Here and there clumps of dry leaves hung on. The lumps of squirrels’ nests hung exposed. The sky was bright blue.

I heard branches thrashing and snapping, upslope. I followed. The underbrush was savage, the biological precursor to concertina wire. After a few minutes of fighting, I found a watercourse. If I bent down, I missed most of the branches. Rocks turned under my feet. I saw the scrapes and footprints that showed the dead man had reached the same conclusion I had.

But what did the poor bastard think he was doing? There wasn’t anywhere for him to go anymore. From what I’d seen, despite his desperate need to hold on to his body, he hadn’t taken very good care of it. Pushing uphill would strain him. I figured he’d be hitting a wall in fifteen minutes or so.

The watercourse grew steeper. This was probably close to a waterfall when it rained. Tree roots criss-crossed above me. Their sharp ends jabbed down at me as I grabbed them. I had to lean way back and feel up with my fingers past where I could see. They were wet and slippery.

I finally found one that was rougher and drier than the others and hauled myself up. It sagged under my weight. I got my elbow into a stable crook and looked up—to find myself staring at the muddy tread of a sneaker. The dead man put his foot in the middle of my chest and, not hurrying at all, pushed.

I lost my grip on the wet roots and fell backward. I bounced, hard, and rolled. Each rock took a punch at me on the way down. I finally came to a stop, face in the mud. A thrashing from above, then silence.

I checked the gear first, then my body. Both looked like they could still do the job. I started up again, moving more carefully this time.

Above the waterfall, the forest opened out. I couldn’t see where he had gone. It might have been up the steeper ridge face to my left, or up the open valley to where the ridge hairpinned around, forming a high valley.

Someone cleared his throat. I looked up. A guy with a gun stood on a rock

outcropping.

“God, you make more noise than a crashing space station.” It was the hunter from the diner, the one who’d left the origami swan for the waitress. He still wore his fluorescent orange cap. “I’ve got to get you the hell off these slopes. Want a beer?”

* * * *

Suburban Phoenix, Arizona

“That was after we sent up that Wilson woman.” Barnaby shuffled around his house in one worn slipper and one new one with a price tag still dangling from its heel. I followed. Slowly. We went around—kitchen, dining room, living room, entry, kitchen again—twice. “Wanted to send her dog up too. Had the cash, but ... just what the universe needs, an immortalized little yapper in permanent psychosis because there aren’t any silicon butts to sniff...”

His voice was much lighter than I remembered, and he had a tremor in his hands.

“Barnaby—”

He glared at me. “You want to go up, eh? Want to get scooped out from behind that pretty mug and sent right upstairs to transparent life eternal? Well, you better have some cash, that’s all I can say.”

“Do you always ask for cash up front?”

“Do I look like an eleemosynary institution?” That was a favored phrase, appearing in his speech now like a fossil. He chuckled, then coughed rattlingly. “Damn! It’s all fluids, you know, at my age. They collect everywhere.” A coughing fit. It was a few minutes before he could draw breath. “Like a head of lettuce forgotten at the back of the crisper ... shuck that bod, sonny. Now, if you can. Or you’ll get what’s left all over your hands.”

“Oh, Barnaby.” Not much of his mind was left. I was surprised by how much that disturbed me.

“Don’t worry about Barnaby.” Only his crankiness was left. “Barnaby’s fine.”

“Do you know who I am?”

“Nah.... “He sounded dubious. “All you clients ... think I can tell you apart? Or remember a damn thing about any of you? You go, and all’s I got left are the smelly carcasses. You ever think of that? Nah, of course not. It’s just dirty underwear to you. You don’t even toss it in the hamper ... you want a drink?”

I sighed. “Sure.”

“You still favor Maker’s Mark?” I gave him a quick glance, but he still looked like a senile oldster. A chance collision of neurons? Or was he making fun of me? “I can’t taste a damn thing anymore, myself, but I can still get drunk. Just let me find my glasses here so I can figure out where it is....” He fumbled on the front of his stained terrycloth bathrobe, where at least three pairs of glasses dangled on cords. “Race between sense and the senses to see who gets out the door first.”

“I’m looking for somebody, Barnaby.”

“So’m I.” He looked bleak. “Me. Seems I sent most of me along, went into the station to get some smokes, and missed the bus.”

“It’s somebody you sent up, about a year ago.”

“Don’t talk about who I sent up. That’s gone.”

“I need to know, Barnaby.”

My voice had gotten a little sharper than I intended. His eyes, blue-yolked eggs behind his glasses, glowered at me. “We all got needs. Yours, I think, is some smooth-sipping bourbon.”

We had made it back into the kitchen. Barnaby squatted down and opened a cabinet by the sink. He yanked out a tangle of plastic shopping bags, a half-full box of Cocoa Puffs, a couple of cans of franks and beans, and a loaf of soft bread whose side had been attacked by mice. He prodded the gnawed hole intently with a bent finger. After a few minutes’ thought, he pulled open a drawer, dug through a mess of sockets, extension cords, junction boxes, and light bulbs, and pulled out a roll of transparent packing tape.

“Could you peel this off for me? My fingers....”

I helped him do it. He pulled off a length, taped up the hole in the bag, and put it on the counter. Then he squatted down again, reached way into the cabinet, and pulled out a bottle of Maker’s Mark, red, fake sealing wax dripping down its neck. The bottle had never been opened.

“I have to say, Barnaby, I’m impressed.” I twisted the bottle open and poured two dusty glasses. “He couldn’t have paid you. You couldn’t have made any deal. You were just driving around, finishing up dinner, listening to something on the radio, and came across a spun-out car. You took a dying man, sent him up, just like that. Angel of mercy.”

Barnaby sat, scowling, at the kitchen table, as if waiting for a waiter to show up with his soup.

“But he lived. Who expected that? So you ginned up some kind of identity for him. I know how you work, Barnaby. Believe me, I do. I just need to find him. That’s all.”

“I’ve had accidents in my day. I remember once, I was driving in the rain ... *driving* rain, I guess you’d call it, when this guy on a motorcycle, with a *sidecar* if you can believe, came barreling toward me going the wrong way—hey!”

I grabbed him and pulled him out of his seat. He was surprisingly heavy and fleshy, not the bag of bones I had expected. “Barnaby, this is serious! I need to find him.”

“You always were a miserable shit,” Barnaby said. “I took you in, showed you the ropes, kept you *alive* ... I didn’t have to, you know that? I didn’t have to.”

He stopped talking then, because he couldn’t breathe. His glasses had fallen back to his chest. His white hair stood straight up. His eyes looked past me, like I wasn’t even there, like I wasn’t choking the life out of him.

I let him drop back into his chair. My mother hadn’t wanted me to come here. She’d been worried that I’d ... what? Tie Barnaby down and torture him for the information? Kill him?

Parents have such strange ideas about their kids sometimes.

I pulled open the front door and almost fell over the two dead plants in flowerpots that stood on the front step. I’d forgotten that a suburban front door is purely symbolic, and that I had actually entered through the garage.

“Wait, wait, wait.” He shuffled after me. “Ian....”

I turned and waited.

“Ian. I didn’t mean ... it’s good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you too, Barnaby.”

He put his hand on my upper arm and looked at me. Was he remembering the first time he had really looked into my face, while I lay screaming on a lawn in the night?

Probably not. He was probably, again, trying to remember who I was.

“You need it?” he said.

“I wouldn’t have come here to bug you otherwise.”

“You’re not bugging me,” he murmured, then took a deep breath. “You know what? All my career, I’ve gotten rid of bodies. They were nothing. Leftovers. And I’m not leaving this one. I’m not going up. Too much of me’s gone already, for one thing. I waited too long. I wouldn’t want to live forever with only this much personality left. But it’s more than that. This sack o’ crap is me. It doesn’t just hang off my brain like a string of snot. It’s *me*.”

“Got it.”

“I gave him good cover: Dennis Nadel. Don Don to his friends.”

“Don Don?”

“Part of my excellent service. Good kind of nickname, fossil of a stupid joke someone once made in high school after a visit to a tiki-headed Chinese restaurant. One of those things that sticks, like falling down and chipping your tooth because you were fooling around while lining up to go into school, or the way you learn to pronounce a word wrong by reading it and never quite get it right. Like you.” He’d even stopped shaking. “Ian: my little accidental, defining detail.”

“Mom says ‘hi,’ by the way.”

“Sure she does.”

“Why’d you do it?” I asked.

“You mean, keep that guy alive?” He shrugged, a movement that shook a lot of bones. “I was a little loopy. Well, okay, five beers and a whiskey sour drunk. Saw it happen, right in front of me. Guy wasn’t paying attention to anything, just went smoothly off the road, never even slowed down. Bam! Little crunch, I heard it. I almost drove right on by, it was just like nothing had happened at all. At the last second, I stopped. I had all my gear, I was pumped, I just went to work, not even thinking what I was doing. I mean, Ian, I’ve been doing this a long, long time.”

“I know,” I said. “I know just how long.”

He didn’t pay attention to me. “I was just kind of showing off, I guess. Not to anyone. Oh, God, maybe, our ultimate upload. I don’t know. I mean, it’s what I do. What I was good at. That’s all.”

“But he wasn’t dead.”

“See how smart you’ve become? And you were so unpromising, at the start.... Yeah, he wasn’t dead. And he wasn’t about to die. Not by a long shot. I was fooled by all that blood. Showing my lack of decent medical education. So he was a complete, ugly mess, but not at all dead.” Barnaby swallowed. “He started in begging me. He knew what was going on. He knew I’d be hitting the ‘destructive read’ portion of the evening’s festivities pretty soon. And you know what? Like anyone else, he saw no reason he had to die in order to live forever. Had kinds of issues. He ripped off the wires, was about to pull the skull plug out ... I stopped him. Talked him down. Then I took him to an ER, hundreds of miles away, in Des Moines, where someone owed me a favor. And he was still alive when I got there. Not ab-machine spokesmodel healthy, but still pumping the blood around.”

“So you cleaned his identity and set him free. Barnaby, buddy, you’ve got to stop doing stuff like that. It screws things up for the rest of us.”

“Well, you know what? You’ll get your wish. I’m not doing any of that shit anymore. And if you’re smart, Ian, you’ll do the same thing. Give it up.”

He seemed to be having some trouble breathing. I grabbed him under the arms and hauled him into the living room. Every horizontal surface was covered with crap. I knocked a stack of books and magazines onto the floor with my foot and plopped him down on the couch.

“I can’t give it up,” I told him. “It’s all I’ve ever been able to do.”

He waved a hand at me, but didn’t say anything.

“You want something, Barnaby? Glass of water?”

He shook his head.

I poured one anyway, and put it on the coffee table in front of him. “I’ll say ‘hi’ to Don Don for you.”

* * * *

Near Bellefonte, Pennsylvania

The hunter had popped up an insulated shelter. Inside he had a few display screens, a quartz heater, a sling chair, and a portable refrigerator. The screens held topo displays, overlaid with ghostly IR indications.

He pulled two bottles out of the fridge. “Hunting’s thirsty work. Puts you right in contact with the primal, right? What makes us human.”

“Right,” I said.

“What you after, if you don’t mind my asking? Not a good time to be wandering around.”

So everyone kept telling me. “My buddy’s the experienced hunter. I wanted to see what it was all about, and he agreed to bring me along. But I stopped to look at something, and he kept moving. He lost me.”

“I think I saw him. Moving fast, upslope. Nothing up there, you know. Maybe he’s not as good at it as you think. But let’s take a look....”

I sipped my beer and watched him hunt. The screens tracked up and down the hill, showing up hot spots.

“There’s a couple of guys up here, other side of the ridgeline. You can see their breath puff out. Suppose they’re laughing about something?” He peered at the screen, as if suspecting the joke was on him. “Been lying back there since before dawn. Canny. But, look at this.” He scanned further up. “They’re sitting there, patient boys, and there’s a deer lying up in this thicket right over here, not a few hundred yards away. See him?” A rough oblong of heat, somewhat larger than a person, lay motionless. “I’ll find your buddy, but first ... let’s show those two jokesters a thing or two.” He picked up something that looked like a videogame controller. Crosshairs appeared on the screen, the intersection resting on the front third of the covert deer. “Come on.”

He grabbed the gun and a tripod, and we stepped back outside. After the warm air of the insulated shelter, the wind cut. He set the tripod down on stable rock. The legs automatically leveled. The hunter looked down at LEDs on his controller. “Gotta do windage. Next model up would do that automatically—it’s got Doppler radar, the works. But yours truly wanted to save some green...” He tapped keys. Silently, the gun rotated on its mount. The tripod rose up, and the barrel declined slightly. Its muzzle zeroed in on a prey neither of us could see, then stopped, waiting for the final command.

“We’re at the limit of range, so I’m using a high-penetration shell. Gotta be careful with something like that. You could punch through a car a mile away, if you’re not careful.”

But he wasn’t even bothering to look off across the creased ridges to where the deer lay, awaiting a day’s end that it would never see. Instead, he stared back down the valley, toward the diner and its pickup-filled parking lot. The waitress was just visible out behind, hauling heavy trash barrels, shouldering them, and pouring their contents into the Dumpster. Even at this distance, you could see her bony grace.

“Someday, maybe, they’ll invent something for hunting that.” And, for a

moment, he looked tired and sad. “And we can completely screw that up too.”

Then, still looking at the diner, he thumbed the controller’s red button. The gun snapped, a surprisingly discreet sound. No smoke. It was almost as if nothing at all had happened.

“Let’s see how we did,” he said.

Inside, on the screen, the cross hairs blinked red. The deer had not moved. The hunter brought up exact temperature data. For a second, it showed nothing. Then the tenths of a degree column started coming down, bit by bit.

The hunter released a breath. “Got the bastard.” Then he chuckled. “And those two great white hunters are still hiding back there, waiting. Morons!”

More puffs of bright air from the other hunters. He scowled, refusing to be mocked. “Now, let’s find that buddy of yours.”

* * * *

Marietta, Georgia

Later, I realized that they must have already been at work for quite a while when one of them knocked a bowl onto the floor and woke me up.

Blankets were piled up on me, and a ski jacket’s sleeves were tangled around my neck. I must have gotten up to throw that on, though I couldn’t remember doing it. Mom always kept the air conditioning cranked. The orange face of my always-buzzing alarm clock told me it was a little before three AM. I shivered in my cotton PJs. Summer PJs, though it was never summer inside our house. While I thought about that, I hung the ski jacket back up in the closet. It would have bugged Mom to see it. She had a thing about the seasons being in their right place.

If only it wasn’t so cold.

Voices muttered. She’d fallen asleep with the TV on again. Sooner or later a jagged laugh track on an old sitcom would wake her up. I walked quietly across the thick carpeting. She was sick. She needed her sleep. But I didn’t like looking at her in the blue light of the TV. It made her look dead.

But there wasn’t anyone in the bedroom, and the TV was off. The blankets and sheets were thrown around on the big bed she’d once shared with my dad. It was her being sick that made him leave. She made crazy choices, he said. He couldn’t live with them. He stopped in the driveway the day he left and asked me to please take care of my mother and make sure nothing bad happened to her.

Hell of a thing to ask a kid whose mother is dying of liver cancer. He didn't get a chance to give me any follow-up instructions, because he died of a heart attack at work a month or so later.

The voices came from downstairs. She didn't usually fall asleep in the living room, but she'd been getting weaker. I went to the bathroom and got her pills out of the medicine cabinet, so she'd have them by her side when she woke up. Waking up was like getting ripped open, I'd heard her tell someone once, when she thought I wasn't listening.

The living room was dark. No TV here either. Light came from the kitchen.

"Come on, come on," someone said under his breath.

"Just a second." The second voice was irritated. "It's a delicate—"

"Never mind, Barnaby. Just do it. We got a few millimeters leeway, don't we?"

"Exact is best."

"We'll lose her. Can't do much with blood pressure in the single digits. Hit the brainstem."

"I'm doing it."

I heard the chilling sound of drill hitting bone.

"Got it, got it. Good."

"Okay," Barnaby said. "Now lay off. What do you got?"

"We've got all the backups already spooled. Last one three weeks ago. That's more than 99 percent of the personality. I don't know why we have to come here for this...."

"Part of the deal, Jeff. We want it all."

"But it's all pain. Pain and suffering. Maybe she wouldn't want it, if she could tell us. Or we could feed her the straight events, without the pain."

"Is it really experience if it's stripped of pain?"

"Jesus, Barnaby," Jeff said. "Quit with the philosophy. This isn't a freshman dorm."

I crept through the dining room, up to the door. I could smell something sharp and sweet, a smell I only later recognized as barbequed baby back ribs, from the place down in town.

My mom lay on the kitchen table. She was naked. Her skin was all puffed out, her veins were thick, and she had marks all over her body. She'd never let me see her body, even before she got sick, and so I stared. Later I was ashamed, so ashamed I was sick, but at that moment I stared. Her large breasts stood straight up, even though her belly and sides and thighs sagged down. I was too young to know that was odd, but the way they stood made it impossible not to look at them.

Her head tilted away from me. For a second I thought she'd grown a ponytail. But she didn't have any hair. The chemo had taken care of it. A cable stuck out of the back of her head.

An alarm beeped. "Jeff! For someone who was so worried about her blood pressure...."

Jeff pulled something from behind his ear and jabbed it into my mother's chest with a powerful sweep of his forearm.

"Very graceful," Barnaby said. "You enjoy shredding cardiac muscle?"

"We only got to hold the body together for a few more minutes."

I must have made a noise, because Barnaby looked up and saw me.

"Who the hell are you?"

"What are you doing to my mother?" I screamed.

Jeff looked over his glasses at Barnaby. "You didn't check for the kid?"

"It wasn't in the records! Idiots...."

I ran. I tripped over the cables that criss-crossed the kitchen, yanked the back door, and plowed through the latched screen door. Night hit me, wet and hot. I ran barefoot across the wet grass.

Barnaby ran after me. I could hear his breath, and the slap of his feet on the ground. I dodged a grab, went around a hedge, and pounded past the garage. A minivan was parked in the driveway, cables snaking out of its open side door and a small antenna pointing up at the glowing sky. A few lights were on in the houses around, but no one was out, no one knew what was going on.

A hand clamped on to my arm. We both spun around and landed on the

grass, Barnaby on top. I rolled, kicked, screamed. No one heard me above their air conditioners.

“They didn’t tell us, kid, you gotta know that.” Barnaby had barbeque on his breath. “Or, maybe, *she* didn’t.”

“Who didn’t?”

“Um, your mother, I guess. She is your ... mother, right?”

“She’s dying. What—?”

“She’s going to live forever, kid. Forever. Think of that.”

Nothing made sense to me anymore. It didn’t even seem odd to be lying on my neighbor’s lawn with a pudgy, barbeque-sauce-scented guy pinning me, looking up at the couple of stars that were visible, and listening to someone’s dog barking, irregularly but unrelentingly, at nothing.

“She never told you?” His voice got eager. “She made the deal when she got sick. A certain prognosis ... look, it’s bad, okay? I won’t pretend it’s not bad. I mean, getting your liver chewed out of you like that ... but that doesn’t mean anything, right? Exactly nothing. Zippo. Squat...”

He might have churned out synonyms for “nothing” for quite some time if I hadn’t screamed, “You’re killing her!” and tried to punch him.

I *did* punch him. After everything, when I thought about how I had acted and what I had thought, that was the only thing I felt really good about. He *oofed*, and I felt the tension in his body. He was mad. I felt even better about that. He might have beaten the crap out of me right then and there, and it would have been fine. It would at least have been a decent explanation of why I hadn’t been able to save my mother.

“She *asked* us.” His voice was hot in my ear. “Found out about us, came to us. She was smart. Only way. Only way to escape. With what she’s got, she knew it was only a matter of time.”

“What—are—you—doing?” I asked between sobs. “What did she ask you?” One of the dots I had thought was a star turned out to be an airplane. It crawled across the glow and disappeared.

“To be scanned. To be uploaded. You see ... how can I say this...”

“You’re going to scan her personality, her mind, and transfer it to some other sort of hardware?” I said.

“Ah ... yeah, you could put it that way. Sure.”

“And she’s going to live forever.”

“That’s the general idea.” He released the pressure on me, watching me carefully the whole time, and slapped my shoulder in approval. “You’re a smart kid.”

“I read stuff,” I said. “Why do you have to be so sneaky?”

“Look, it’s not like the technology’s ... *mature*, or anything. I mean, most of that stuff’s something we kludged together. Theory’s good, don’t get me wrong. We got a brassboard, but a solid brassboard. We’re beta testing, say. But try to get FDA approval for *that*. Big pharma’s got them in its pocket ... don’t get me started. But, anyway...”

“What are you going to do?”

He looked away. “It’s a destructive read, okay? To get everything out, all the final memories, everything, means taking the synapses right apart—”

He was still holding me, but not as tightly, thinking I had relaxed, was ready to play along and let them do their job.

“Hey!”

But he was too late. I ripped myself from his arms and ran toward the house. “Mom! Mom!”

Jeff was coming out, dragging a wheeled cart loaded with heavy equipment. Sweat soaked his shirt. He looked at me as I ran past, but was too tired to register any reaction.

“Let him go,” Barnaby said, unnecessarily. “And let’s get the hell out of here.”

She lay dead on the table. The stink. Oh, God, the stink. That was all I could think about. Shit, piss, rot. It was a few minutes before I could come up to her.

Her head lay on one side. They’d left a gaping hole in the back of her neck. And there was no hair to pull to cover it. I finally pulled some paper towels from under the sink, wadded them up, and pushed them against it. The van started up in the driveway. I almost ran after it. When it was gone, I was alone.

I climbed up on the counter and opened the cabinet. The bag of potato chips was carefully crimped down, the chip clip a grinning mouth with white teeth. The

potato chips were stale. I had no idea how long they had been up there.

The phone rang. I sat down on the countertop and picked it up.

“Hello?”

A hiss of static, then a click. “Honey, what are you doing out of bed?” my mother asked.

* * * *

Near Bellefonte, Pennsylvania

“What are you going to do to me?” the dead man asked.

He lay on the ground, trussed, half-naked, and already covered with electrode paste. It hadn't been hard to catch him, once he'd popped up on the hunter's screen. I'd nailed him while he was sitting on a tree stump, head between his knees, gasping for breath.

He tried again. “Would you mind at least telling me who you are?”

I didn't want to talk to him. There was really no point to it. I pulled gear out and set it up. The sooner I was done, the better.

“Please....”

“Who hired me?” I yelled. “You poor son of a bitch. *You* did.”

“But I didn't...” He sucked a breath. “The ascended me? The me that interfering nutcase sent up before getting all pissy because I wasn't anywhere near being dead? Hah. That's not me. That's just the damn *movie version*.”

“That's not fair.” My client spoke out of nowhere. I hadn't contacted him, but clearly he had decided it was time for closer supervision.

The dead man was thunderstruck at hearing his own voice coming from the speaker. “Is that ... ah ... I mean...” He swallowed. “So what's it like up there?”

“Remember the day I ... you and Carol took that hike in the Adirondacks? It was misty, almost dark in the trees, and when you got to the top, after all your hard work, you still couldn't see anything because there were trees all around? Carol went ahead, then called to you. And just when you got out to the rock ledge that stuck out, giving a view across Blue Mountain Lake and out beyond, the breeze cleared the mist and the sun came out and it seemed like you could see every leaf on every tree, across the ranges?”

“Like that?” the dead man said.

“Just like that, all the time.”

“Sounds grand.” The dead man sighed. “And I haven’t even been able to get to Carol’s grave. Barnaby told me that would be the worst thing. That I’d get caught right away if I tried that.” He was shivering in the cold. He glared at me, blaming me for everything. “And see? I got caught anyway.”

“Set him up and let’s go.” My client was brisk. My hunter friend wasn’t the only one who didn’t like seeing his target when he shot at it.

I knew the dead man already had an access port in the back of his skull. They’d probably put a patch in, at the hospital, but that would be easy enough to get through.

The dead man struggled against his bonds, but if he’d been an actor in a play about a hostage, I wouldn’t have been convinced. “Something’s gone wrong. It’s been a year since he went up. Why now?”

I ignored him.

“He’s not just clearing up some loose ends! That’s what I’d tell you, if I had something to hide. I know what I do when I screw up. And he’s no different—”

“Find any interesting pieces of railway up here?”

I looked up. The waitress stood on the slope just above us. She was dressed for the walk, with light hikers, nylon pants, and a dark-red windbreaker cropped at the waist. She’d tied her hair back. I hadn’t heard her coming up. The wind whipping up the valley was too loud.

“This guy’s trying to kill me!” the dead man screamed.

“Not technically correct,” I said.

She reached behind her head and her hair billowed out in the wind. She hopped down the slope and tied her red hair ribbon loosely around the antenna. Before I could do anything, she stepped back, raised her arm over her head, and pointed down at the antenna with her wrist bent.

Another high-penetration shell from that damn computer-controlled hunting rifle ripped through the antenna with a smash of metal.

She looked at me. “He always watches me. Usually that’s really annoying. But

sometimes it comes in handy.”

“If you let it come in handy,” the dead man said, “you’ll never get rid of him.”

“There’s always some kind of trap to fall into.” Though she had saved him, she was expressionless as she stared down at the dead man. Her eyes examined him and the now-useless equipment. “I could see the one you were in. I almost let it go, but ... I had the afternoon off.” And then she smiled, a flash of sunlight through the trees, and then gone.

“I want to ask a favor,” the dead man said through clenched teeth.

“What?”

“When you paint this ... take off a few pounds.” He looked up at her. “Just a couple. You’ll still get the effect you want.”

“What makes you think I’m going to paint you?”

“I know.”

She shrugged. “Truth and mercy are not as incompatible as you think.” She pulled her windbreaker off and put it over him. She was lean and beautiful, flushed with cold air. I didn’t think that our friend the hunter was ever going to catch her. Or I hoped he wouldn’t, maybe. She set off again, moving faster now, jogging up the slope.

“Consciousness is an illusion,” my client’s voice said. It had lost all the fake features of larynx and throat, all sense of background and foreground, and was just a message.

“If consciousness is an illusion,” the dead man asked, “who, exactly, is being fooled?”

“Nothing dumber than playing word games with yourself,” my client said.

“Some people say that consciousness is nothing but word games.”

“I do know that consciousness is a kludge, an on-the-fly way of integrating a bunch of disparate processing systems that were evolved for different purposes at different times. We build a model of reality in our brains in order to deal with it, at a rate of maybe fifteen bits per second. And we call that model consciousness.”

“But you don’t need the model anymore,” the dead man guessed.
“Processing is infinitely faster, there are no archaic hardware modules, you don’t need any clumsy rules-of-thumb to recognize a face or make a deal with someone.”

“You got it. No need for consciousness up here.”

“Hmm. So ... you’re not conscious? You’re just faking it to keep us at our ease? That’s really thoughtful of you.”

“I am so conscious! But ... I keep it around, kind of like a folkloric dance troupe wearing the colorful native costumes of an extinct tribe.”

“I was always sentimental,” the dead man said, mostly to himself. “Kept all sorts of old crap around. Pissed Carol off no end.” He raised his voice. “If your consciousness vanishes, it’s just like dying, isn’t it?”

There was no hesitation. “Yes.”

“Jesus.” I finally had to break into the mono/dialogue. “You. You hired me because you wanted to reinhabit your body. Not pull its last bits of action potential out. You wanted to come back, before you disappeared altogether!”

My client didn’t say anything.

“Really.” The dead man was stubbornly unsurprised. “Don’t you remember why the hell I hit that bridge abutment in the first place? The road was bone dry—”

“He said there was a patch of ice.” I couldn’t resist breaking in.

“Well, I would say that, wouldn’t I? Being a spectacularly unsuccessful suicide.”

“Carol—” my client said.

“She’ll never know what a botch I made of it, will she? My one comfort. It’s pathetic. Well, I’ve learned my lesson. I’m never going to kill myself again.”

I turned away from them and pulled out my phone. The fall sun slanted steeply through the trees, making me feel that the entire world was tilting.

“Ma! I’m sorry about Barnaby. I know that you ... maybe I’ve never forgiven him. I don’t know.”

The nice lady from Social Services had made arrangements to bury my mother and find me a foster home, but I escaped the first night and tracked Barnaby down. In my mom’s desk I found all the paperwork for the upload. Barnaby hadn’t had the sense to grab it.

“Ma!”

It wasn't just static I heard now. There were fluting notes in it, and complicated patterns of sound. She wasn't dead, she wasn't gone. But there was no one left for me to talk to.

"You did a great job," I said. "I'll always appreciate it."

The thing children always wait too long to say. She'd raised me from the day she died. She'd always been with me, all through my years with Barnaby, and beyond. She'd helped me track him down, and guilted him into taking me in. She'd done the best she could to make up for not being able to stay alive.

I turned the phone off.

They were talking, the dead man and his ... soul? Quietly. I left my gear behind and started back down the hill.

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