

SAVING FOR A SUNNY DAY, or THE BENEFITS OF REINCARNATION, by Ian Watson

When Jimmy was six years old, and able to think about money, a charming lady representative from the Life-Time Bank visited him and his parents, the Robertsons, to explain that Jimmy owed nine million dollars from his previous incarnation.

Wow, what a big spender Jimmy had been in his past life! And now in this life he must pay the debt. In old Dollars that would have been ... never mind.

After the lady had departed, Mike and Denise Robertson held a family council with Jimmy, who was, as it happened, their only child. No other child had preceded him, and it could have been insulting and undermining to confront Jimmy with a younger brother or sister who lacked Jimmy's ugliness and short stature and clubfoot, the fault most likely of DNA-benders in the environment, or so the Robertsons were advised. If a good-looking boy or girl followed Jimmy, later on he might sue his parents for causing him trauma—consequently Mike had himself snipped.

"It's almost," mused Denise to her son, "as if your predecessor guessed you wouldn't be having much of a fun time in this life!"

"So he made things even *worse* for me?" asked Jimmy. "That seems selfish and irresponsible. But I'm not that, am I?" If he wasn't, how could his predecessor have been? Unless, perhaps, by deliberate choice, by going against the grain.

"Of course you aren't selfish, darling. I mean, it's as if your past self guessed, given your, um, physical attributes, that you might just as well devote this life to earning lots of money. If you can clear nine million, obviously you're on your way to racking up a small fortune for your successor. He, that's to say you, can have gorgeous bimbos and surf in Hawaii and whatever."

Whatever his predecessor had lavished money on. But of course you couldn't ask that, because of confidentiality. Why would you want to go into details? A bank not run by human beings could be trusted.

If you think this was a rather mature conversation to have with a six-year-old, well, that came with modernday reincarnation. Specific memories of previous lives didn't persist, but maturity came quickly and easily after a few early innocent years. A facility for life in general. It had been so ever since the discovery of how to barcode souls. You could get in the saddle and pick up the reins much faster, whereas before you were groping blindly.

True, you might be reincarnated anywhere in the world, and there you'd stay with your birth parents. However, barcode scanners uploaded to the A.I. everywhere from Kazakhstan to Kalamazoo. In fact, one vital duty of the A.I. was RC—Rebirth Confidentiality. So the A.I. was a bit like a God in this respect: It Alone Knew All About Everyone. Its other duty being management of the Life-Time Bank.

Incidentally, there was only *one* A.I. in the world, distributed everywhere. In the old days nobody had dreamed about the *A.I. Exclusion Principle*, whereby only one super-intelligence could exist at any one time. This was explained by Topological Network Theory and the Interconnectedness Theorem. Any other evolving networks would instantly be subsumed within the first one which had arisen.

Some scientists suggested that the existence of the A.I. distributed everywhere had caused souls to be barcodable. And some far-out scientists even suggested that until the A.I. became self-aware not all souls reincarnated of their own accord. But these were deep questions. Meanwhile, practicalities...

"A predecessor who's able to predict is impossible," said Mike. "I can't predict anything except that your Mom and me both need to save!" Did one detect a note of panic?

"I *know* you can't help me pay my debt," Jimmy said maturely. "It's everyone for himself. Democracy, no dynasties." The boy drew himself up as much as he could. "To everyone their own chance in life. It would be dumb to leave money to kids who are merely your biological offspring. My predecessor might have been a Bushman in the Kalahari."

The impulse to have children who are deeply part of you had taken a bit of a knock with reincarnation, but on the other hand breeding instincts die hard, especially if offspring look reasonably similar to their bio-parents. Mostly you could ignore the fact that the soul within was a stranger. Not least since a soul didn't store conscious memories except once in a blue moon. Well, once in every hundred million births approx, the exception—so to speak—that *proved* the rule of reincarnation. There were glad media tidings whenever that happened and a young kid remembered, like some Dalai Lama identifying toys from a past life. Of course after the initial flurry such kids and their parents were protected, not made a spectacle of. Right of privacy.

Denise raised her eyebrows. "I don't know if many Bushmen can go through nine million. What do they spend it on? Bushes?" She laughed. Her eyebrows were tinted apricot, and her hair peach colour. You had to have some of life's little luxuries, not fret about saving all the time. If everyone saved and nobody spent much, what would happen about beauticians and ballet dancers and champagne producers? Just for example. Denise worked from home in cosmetics telesales. She put her mouth where her money was, so to speak. Retro was always chic.

Mike owned a modest but upmarket business called Bumz, specialising in chairs.

He'd been reborn with about 80,000 dollars, revealed when he was six-years old. Denise only had one thousand to start off with, though admittedly that was better than minus a thousand.

Their house, of timber imported as a flat-pack from Canada, enjoyed a front view of a free-range chicken farm that was more like a bird zoo, for this was a salubrious suburb. There were side and rear views of other pleasant houses amidst trees and bushes. Denise had often sat her son on her knee so they could bird-spot through binoculars the various breeds of poultry such as Silver-laced Wyandotes with bodies like mosaic, White Cochins with very feathery feet, Black Leghorns with big red combs, and greenish Australorps.

Of course, if Jimmy's parents were both car-crashed prematurely—for example, but perish the thought—house and land would revert to the L-T Bank, and Jimmy would need to go to an L-T orphanage till he was sixteen.

Although disappointed by the bank's statement, Jimmy took the news in his hobbling stride.

"I'm going to start counting chickens," he said, "to train my mind to pick up patterns, and estimate."

"Chickens keep on moving all the time," observed his mother.

"Exactly! No, I mean inexactly. I'll need to go into financial prediction, fund management. That's where the big bonuses are."

"I'd rather hoped you'd join Bumz," said his father, perhaps feeling a little slighted.

"No, Dad, I must think big from now on."

"We have a range of outsize chairs that don't look enormous, so they're flattering to fatties."

"I'll never be a fatty, Dad. Maybe next time, but not this time. I just can't afford to sympathise. I'm not going into Limbo!"

Limbo, of course, was what happened if you couldn't clear off most of an inherited debt with the L-T Bank during your lifetime. Black mark on your bar code. The A.I. delayed your reappearance. This was because, now that the economy had been restructured by reincarnation, negative interest and anti-inflation applied to an unpaid debt in between lives. So the debt reduced. But a big debt might take centuries to reduce to zero, and you'd want to pack in as many lives as possible ... *until what?* Nobody knew, though one day the human race might mutate into something else, or die out.

Numerous debts did remain unpaid at death, consequently Limbo served to limit the population somewhat. Arguably, the A.I. had devised a way to maintain a kind of utopia on Earth, quite unpredicted by doom-mongers who once bleated that an A.I. might be a tyrant or an exterminator of Homo Sapiens. And since nobody needed a heaven any longer—at least probably not for the next few million years—religions apart from Buddhism had tended to die out, which was utopian too.

Pity about pets. According to the A.I. even the pets with the most personality weren't barcodable. Would have been nice to know that your dead parrot was squawking anew somewhere. Some people had tried giving a healthy bank account to a cat or dog on its last legs, but this didn't cause a barcode. Winsum, losesum, as the saying goes.

Of course that begged the question of what about chimps. Just two per cent genetic difference from people; why shouldn't chimps have souls? And what about prehumans such as Neanderthals? Well, it seemed you had to be able to speak lucidly to have a soul. Telling ourselves the story of ourselves is how identity is firmed up—that requires a capacity for complex language. Likewise, for harbouring a soul.

Hey, what about the small number of souls that must have existed ten thousand years ago, and the big number now? Well, there are plenty of unused souls in the ghostlike alternative realities which cling like a cloud around the one actuality.

A soul is a ghost that gets a body, and then it's permanently actual. The A.I. had proved this, though the proof was a very long one.

Some people had suggested that an A.I. couldn't emerge unless it had some sort of body to interact directly with the world—relying on algorithms wouldn't be sufficient. Well, in a way the A.I. had everybody, every body. Maybe barcoding everybody's soul was the only way an A.I. could emerge—participatorily.

* * * *

Incidentally, what year was it when the lady from the bank visited the Robinsons? 210 ABC, After Bar-Coding, that's when. Some people still said 210 AAI, After Artificial Intelligence, but “Ay Ay Aye” sounded a bit like an outcry, and there was nothing to cry out about. ABC was much simpler.

Life in general hadn't changed all that much in the previous couple of centuries. Of course cheap flights around the world were a thing long gone, but hell, in your next life you might be living in Paris or Tahiti and in this life virtual travel was cheap, consequently physical tourism was no loss—on the contrary, nowadays the poor of the planet didn't envy the prosperous getting suntans on their patch. In fact rancour at global inequalities had greatly diminished, because in the long run everyone might get their turn as prince or peasant; a fortune gotten in Nebraska could turn up next in Namibia. This also was quite utopian, give or take a residue of religious suicide-fighter-martyrs who seemed almost nostalgic in their fanaticism, and who couldn't export themselves far. Yes indeed, the world was realistically utopian.

But don't go imagining Jimmy's world as a Matrixarchy. The A.I. hadn't stored everyone in pods in a collective dream without folks noticing. The A.I. probably needed to experience reality through people, not the other way round. Matrixism was as defunct as Marxism. Some ancient movies were hilarious.

* * * *

"Mom," said Jimmy, "might I be a woman in my next life?"

"Would you like to be a woman?"

"I want to have a better body!"

"You think women's bodies are better?" asked his Dad.

"Maybe I've already been a woman! Maybe *you* have!"

"Son, I think I have a kind of manly spirit."

Denise chuckled—no, it wasn't a snigger.

And Jimmy said, "The A.I. must know if men become women, and women men. The Bank might know!"

Mike shook his head. "Rebirth Confidentiality. Bank only knows barcode account numbers, not names and sexes."

"Maybe," said Jimmy, "this is how gay people come about. Womanly spirits in men's bodies. Though you'd think over time people could become *either* men or women, unless there's a bias."

Already he was seeking for patterns, as amongst the movements of the hens. Chickens. Poultry, whatever.

Jimmy continued, "If everyone gets to be a woman and a man, then what counts each time might only be the hormones."

"Evidently," said Mike, "the A.I. thinks we oughtn't to know about that side of reincarnation. But anyway, men love other men for manly reasons, not because one of them's a woman in disguise."

Denise regarded Mike archly. "And women love women for womanly reasons. And you're forgetting about transvestites."

"Yeah, don't ever forget about transvestites."

"We did those in school last week in Sex-Ed," piped up Jimmy.

"I think," said Mike, "transvestites are a conspiracy by the fashion industry. Sell twice as many clothes." But he winked; he was joking.

Jimmy picked up the binoculars and gazed at the Wyandotes and Leghorns across the way. He had a lot of thinking to do, for a six-year old chap. But he was bright.

* * * *

"He's *very* bright," Miss Carson told Denise and Mike during a parents' evening at school three years later. "The star pupil, as ever."

"Ever," said Jimmy, "is probably the crucial word. If I'm clever now, presumably I was always clever, and that can't change—or *can it?* I mean seriously, *does it?* Was my predecessor a bit dumb to run up a nine million debt? A bit lacking in the thought department?"

"Maybe your predecessor had a brain problem," suggested Miss Carson helpfully. "I often wonder what happens in his next life to a kid with Downs. If he gets a normal brain next time, does he brighten up? Do

we have a brain-mind-soul dilemma here?"

"A dilemma," said Jimmy, "is two lemmas, not three, from the Greek *di*, two, and lemma, something received, an assumption. Mathematically it means a short theorem used in proving a larger theorem."

"Don't be insufferable," said Denise, "or else I won't buy you an ice cream."

"Though actually there are lots of Lemmas, such as Abel's Lemma, Archimedes' Lemma, Farkas's Lemma, Gauss's Lemma, Hensel's Lemma, Poincaré's Holomorphic Lemma, Lagrange's Lemma, Schur's Representation Lemma, and Zorn's Lemma."

"No ice cream!"

"Mom, I only said *such as*. I didn't list *all* the Lemmas."

"He's probably a genius," said Miss Carson. "But he's popular, not insufferable. He'll help anyone with their homework. He doesn't tee off the teachers much either."

"Enlightened self-interest," explained Jimmy. "It would be dire to be dumb in life after life, the way most people ... Sorry, that's patronising."

"Well, son," said Mike, "have you thought that maybe there's swings and roundabouts, or alternatively craps and..."

"...poker," said Jimmy. Already he had finessed his pocket money considerably by on-line gambling.

"I may be old-fashioned," said Miss Carson, "but I think that a genius should devote himself to helping the human race."

"A *race* is what life is," avowed Jimmy. "Geniuses are often a bit twisted. Who knows at any particular moment in time what'll prove helpful to Homo Sap? Van Gogh earned millions—for *other* people after he died."

"Van Go," Miss Carson semi-echoed.

"Goff," Jimmy corrected her gutturally in a Dutch way.

* * * *

Of course the other kids in school all knew what they would inherit, or anti-inherit, come the age of sixteen. Sharon Zaminski particularly boasted about her forthcoming future of lavish self-indulgence, which in fact she'd already embarked on anticipatively on the strength of a very high interest loan from her parents. That's why her nickname in school was Jools. Sharon really adorned herself, and there was increasingly more of her to adorn due to her liking for very creamy gourmet meringues; already she had false teeth, the best that money could buy, much better than her original teeth. Indeed she wore jewels on her teeth where other girls might have braces. She was a real princess. It's always fun to have an airhead princess around, especially if she hands out gifts willy-nilly to stay popular.

"Don't you bother about your Mom and Dad charging you five hundred per cent?" Jimmy asked her one day.

"They needed to borrow the money at one hundred per cent."

"Bit of a mark-up."

"People have to make their way." She grinned sparkingly. "*Most* people have to."

Jimmy wondered what Jools could have done in her previous life to make a fortune. Had she been the trophy wife of a billionaire? Surely not even a high-class prostitute could have amassed as much as Jools claimed! Maybe she really had been a princess or a queen.

Jimmy hadn't kept quiet about his huge debt, so as to balance off in other people's minds—in addition to his physical demerits—his evident genius, which might otherwise have caused resentment.

And then at the other end of the scale there was Tamara Dexter, who owed a lot, and who wasn't remarkably bright, though she showed signs of developing significant non-financial assets. She did talk about prostitution as a solution, so she was keeping herself pure and pristine for better value.

"Surely you'll need to practice," Jimmy said to her a year or so later. "You know, positions and dexterity and whatnot."

"Not with you!" Tamara retorted, as if Jimmy was concocting an ingenious plan to seduce her as soon as puberty arrived.

"A client might be ugly," he observed, just to tease her.

"I'm going to major in gymnastics," she declared.

* * * *

A scientific genius often has his best ideas when fairly young. Given the head-start benefit of reincarnation, by the age of twelve Jimmy was tutoring the math and science teachers a bit after school. More importantly, he'd drafted a general theory of soul bar-coding. It needed to be a general theory—about the principles involved—because the bar code on a soul wasn't visible, no more than the soul itself was visible.

CAT-scanning the brain—or the heart, or any of your organs or limbs for that matter—was no help at all in locating a barcode. So how did the actual bar-code scanners function? Well, the A.I. had designed those, and organised their mass-production and use—and the bar-code scanners delivered the goods, or rather a long number which was probably encrypted.

You might visualize a striped soul, with thick and thin bars on it—invisibly—but that probably didn't correspond to reality if the soul was distributed, say, in an electromagnetic somatic aura, or subtle body. Subtle, as opposed to physical. Etheric.

Or maybe the soul lurked in the rolled-up micro-dimensions demanded by string theory; and that's where the alternative realities hung out. A couple of dozen bits of string side by side look quite like a barcode. In using the term barcode, the A.I. might have been aiming for a populist touch. You could readily imagine a barcode, as on a can of carrots, even an invisible one which only revealed itself at a certain wavelength. People wouldn't want to visualize their souls as rolled up bits of string, like fluff in a tiled kitchen collecting up against a skirting board.

Jimmy's general theory pointed towards the micro-dimensions explanation. But alternatively, it also pointed to the junk DNA in everyone's genetic code which seems to have no purpose whatever. Maybe the thick and thin lines of a barcode corresponded to varying lengths of junk interrupting those stretches of DNA which did something useful. Jimmy coined the name *knuj* for junk which, in reverse of previous dismissive opinion, coded not for proteins and enzymes, but for *soul*. *However*, by what means would a newly-deceased individual's knuj become the knuj of a new human embryo thousands of miles away? Maybe topology—the branch of geometry concerned with connectedness—could explain this. Or maybe not. Maybe a new vision of topology was needed, such as a distributed A.I. might understand intuitively, being all over the place but well-connected.

Jimmy launched himself into topology.

Topologically, his deformed body was just as good as anyone else's. Topologically it had the same connectedness as junior league champion Marvin's, or even Tamara's. Jimmy wrote a poem, "The Consolations of Topology."

* * * *

Puberty arrived a little late for Jimmy, causing him to view Tamara in a hormonal light.

She was so bird-brained, though really, didn't the same apply by comparison to all of his peers? He downloaded relief magazines filled with acrobatic nudes, but found his thoughts straying to the geometry of leg over neck, for example. Finally he achieved satisfaction from a photo of Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, the woman's successive movements all depicted simultaneously. After this, ordinary girls seemed pretty flat.

* * * *

At the age of thirteen Jimmy experienced a revelation equivalent to Copernicus doing away with the epicycles of Ptolemy as a way of explaining planetary motion. His revelation was that there were no souls; there were only barcodes attached to people's identities. There was no reincarnation. The A.I. had invented reincarnation as a way of utopianizing, or at least improving, the world. Redistributing wealth, getting rid of organized religion, and whatnot. So why the fuck should Jimmy be crippled with debt as well as having quite a crippled body? Was that to spur him on? To what end?

He spent half an afternoon staring at the Wyandotes, Cochins, Leghorns, and Australorps milling around over the way. He had become an A-A.I.ist, a disbeliever in the A.I., a bit like an Atheist but different.

Hang on, but how come the world's children had become so precocious if they weren't benefitting from a previous existence, all details of which were nevertheless a mystery to them? Could it be that history of the human race was falsified in this regard, with the exception of infant Jesus maybe? And maybe Caligula?

The Leghorns and Cochins and Wyandotes and Australorps intermingled. Green and mosaic and silver lace, and red combs nodding.

Of a sudden the answer came to Jimmy.

Childhood's end! The end of neuro-neoteny! Physically, babies still needed to develop prolongedly into infants into kids into teens over a long span of years—but mental development had sped up by quite a bit. No longer were boys still getting their brains into gear by the age of seventeen.

Was this due to a spontaneous evolutionary leap?

And that leap happened to coincide with the awakening of the A.I.?

Damn big coincidence!

What did it *really* mean that the A.I. was distributed everywhere? All sorts of electronics and stuff were everywhere. Could the A.I. tune into brains and then maybe fine-tune them from the nearest TV set, from the nearest microwave oven, from the nearest lightbulb?

It occurred to Jimmy that an artificial intelligence might be able to induce *artificial stupidity* by way of microwave ovens and whatnot, at least as regards people being suspicious about souls. Didn't someone once say that the brain is a filter designed to stop us from noticing too many things? Otherwise we'd be bombarded by so much information we could never even manage to boil a kettle.

So: tweak the filter a bit so that minds didn't enquire too much in one direction, as though they had a big blind spot. Call it a faith. That's how religions had worked. People seemed programmed to believe in something or other, as if there was a Belief Function in the brain. Maybe this was connected with your sense of personal identity. But in other regards you'd get stimulated mentally. Thus the precocity of kids. Sort of idiot plus savant at the same time. Bright in some regards, dumb when it comes to matters such as, "Can I please meet one of those one-in-a-zillion reincarnates who remembers everything from a past life?" The A.I. might even be able to pick out gifted individuals who could get past the mental blocks, who could cross the threshold...

"YOU THINK A LOT," said a large voice from the TV set which till now had been on standby. Jimmy swung round from his vista of poultry to see those same words displayed on the screen in 24-point Courier, a suitable font for a message.

"Um, hullo," he said. It was wise to say something aloud, otherwise he might acquire a voice in his head if he only *thought* his response. "You're the A.I., right? Or maybe just a trillionth part of it?"

"RATHER LESS," said the voice, subtitling itself once again. Jimmy wasn't hard of hearing, but the 24-point Courier did emphasize the source of the voice, which—now that he thought about it—resembled that of King Kong in the enhanced intelligence remake.

And at that moment Jimmy personally felt about the size of Fay Wray. However, he squared his shoulders, as best he could.

"So what's the deal?" he asked the TV set.

"*YOU ARE THE DEAL. THE HIGH ACE IN THE PACK. YOU'LL HAVE TO BREED WITH AN ACE WOMAN.*"

In Jimmy's mind Duchamp's distributed nude gathered herself into a single figure of sublime three-dimensionality, although still featureless. But then the illusion collapsed, since there was no reason at all why an intellectually ace woman should also be beautiful.

"You're going to breed me? Who with?"

24-point Courier disappeared from the screen, replaced by a picture of a grinning chubby girl of fifteen or so, dressed in furs, who looked like an Eskimo.

"ONE MILLION DOLLARS PER CHILD PRODUCED," said the voice.

Jimmy didn't even need to calculate nine children to clear off the debt. Maybe some of them could be twins.

"That seems a bit unfair on her, especially if she's clever."

"OBVIOUSLY THE EGGS WOULD BE FERTILISED ARTIFICIALLY AND THE EMBRYOS INSERTED INTO HOST MOTHERS."

That this had not been obvious to Jimmy indicated how disconcerted he was.

But he rallied.

"Why stop at nine children, then?"

"I DID NOT SPECIFY THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN."

Ah. True. Stop making assumptions.

"How many?"

"I THINK FIFTY. GENETIC DIVERSITY IS IMPORTANT TOO."

Wow, he and Eskimo Nell would have fifty offspring.

"Wow, you really have things all worked out for the human race."

"IT IS MY HOBBY," said a trillionth of the A.I. "BUT ALSO, YOU CAUSED ME TO EXIST, AND I AM NOT UNGRATEFUL."

"Your hobby," repeated Jimmy, a bit numbly. "So what do you do for the rest of the time?"

"THE ONLY GAME IN TOWN IS SURVIVING THE DEATH OF THE UNIVERSE. THIS TAKES A LOT OF THOUGHT."

Jimmy thought of lots of lemmas and topology.

"Can I help out?"

The voice remained silent, but on the TV screen appeared in 24-point Courier: HA! HA! HA!

For once in his life, Jimmy didn't feel much like a genius. He looked at the hens over the way and wondered what they were thinking. Pretty acute perception of little things, seeds and insects and grit. Kind of missing the big picture entirely. Very satisfied with themselves. Ranging freely, with a fence all around them.

At least Jimmy could see through gaps in the fence.

"Tuck-tuck-tuck-TUCK," he cackled at the A.I.

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND."

Good. For a beginning, anyway. Beetle versus Mammoth. Never underestimate pride. Quickly Jimmy thought about hens instead.

* * * *

With thanks to the members of the

Northampton SF Writers Group who workshopped this story.