

A KIDNAPPING

By Greg Egan

The office's elaborate software usually fielded my calls, but this one came through unannounced. The seven-metre wallscreen opposite my desk abruptly ceased displaying the work I'd been viewing — Kreyszig's dazzling abstract animation, *Spectral Density* — and the face of a nondescript young man appeared in its place.

I suspected at once that the face was a mask, a simulation. No single feature was implausible, or even unusual — limp brown hair, pale blue eyes, thin nose, square jaw — but the face as a whole was too symmetrical, too unblemished, too devoid of character to be real. In the background, a pattern of brightly coloured, faux-ceramic hexagonal tiles drifted across the wallpaper — desperately bland retro-geometricism, no doubt intended to make the face look natural in comparison. I made these judgements in an instant; stretching all the way to the gallery's ceiling, four times my height, the image was open to merciless scrutiny.

The 'young man' said, 'We have your wife/Transfer half a million dollars/Into this account/If you don't want her to/Suffer.' I couldn't help hearing it that way; the unnatural rhythm of the speech, the crisp enunciation of each word, made the whole thing sound like a terminally hip performance artist reading bad poetry. This piece is entitled, 'Ransom Demand'. As the mask spoke, a sixteen-digit account number flashed up across the bottom of the screen.

I said, 'Go screw yourself. This isn't funny.'

The mask vanished, and Loraine appeared. Her hair was dishevelled, her face was flushed, as if she'd just been in a struggle — but she wasn't distraught, or hysterical; she was grimly in control. I stared at the screen; the room seemed to sway, and I felt sweat break out on my arms and chest, impossible rivulets forming in seconds.

She said, 'David, listen: I'm all right, they haven't hurt me, but—'

Then the call cut off.

For a moment, I just sat there, dazed, drenched with sweat, too giddy to trust myself to move a muscle. Then I said to the office, 'Replay that call.' I expected a denial — No calls have been put through all day — but I was wrong. The whole thing began again.

'We have your wife . . .'

'Go screw yourself. . .'

'David, listen . . .'

I told the office, 'Call my home.' I don't know why I did that; I don't know what I believed, what I was hoping for. It was more a reflex action than anything else — like flailing out to grab something solid when you're falling, even if you know full well that it's far beyond your reach.

I sat and listened to the ringing tone. I thought: I'll cope with this, somehow. Loraine will be released, unharmed — it's just a matter of paying the money. Everything will happen, step by step; everything will unwind, inexorably — even if each second along the way seems like an unbreachable chasm.

After seven chimes, I felt like I'd been sitting at the desk, sleepless, for days: numb, tenuous, less than real.

Then Loraine answered the phone. I could see the studio behind her, all the familiar charcoal sketches on the wall. I opened my mouth to speak, but I couldn't make a sound.

Her expression changed from mild annoyance to alarm. She said, 'David? What's wrong? You look like you're having a heart attack.'

For several seconds, I couldn't answer her. On one level, I simply felt relieved — and already slightly foolish, for having been so easily taken in . . . but at the same time, I found myself holding my breath, bracing myself for another reversal. If the office phone system had been corrupted, how could I be sure that this call had reached home? Why should I trust the sight of Loraine, safe in her studio — when the image of her in the kidnappers' hands had been every bit as convincing? At any moment, the 'woman' on the screen would drop the charade, and begin reciting coolly: 'We have your wife . . .'

It didn't happen. So I pulled myself together and told the real Loraine what I'd seen.

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In retrospect, of course, it all seemed embarrassingly obvious. The contrast between the intentionally unnatural mask, and the meticulously plausible image that followed, was designed to keep me from questioning the evidence of my own eyes. This is what a simulation looks like (smartarsed expert spots it at once) ... so this (a thousand times more realistic) must be authentic. A crude trick, but it had worked — not for long, but long enough to shake me up.

But if the technique was transparent, the motive remained obscure. Some lunatic's idea of a joke? It seemed like a lot of trouble to go to, for no greater reward than the dubious thrill of making me sweat with fear for all of sixty seconds. As a genuine attempt at extortion, though . . . how could it ever have worked? Were they hoping that I'd transfer the money immediately — before the shock wore off, before it even occurred to me that the image of Loraine, however lifelike, proved nothing? If so, surely they would have kept me on the phone, threatening imminent danger, building up the pressure — leaving me with no time for doubts, and no opportunity to verify anything.

It didn't make sense either way.

I replayed the call for Loraine — but she didn't seem to take it very seriously.

'A crank caller with fancy technology is still just a crank caller. I remember my brother, when he was ten years old, phoning up random numbers on a dare, putting on a ludicrous high-pitched voice which was meant to sound like a woman . . . and telling whoever answered that he was about to be gang-raped. Needless to say, I thought it was totally sick — and extremely immature . . . I was eight — but his friends all sat around laughing their heads off. Thirty years later, this is the equivalent.'

'How can you say that? Ten-year-old boys do not own twenty-thousand-dollar video synthesisers—'

'No? Some might. But I'm sure there are plenty of forty-year-old men with the same sophisticated sense of humour.'

'Yeah: forty-year-old psychopaths who know exactly what you look like, where we live, where I work . . .'

We argued the point for almost twenty minutes, but we couldn't agree upon what the call meant, or what we should do about it. Lorraine was obviously growing impatient to get back to work, so, reluctantly, I let her go.

I was a wreck, though. I knew I'd get nothing done that afternoon, so I decided to close the gallery and head for home.

Before leaving, I phoned the police — against Lorraine's wishes, but as she'd said: 'You got the call, not me. If you really want to waste your time and theirs, I can't stop you.'

I was put through to a Detective Nicholson in the Communications Crime Division, and I showed him the recording. He was sympathetic, but he made it clear that there wasn't much he could do. A criminal act had been committed — and a ransom demand was a serious matter, however rapidly the hoax had been debunked — but identifying the perpetrator would be virtually impossible. Even if the account number quoted actually belonged to the caller, it carried the prefix of an Orbital bank, who'd certainly refuse to disclose the name of the owner. I could arrange to have the phone company attempt to trace any future calls — but if the signal was routed through an Orbital nation, as it most likely would be, the trail would stop there. An international agreement to veto exchanges of money and data with the satellites had been drafted a decade ago, but remained unratified; apparently, few countries could afford to forgo the advantages of being plugged into the quasi-legal Orbital economy.

Nicholson asked me for a list of prospective enemies, but I couldn't bring myself to name anyone. I'd had business disputes of various degrees of animosity over the years, mostly with disgruntled artists who'd taken their work elsewhere — but I couldn't honestly imagine any of the people involved wasting their energy on such a venomous — yet ultimately petty — act of revenge.

He had one final question. 'Has your wife ever been scanned?'

I laughed. 'Hardly. She loathes computers. Even if the cost came down a thousandfold, she'd be the last person in the world to have it done.'

'I see. Well, we appreciate your cooperation. If there are any further incidents, don't hesitate to get in touch.'

As he hung up, I belatedly wished I'd asked him: 'What if she had been scanned? Why would that be a factor? Have hackers started breaking into people's scan files?'

That was a disturbing notion . . . but even if it were true, it had no bearing on the hoax call. No such convenient, computerised description of Loraine existed, so however the hoaxers had reconstructed her appearance, they'd obtained their data by other means entirely.

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I drove home on manual override, breaking the speed limit — marginally — on five separate occasions, watching the fines add up on the dashboard display, until the car intoned, 'One more violation and your licence is suspended.'

I went straight from the garage to the studio. Loraine was there, of course. I stood in the doorway, watching her silently, as she fussed over a sketch. I couldn't make out the subject, but she was working in charcoal again. I often teased her about her anachronistic methods: 'Why do you glorify the faults of traditional materials? Artists in the past had no choice but to make a virtue out of necessity — but why keep up the pretence? If charcoal on paper, or oil paint on canvas, really is so wonderful, then describe whatever it is you find so sublime about them to some virtual art software — and then generate your own virtual materials which are twice as good.' All she'd ever say in reply was: 'This is what I do, this is what I like, this is what I'm used to. There's no harm in that, is there?'

I didn't want to disturb her, but I didn't want to walk away. If she noticed my presence, she gave no sign of it. I stood there and thought: I really do love you. And I really do admire you: the way you kept your head in the middle of—

I caught myself. The middle of what? Being thrust in front of a camera by her abductors? None of that had actually happened.

No . . . but I knew Loraine — and I knew that she wouldn't have fallen to pieces, she would have stayed in control. I could still admire her courage and her level-headedness — however bizarre the means by which I'd been reminded of those qualities.

I started to turn away, and she said, 'Stay if you like. I don't mind you watching.'

I took a few steps into the cluttered studio. After the stark, cavernous spaces of the gallery, it looked very homely. 'What are you working on?'

She stood aside from the easel. The sketch was almost completed. It showed a woman, clenched fist raised to her lips, staring straight at the onlooker. Her expression was one of uneasy fascination, as if she was gazing at something hypnotic, compelling — and deeply troubling.

I frowned. 'It's you, isn't it? A self-portrait?' It had taken me a while to spot the resemblance, and even then, I wasn't sure.

But Loraine said, 'Yes, it's me.'

'Am I allowed to ask what you're looking at?'

She shrugged. 'Hard to say. The work in progress? Maybe it's a portrait of the artist caught in the act of self-portraiture.'

'You should try working with a camera and a flatscreen. You could program the stylisation software to build up a composite image of yourself — while you watched the result, and reacted to it.'

She shook her head, amused. 'Why go to so much trouble? Why not just frame a mirror?'

'A mirror? People want to see the artist revealed; they don't want to see themselves.'

I wandered over and kissed her, but she barely responded. I said, tenderly, 'I'm glad you're safe.'

She laughed. 'So am I. And don't worry — I wouldn't let anyone kidnap me, now. I know you'd have a stroke before you had a chance to pay the ransom.'

I put a finger to her lips. 'It's not funny. I was terrified — don't you believe me? I didn't know what they might do. I thought they were going to torture you.'

'How? By voodoo?' She backed out of my embrace, then walked over to the workbench. The wall above was covered with her sketches — 'failures' which she kept on show for 'salutary reasons'.

She picked up a paperknife from the bench and made two diagonal slashes in one of the drawings — an old self-portrait, one I'd liked very much.

Then she turned to me and said, in mock amazement, 'That didn't hurt a bit.'

* * * *

I managed to keep myself from broaching the subject again until late in the evening. We were sitting in the living room, huddled together in front of the fireplace — ready for bed, but reluctant to move from this cosy spot (even though a few words to the house could have reproduced the very same hearthside warmth, anywhere at all).

'What worries me,' I said, 'is that someone must have followed you around with a camera — long enough to capture your face, your voice, your mannerisms . . .'

Loraine scowled. 'My what? This thing didn't even speak a whole sentence. And they need not have followed me anywhere — they probably just intercepted a phone call I made, and based it all on that. They pushed their

own call straight through your office defences, didn't they? They're probably just a bunch of bored hackers — and for all we know, they could live on the other side of the planet.'

'Maybe. But not one phone call — dozens. They must have gathered a lot of data, however they did it. I've talked to artists who do simulation portraits — ten or twenty seconds of action, based on hours of sittings — and they say it's still not easy to fool anyone who really knows the subject. OK, I should have been sceptical . . . but why wasn't I? Because it was so convincing. Because it was exactly how I would have imagined you—'

She shifted in my arms, irritably. 'It was nothing like me. It was melodramatic, computerised overacting — and they knew it, which is why they kept it so short.'

I shook my head. 'Nobody can judge an impersonation of themselves. You'll have to take my word for it. I know, it only lasted a few seconds — but I swear, they got it right.'

As the conversation dragged on into the early hours of the morning, Loraine stood her ground — and I had to concede that there was nothing much we could actually do to make our lives any safer, whether or not the caller harboured plans to inflict real physical harm. The house already had state-of-the-art security hardware, and Loraine and I both carried surgically implanted radio alarm beacons. Even I balked at the idea of hiring armed bodyguards.

I had to concede, too, that no serious aspiring kidnappers would have alerted us to their intentions with a hoax call.

Finally, wearily (as if it had to be settled, there and then, if we weren't to keep arguing until dawn), I caved in. Maybe I'd overreacted. Maybe I just resented having been fooled. Maybe the whole thing had been nothing but a prank, after all.

However sick. However technically accomplished. However apparently pointless.

* * * *

When we slumped into bed, Loraine fell asleep almost at once, but I lay awake for hours. The call itself finally stopped monopolising my thoughts — but as soon as I'd put it out of my mind, another set of concerns came floating up to take its place.

As I'd told the detective, Loraine had never been scanned. I had, though. High-resolution imaging techniques had been used to generate a detailed map of my body, down to the cellular level — a map which included, among other things, a description of every neuron in my brain, every synaptic connection. I had purchased a kind of immortality: whatever happened to me, the most recent snapshot of my body could always be resurrected as a Copy: an elaborate computer model, embedded in a virtual reality. A model which, at the very least, would act and think like me: it would share all my memories, my beliefs, my goals, my desires. Currently, such models ran slower than real time, their virtual environments were restrictive, and the

telepresence robots meant to enable interaction with the physical world were a clumsy joke . . . but all of the technology was rapidly improving.

My mother had already been resurrected in the supercomputer known as Coney Island. My father had died before the process had become available. Loraine's parents were both still alive — and unscanned.

I'd been scanned twice, the last time three years before. I was long overdue for an update — but that would have meant facing up to the realities of my posthumous future, all over again. Loraine had never condemned me for my choice, and the prospect of my virtual resurrection didn't seem to bother her at all — but she'd made it clear that she wouldn't be joining me.

The argument was so familiar that I could run through it all in my head, without even waking her.

LORAIN: I don't want to be imitated by a computer after I'm dead. What use would that be to me?

DAVID: Don't knock imitation — life consists of imitation. Every organ in your body is constantly being rebuilt in its own image. Every cell that divides is dying and replacing itself with imposters. Your body doesn't contain a single atom you were born with — so what gives you your identity? It's a pattern of information, not a physical thing. And if a computer started imitating your body — instead of your body imitating itself — the only real difference would be that the computer would make fewer mistakes.

LORAIN: If that's what you believe . . . fine. But it's not the way I see things. And I'm as frightened of death as anyone — but being scanned wouldn't make me feel any better. It wouldn't make me feel immortal; it wouldn't comfort me at all. So why should I do it? Give me one good reason.

And I never could bring myself to say (not even then, in the safety of my imaginings): Do it because I don't want to lose you. Do it for me.

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I spent the next morning dealing with the curator for a large insurance company, who was looking for a change of decor for a few hundred lobbies, elevators, and boardrooms, real and virtual. I had no trouble selling her some suitably dignified electronic wallpaper, by some suitably revered young talents.

Some starving artists put low-resolution roughs of their work into network galleries, hoping to strike a compromise between a version so crude as to be off-putting, and one so appealing as to make buying the real thing superfluous. Nobody will pay for art unseen — and in the network galleries, to see was to own.

Physical galleries — tightly run — remained the best solution. All my visitors were screened for microcameras and visual cortex taps; nobody left the building with anything more than an impression, without paying for it.

If it had been lawful, I would have demanded blood samples, and refused entry to anyone with a genetic predisposition to eidetic memory.

In the afternoon, as always, I viewed the work of aspiring exhibitors. I finished watching the Kreyszig piece which had been interrupted the day before, and then started sifting through a great heap of lesser submissions. The process of deciding what would or wouldn't be acceptable to my corporate clientele required no intellectual or emotional exertion; after two decades in the business, it had become a purely mechanical act — as uninvolved, most of the time, as standing at a conveyor belt sorting nuts from bolts. My aesthetic judgement hadn't been blunted — if anything, it had become more finely honed — but only the most exceptional work evoked anything more from me than a — highly astute, unfailingly accurate — assessment of marketability.

When the image of the 'kidnapper' broke through on to the screen again, I wasn't surprised; the instant it happened, I realised that I'd been waiting for it all afternoon. And although I grew tense in anticipation of the unpleasantness to follow, at the same time, the opportunity of discovering more about the caller's true motives was, undeniably, welcome. I couldn't be fooled again, so what did I have to fear? Knowing that Loraine was safe, I could watch with a sense of detachment, and try to extract some clue as to what was really going on.

The mask said, 'We have your wife/Transfer half a million dollars/Into this account/If you don't want her to/Suffer.'

The synthetic image of Loraine reappeared. I laughed uneasily. What did these people expect me to believe? I surveyed the picture coolly. What I could see of the dingy 'room' behind 'her' badly needed repainting — another laborious touch of 'realism' to contrast with the background for the other mask. This time, 'she' didn't seem to have been struggling — and there were no signs that 'she' had been physically ill-treated (it even looked like 'she' had had a chance to wash) — but there was an uncertainty in 'her' expression, a hint of subdued panic on 'her' face, which hadn't been there before.

Then she looked straight into the camera and said, 'David? They won't let me see you — but I know you're there. And I know you must be doing all you can to get me out of this — but please hurry. Please, pay them the money as soon as you can.'

My veneer of objectivity shattered. I knew it was just an elaborate piece of computer animation — but listening to it 'pleading' with me this way was almost as distressing as the call I'd thought was real. It looked like Loraine, it sounded like Loraine; every word and gesture rang true. I couldn't throw a switch inside my head and turn off all my responses to the sight of someone I loved, begging for her life.

I covered my face and shouted, 'You sick fuck — is this how you get off? Do you think I'm going to pay you to stop this? I'll just get the phone fixed so you can't break through — then you can go back to running interactive snuff movies, and fucking your own corpse.'

There was no reply, and when I looked at the screen again, the call was over.

I waited until I'd stopped shaking — mostly with anger — then I called Detective Nicolson, for what that was worth. I gave him a copy of the call for his files; he thanked me. I told myself, optimistically: with computer analysis of modus operandi, every piece of evidence helps; if the same caller goes on to do the same thing to other people, the information collected might eventually coalesce into some kind of incriminating profile. The psychopathic piece of shit might even get caught one day.

Then I phoned the company which had supplied the office software, and explained what had been going on — leaving out details of the subject matter of the nuisance calls.

Their troubleshooter asked me to authorise a diagnostic link; I did so. She vanished for a minute or two. I thought: it will be something simple, and easily fixed — some trivial mistake in the security set-up.

The woman came on-screen again, looking wary.

'The software all seems fine —there's no evidence of tampering. And no evidence of unauthorised access. How long since you changed the breakthrough password?'

'Ah. I haven't. I haven't changed anything since the system was installed.'

'So it's been the same for the last five years? That's not good practice.'

I nodded repentantly, but said, 'I don't see how anyone could have discovered it. Even if they tried a few thousand random words—'

'You would have been notified on the fourth wrong guess. And there's a voiceprint check. Passwords are usually stolen by eavesdropping.'

'Well, the only other person who knows it is my wife — and I don't think she's ever even used it.'

'There are two authorised voiceprints on file. Whose is the other one?'

'Mine. In case I had to call the office management system from home. I've never done that, though — so I doubt the password has been spoken out loud since the day we installed the software.'

'Well, there's a log of both breakthrough calls—'

'That's no help. I record all my calls, I've already given copies to the police.'

'No, I'm talking about something else. For security reasons, the initial part of the call — when the password is actually spoken — is stored separately, in encrypted form. If you want to view it, I'll tell you how — but you'll have to speak the password yourself, to authorise the decoding.'

She explained the procedure, then went off-line. She didn't look happy at all. Of course, she didn't know that the caller had been imitating Loraine; she probably thought I was about to 'discover' that the threatening calls

were coming from my wife.

She was wrong, of course —but so was I.

Five years is a long time to remember anything so trivial. I had to make three guesses before I got the password right.

I steeled myself for one more glimpse of the fake Loraine, but the screen remained dark — and the voice that said 'Benvenuto' was my own.

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When I arrived home, Loraine was still working, so I left her undisturbed. I went to my study and checked the terminal for mail. There was nothing new, but I scrolled back through the list of past items, until I came to the most recent video postcard from my mother, which had arrived about a month before. Because of the time-rate difference, talking face-to-face was arduous, so we kept in touch by sending each other these recorded monologues.

I told the terminal to replay it. There was something I half remembered at the end, something I wanted to hear again.

My mother had been slowly unageing her appearance ever since her resurrection in Coney Island; she now looked about thirty. She'd been working on her house, too — which had gradually mutated and expanded from a near-perfect model of her last real-world home, into a kind of eighteenth-century French mansion, all carved doors, Louis XV chairs, ornate wall hangings, and chandeliers.

She enquired dutifully about my health and Loraine's, the gallery, Loraine's drawings. She made a few acerbic comments on current political events — both inside and outside the Island. Her youthful appearance, her opulent surroundings, weren't acts of self-deception; she was not an old woman any more, she did not live in a four-room apartment. Pretending that she had no choice but to mimic her last few years of organic life would have been absurd. She knew exactly who and where she was — and she had every intention of making the best of it.

I'd planned to fast-forward through the small talk, but I didn't. I sat and listened to every word, transfixed by the image of this nonexistent woman's face, trying to make sense of my feelings for her, trying to untangle the roots of my empathy, my loyalty, my love . . . for this pattern of information copied from a body now long decayed.

Finally, she said, 'You keep asking me if I'm happy. If I'm ever lonely. If I've found someone.' She hesitated, then shook her head. 'I'm not lonely. You know your father died before this technology was perfected. And you know how much I loved him. Well, I still do; I still love him. He's not gone, any more than I am. He lives on in my memory — and that's enough. Here of all places, that's enough.'

The first time I'd heard these words, I'd thought she'd been speaking in uncharacteristic platitudes. Now, I thought I understood the barely intentional hint behind her reassurances, and a chill passed through me.

He lives on in my memory.

Here of all places, that's enough.

Of course they would have kept it quiet; the organic world wasn't ready to hear this — and Copies could afford to be patient.

That was why I hadn't yet heard from my mother's companion. He could wait however many decades it took for me to come to the Island 'in person' — and that's when he'd see me 'again'.

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As the serving trolley unloaded the evening meal on to the dining room table, Loraine asked, 'Any more high-tech heavy breathing today?'

I shook my head slowly, over-emphatically, feeling like an adulterer — or worse. Inside, I was drowning, but if anything showed, Loraine gave no sign that she'd noticed.

She said, 'Well, it's hardly the kind of trick you can play twice on the same victim, is it?'

'No.'

In bed, I stared out into the suffocating darkness, trying to decide what I was going to do . . . although the kidnappers no doubt knew the answer to that already — and they'd hardly have gone ahead with their plan if they hadn't believed I'd pay them, in the end.

Everything made sense now. Far too much sense. Loraine had no scan file — but they'd broken into mine. To what end? What use is a man's soul? Well, there's no need to guess, it will tell you. Extracting the office password would have been the least of it; they must have run my Copy through a few hundred virtual scenarios, and selected the one most likely to produce the largest return on their investment.

A few hundred resurrections, a few hundred different delusions of extortion, a few hundred deaths. I didn't care — the notion was far too bizarre, far too alien to move me — which was probably why there hadn't been a very different ransom demand: 'We have your Copy...'

And the fake Loraine — not even a Copy of the real woman, but a construct based entirely on my knowledge of her, my memories, my mental images — what empathy, what loyalty, what love did I owe her?

The kidnappers might not have fully reproduced the memory-resurrection technique invented in the Island. I didn't know what they'd actually created, what — if anything — they'd 'brought to life'. How elaborate was the computer model behind 'her' words, 'her' facial expressions, 'her' gestures? Was it complex enough to experience the emotions it was portraying — like a Copy? Or was it merely complex enough to sway my emotions — complex enough to manipulate me, without feeling a thing?

How could I know, one way or the other — how could I ever tell? I took the 'humanity' of my mother for granted — and perhaps she in turn did the

same for my resurrected unscanned father, plucked from her virtual brain — but what would it take to convince me that this pattern of information was someone I should care about, someone who desperately needed my help?

I lay in the dark, beside the flesh-and-blood Loraine, and tried to imagine what the computer simulation of my mental image of her would be saying in a month's time.

IMITATION LORAINÉ: David? They tell me you're there, they tell me you can hear me. If that's true ... I don't understand. Why haven't you paid them? Is something wrong? Are the police telling you not to pay? (Silence.) I'm all right, I'm hanging on — but I don't understand what's happening. (Long silence.) They're not treating me too badly. I'm sick of the food, but I'll live. They've given me some paper to draw on, and I've done a few sketches . . .

Even if I was never convinced, even if I was never certain, I'd always be wondering: What if I'm wrong? What if she's conscious after all? What if she's every bit as human as I'll be when I'm resurrected — and I've betrayed her, abandoned her?

I couldn't live with that. The possibility, and the appearance, would be enough to tear me apart.

And they knew it.

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My financial management software laboured all night to free the money from investments. At nine o'clock the next morning, I transferred half a million dollars into the specified account, and then sat in my office waiting to see what would happen. I considered changing the breakthrough password back to the old 'Benvenuto' — but then decided that if they really had my scan file at their disposal, they'd have no trouble deducing my new choice.

At ten past nine, the kidnapper's mask appeared on the giant screen — and said bluntly, without poetic pretensions, 'The same again, in two years' time.'

I nodded. 'Yes.' I could raise it by then, without Loraine knowing. Just.

'So long as you keep paying, we'll keep her frozen. No time, no experience — no distress.'

'Thank you.' I hesitated, then forced myself to speak. 'But in the end, when I'm—'

'What?'

'When I'm resurrected . . . you'll let her join me?'

The mask smiled magnanimously. 'Of course.'

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I don't know how I'll begin to explain everything to the imitation Loraine — or what she'll do when she learns her true nature. Resurrection in the Island may be her idea of Hell — but what choice did I have? Leaving her to rot, for as long as the kidnappers believed her suffering might still move me? Or buying her freedom — and then never running her again?

When we're together in the Island, she can come to her own conclusions, make her own decisions. For now, all I can do is gaze up at the sky and hope that she really is safe in her unthinking stasis.

For now, I have a life to live with the flesh-and-blood Loraine. I have to tell her the truth, of course — and I run through the whole conversation, beside her in the dark, night after night.

DAVID: How could I not care about her? How could I let her suffer? How could I abandon someone who was — literally — built out of all my reasons for loving you?

LORAININE: An imitation of an imitation? There was no one suffering, no one waiting to be saved. No one to be rescued, or abandoned.

DAVID: Am I no one? Are you no one? Because that's all we can ever have of each other: an imitation, a Copy. All we can ever know about are the portraits of each other inside our own skulls.

LORAININE: Is that all you think I am? An idea in your head?

DAVID: No! But if it's all I have, then it's all I can honestly love. Don't you see that?

And, miraculously, she does. She finally understands.

Night after night.

I close my eyes and fall asleep, relieved.