

THE SAFE-DEPOSIT BOX

By Greg Egan

I dream a simple dream. I dream that I have a name. One name, unchanging, mine until death. I don't know what my name is, but that doesn't matter. Knowing that I have it is enough.

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I wake just before the alarm goes off (I usually do), so I'm able to reach out and silence it the instant it starts screeching. The woman beside me doesn't move; I hope the alarm wasn't meant for her too. It's freezing cold and pitch black, except for the bedside clock's red digits slowly coming into focus. Ten to four! I groan softly. What am I? A garbage collector? A milkman? This body is sore and tired, but that tells me nothing; they've all been sore and tired lately, whatever their profession, their income, their lifestyle. Yesterday I was a diamond merchant. Not quite a millionaire, but close. The day before I was a bricklayer, and the day before that I sold menswear. Crawling out of a warm bed felt pretty much the same each time.

I find my hand travelling instinctively to the switch for the reading light on my side of the bed. When I click it on, the woman stirs and mumbles, 'Johnny?' but her eyes remain closed. I make my first conscious effort to access this host's memories; sometimes I can pick up a frequently used name. Linda? Could be. Linda. I mouth it silently, looking at the tangle of soft brown hair almost hiding her sleeping face.

The situation, if not the individual, is comfortingly familiar. Man looks fondly upon sleeping wife. I whisper to her, 'I love you,' and I mean it; I love, not this particular woman, (with a past I'll barely glimpse, and a future that I have no way of sharing), but the composite woman of which, today, she is a part — my nickering, inconstant companion, my lover made up of a million pseudorandom words and gestures, held together only by the fact that I behold her, known in her entirety to no one but me.

In my romantic youth, I used to speculate: Surely I'm not the only one of my kind? Might there not be another like me, but who wakes each morning in the body of a woman? Might not whatever mysterious factors determine the selection of my host act in parallel on her, drawing us together, keeping us together day after day, transporting us, side by side, from host couple to host couple?

Not only is it unlikely, it simply isn't true. The last time (nearly twelve years ago now) that I cracked up and started spouting the unbelievable truth, my host's wife did not break in with shouts of relief and recognition, and her own, identical, confession. (She didn't do much at all, actually. I expected her to find my rantings frightening and traumatic, I expected her to conclude at once that I was dangerously insane. Instead, she listened briefly, apparently found what I was saying either boring or incomprehensible, and so, very sensibly, left me alone for the rest of the day.)

Not only is it untrue, it simply doesn't matter. Yes, my lover has a

thousand faces, and yes, a different soul looks out from every pair of eyes, but I can still find (or imagine) as many unifying patterns in my memories of her, as any other man or woman can find (or imagine) in their own perceptions of their own most faithful lifelong companion.

Man looks fondly upon sleeping wife.

I climb out from under the blankets and stand for a moment, shivering, looking around the room, eager to start moving to keep myself warm, but unable to decide what to do first. Then I spot a wallet on top of the chest of drawers.

I'm John Francis O'Leary, according to the driver's licence. Date of birth: 15 November, 1951 — which makes me one week older than when I went to bed. Although I still have occasional daydreams about waking up twenty years younger, that seems to be as unlikely for me as it is for anyone else; in thirty-nine years, so far as I know, I've yet to have a host born any time but November or December of 1951. Nor have I ever had a host either born, or presently living, outside this city.

I don't know how I move from one host to the next, but since any process could be expected to have some finite effective range, my geographical confinement is not surprising. There's desert to the east, ocean to the west, and long stretches of barren coast to the north and south; the distances from town to town are simply too great for me to cross. In fact, I never even seem to get close to the outskirts of the city, and on reflection that's not surprising: if there are one hundred potential hosts to the west of me, and five to the east, then a jump to a randomly chosen host is not a jump in a random direction. The populous centre attracts me with a kind of statistical gravity.

As for the restrictions on host age and birthplace, I've never had a theory plausible enough to believe for more than a day or two. It was easy when I was twelve or thirteen, and could pretend I was some kind of alien prince, imprisoned in the bodies of Earthlings by a wicked rival for my cosmic inheritance; the bad guys must have put something in the city's water, late in 1951, which was drunk by expectant mothers, thus preparing their unborn children to be my unwitting jailers. These days I accept the likelihood that I'll simply never know the answer.

I am sure of one thing, though: both restrictions were essential to whatever approximation to sanity I now possess. Had I 'grown up' in bodies of completely random ages, or in hosts scattered worldwide, with a different language and culture to contend with every day, I doubt that I'd even exist — no personality could possibly emerge from such a cacophony of experiences. (Then again, an ordinary person might think the same of my own, relatively stable, origins.)

I don't recall being John O'Leary before, which is unusual. This city contains only six thousand men aged thirty-nine, and of those, roughly one thousand would have been born in November or December. Since thirty-nine years is more than fourteen thousand days, the odds by now are heavily against first-timers, and I've visited most hosts several times within memory.

In my own inexpert way, I've explored the statistics a little. Any given potential host should have, on average, one thousand days, or three years, between my visits. Yet the average time I should expect to pass without repeating any hosts myself is a mere forty days (the average to date is actually lower, twenty-seven days, presumably because some hosts are more susceptible than others). When I first worked this out it seemed paradoxical, but only because the averages don't tell the whole story; a fraction of all repeat visits occur within weeks rather than years, and of course it's these abnormally fast ones that determine the rate for me.

In a safe-deposit box (with a combination lock) in the centre of the city, I have records covering the past twenty-two years. Names, addresses, dates of birth, and dates of each visit since 1968, for over eight hundred hosts. One day soon, when I have a host who can spare the time, I really must rent a computer with a database package and shift all that crap on to disk; that would make statistical tests a thousand times easier. I don't expect astounding revelations; if I found some kind of bias or pattern in the data, well, so what? Would that tell me anything? Would that change anything? Still, it seems like a good thing to do.

Partly hidden under a pile of coins beside the wallet is — oh, bliss! — an ID badge, complete with photo. John O'Leary is an orderly at the Pearlman Psychiatric Institute. The photo shows part of a light blue uniform, and when I open his wardrobe there it is. I believe this body could do with a shower, though, so I postpone dressing.

The house is small and plainly furnished, but very clean and in good repair. I pass one room that is probably a child's bedroom, but the door is closed and I leave it that way, not wanting to risk waking anyone. In the living room, I look up the Pearlman Institute in the phone book, and then locate it in a street directory. I've already memorised my own address from the licence, and the Institute's not far away; I work out a route that shouldn't take more than twenty minutes, at this hour of the morning. I still don't know when my shift starts; surely not before five.

Standing in the bathroom, shaving, I stare for a moment into my new brown eyes, and I can't help noticing that John O'Leary is not bad looking at all. It's a thought that leads nowhere. For a long while now, thankfully, I've managed to accept my fluctuating appearance with relative tranquillity, though it hasn't always been that way. I had several neurotic patches, in my teens and early twenties, when my mood would swing violently between elation and depression, depending on how I felt about my latest body. Often, for weeks after departing an especially good-looking host (which of course I'd have delayed for as long as possible, by staying awake night after night), I'd fantasise obsessively about returning, preferably to stay. At least an ordinary, screwed-up adolescent knows he has no choice but to accept the body in which he was born. I had no such comfort.

I'm more inclined now to worry about my health, but that's every bit as futile as fretting over appearance. There's no point whatsoever in me exercising, or watching my diet, since any such gesture is effectively diluted one-thousandfold. 'My' weight, 'my' fitness, 'my' alcohol and tobacco consumption, can't be altered by my own personal initiative — they're public health statistics, requiring vastly expensive advertising campaigns to

budge them even slightly.

After showering, I comb my hair in imitation of the ID photo, hoping that it's not too out of date.

Linda opens her eyes and stretches as I walk, naked, back into the bedroom, and the sight of her gives me an erection at once. I haven't had sex for months; almost every host lately seems to have managed to screw himself senseless the night before I arrived, and to have subsequently lost interest for the following fortnight. Apparently, my luck has changed. Linda reaches out and grabs me.

'I'll be late for work,' I protest.

She turns and looks at the clock. 'That's crap. You don't start until six. If you eat breakfast here, instead of detouring to that greasy truck stop, you won't have to leave for an hour.'

Her fingernails are pleasantly sharp. I let her drag me towards the bed, then I lean over and whisper, 'You know, that's exactly what I wanted to hear.'

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My earliest memory is of my mother reverently holding a bawling infant towards me, saying, 'Look, Chris! This is your baby brother. This is Paul! Isn't he beautiful?' I couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. Siblings were like pets or toys; their number, their ages, their sexes, their names, all fluctuated as senselessly as the furniture or the wallpaper.

Parents were clearly superior; they changed appearance and behaviour, but at least their names stayed the same. I naturally assumed that when I grew up, my name would become 'Daddy', a suggestion that was usually greeted with laughter and amused agreement. I suppose I thought of my parents as being basically like me; their transformations were more extreme than my own, but everything else about them was bigger, so that made perfect sense. That they were in a sense the same from day to day, I never doubted; my mother and father were, by definition, the two adults who did certain things: scolded me, hugged me, tucked me into bed, made me eat disgusting vegetables, and so on. They stood out a mile, you couldn't miss them. Occasionally one or the other was absent, but never for more than a day.

The past and future weren't problems; I simply grew up with rather vague notions as to what they actually were. 'Yesterday' and 'tomorrow' were like 'once upon a time' — I was never disappointed by broken promises of future treats, or baffled by descriptions of alleged past events, because I treated all such talk as intentional fiction. I was often accused of telling 'lies', and I assumed that was just a label applied to stories that were insufficiently interesting. Memories of events more than one day old were clearly worthless 'lies', so I did my best to forget them.

I'm sure I was happy. The world was a kaleidoscope. I had a new house to explore every day, different toys, different playmates, different food. Sometimes the colour of my skin would change (and it thrilled me to see

that my parents, brothers and sisters almost always chose to make their own skin the same as mine). Now and then I woke up as a girl, but at some point (around the age of four, I think) this began to trouble me, and soon after that, it simply stopped happening.

I had no suspicion that I was moving, from house to house, from body to body. I changed, my house changed, the other houses, and the streets and shops and parks around me, changed. I travelled now and then to the city centre with my parents, but I thought of it not as a fixed location (since it was reached by a different route each time) but as a fixed feature of the world, like the sun or the sky.

School was the start of a long period of confusion and misery. Although the school building, the classroom, the teacher, and the other children, changed like everything else in my environment, the repertoire was clearly not as wide as that of my house and family. Travelling to the same school, but along different streets, and with a different name and face, upset me, and the gradual realisation that classmates were copying my own previous names and faces — and, worse still, I was being saddled with ones they'd used — was infuriating.

These days, having lived with the approved world-view for so long, I sometimes find it hard to understand how my first year at school wasn't enough to make everything perfectly clear — until I recall that my glimpses of each classroom were generally spaced weeks apart, and that I was shuttling back and forth at random between more than a hundred schools. I had no diary, no records, no class lists in my head, no means of even thinking about what was happening to me — nobody trained me in the scientific method. Even Einstein was a great deal older than six, when he worked out his theory of relativity.

I kept my disquiet from my parents, but I was sick of dismissing my memories as lies; I tried discussing them with other children, which brought ridicule and hostility. After a period of fights and tantrums, I grew introverted. My parents said things like 'You're quiet today!', day after day, proving to me exactly how stupid they were.

It's a miracle that I learnt anything. Even now, I'm unsure how much of my reading ability belongs to me, and how much comes from my hosts. I'm sure that my vocabulary travels with me, but the lower-level business of scanning the page, of actually recognising letters and words, feels quite different from day to day. (Driving is similar; almost all of my hosts have licences, but I've never had a single lesson myself. I know the traffic rules, I know the gears and pedals, but I've never tried going out on to the road in a body that hasn't done it before — it would make a nice experiment, but those bodies tend not to own cars.)

I learnt to read. I learnt quickly to read quickly — if I didn't finish a book the day I started it, I knew I might not get my hands on it again for weeks, or months. I read hundreds of adventure stories, full of heroes and heroines with friends, brothers and sisters, even pets, that stayed with them day after day. Each book hurt a little more, but I couldn't stop reading, I couldn't give up hoping that the next book I opened would start with the words, 'One sunny morning a boy woke up, and wondered what his name

was.'

One day I saw my father consulting a street directory, and, despite my shyness, I asked him what it was. I'd seen world globes and maps of the country at school, but never anything like this. He pointed out our house, my school, and his place of work, both on the detailed street maps, and on the key map of the whole city inside the front cover.

At that time, one brand of street directory had a virtual monopoly. Every family owned one, and every day for weeks, I browbeat my father or mother into showing me things on the key map. I successfully committed a lot of it to memory (once I tried making pencil marks, thinking they might somehow inherit the magical permanence of the directory itself, but they proved to be as transitory as all the writing and drawing I did at school). I knew I was on to something profound, but the concept of my own motion, from place to place in an unchanging city, still failed to crystallise.

Not long afterwards, when my name was Danny Foster (a movie projectionist, these days, with a beautiful wife called Kate to whom I lost my virginity, though probably not Danny's), I went to a friend's eighth birthday party. I didn't understand birthdays at all; some years I had none, some years I had two or three. The birthday boy, Charlie McBride, was no friend of mine so far as I was concerned, but my parents bought me a gift to take, a plastic toy machine gun, and drove me to his house; I had no say in any of it. When I arrived home, I pestered Dad into showing me, on a street map, exactly where I'd been, and the route the car had taken.

A week later, I woke up with Charlie McBride's face, plus a house, parents, little brother, older sister, and toys, all identical to those I'd seen at his party. I refused to eat breakfast until my mother showed me our house on a street map, but I already knew where she'd point to.

I pretended to set off for school. My brother was too young for school, and my sister too old to want to be seen with me; in such circumstances I normally followed the clear flow of other children through the streets, but today I ignored it.

I still remembered landmarks from the trip to the party. I got lost a few times, but I kept stumbling upon streets I'd seen before; dozens of fragments of my world were starting to connect. It was both exhilarating and terrifying; I thought I was uncovering a vast conspiracy, I thought everyone had been purposely concealing the secrets of existence, and at last I was on the verge of outsmarting them all.

When I reached Danny's house, though, I didn't feel triumphant, I simply felt lonely and deceived and confused. Revelation or no revelation, I was still a child. I sat on the front steps and cried. Mrs Foster came out, in a fluster, calling me Charlie, asking me where my mother was, how I'd got here, why I wasn't at school. I yelled abuse at this filthy liar, who'd pretended, like they all had, to be my mother. Phone calls were made, and I was driven home screaming, to spend the day in my bedroom, refusing to eat, refusing to speak, refusing to explain my unforgivable behaviour.

That night, I overheard my 'parents' discussing me, arranging what in

retrospect I now believe was a visit to a child psychologist.

I never made it to that appointment.

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For the past eleven years now, I've been spending my days at the host's workplace. It's certainly not for the host's sake; I'm far more likely to get him sacked by screwing up at his job than by causing him one day's absence every three years. It's, well, it's what I do, it's who I am these days. Everybody has to define themselves somehow; I am a professional impersonator. The pay and conditions are variable, but a vocation cannot be denied.

I've tried constructing an independent life for myself, but I've never been able to make it work. When I was much younger, and mostly unmarried, I'd set myself things to study. That's when I first hired the safe-deposit box — to keep notes in. I studied mathematics, chemistry and physics, in the city's central library, but when any subject began to grow difficult, it was hard to find the discipline to push myself onwards. What was the point? I knew I could never be a practising scientist. As for uncovering the nature of my plight, it was clear that the answer was not going to lie in any library book on neurobiology. In the cool, quiet reading rooms, with nothing to listen to but the soporific drone of the air conditionings, I'd lapse into daydreams as soon as the words or equations in front of me stopped making easy sense.

I once did a correspondence course in undergraduate level physics; I hired a post office box, and kept the key to it in my safe-deposit box. I completed the course, and did quite well, but I had no one to tell of my achievement.

A while after that I got a pen pal in Switzerland. She was a music student, a violinist, and I told her I was studying physics at the local university. She sent me a photo, and, eventually, I did the same, after waiting for one of my best-looking hosts. We exchanged letters regularly, every week for more than a year. One day she wrote, saying she was coming to visit, asking for details of how we could meet. I don't think I'd ever felt as lonely as I did then. If I hadn't sent that photo, I could at least have seen her for one day. I could have spent a whole afternoon, talking face to face with my only true friend, the only person in the world who actually knew, not one of my hosts, but me. I stopped writing at once, and I gave up renting the post office box.

I've contemplated suicide at times, but the fact that it would be certain murder, and perhaps do nothing to me but drive me into another host, makes an effective deterrent.

Since leaving behind all the turmoil and bitterness of my childhood, I've generally tried to be fair to my hosts. Some days I've lost control and done things that must have inconvenienced or embarrassed them (and I take a little cash for my safe-deposit box from those who can easily spare it), but I've never set out to intentionally harm anyone. Sometimes I almost feel that they know about me and wish me well, although all the indirect evidence, from questioning wives and friends when I've had closely spaced

visits, suggests that the missing days are hidden by seamless amnesia — my hosts don't even know that they've been out of action, let alone have a chance of guessing why. As for me knowing them, well, I sometimes see love and respect in the eyes of their families and colleagues, I sometimes see physical evidence of achievements I can admire — one host has written a novel, a black comedy about his Vietnam experiences, that I've read and enjoyed; one is an amateur telescope-maker, with a beautifully crafted, thirty-centimetre Newtonian reflector, through which I viewed Halley's comet — but there are too many of them. By the time I die, I'll have glimpsed each of their lives for just twenty or thirty randomly scattered days.

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I drive around the perimeter of the Pearlman Institute, seeing what windows are lit, what doors are open, what activity is visible. There are several entrances, ranging from one clearly for the public, complete with plushly carpeted foyer and polished mahogany reception desk, to a rusty metal swing door opening on to a dingy bitumen-covered space between two buildings. I park in the street, rather than risk taking a spot on the premises to which I'm not entitled.

I'm nervous as I approach what I hope is the correct doorway; I still get a pain in my gut in those awful seconds just before I'm first seen by a colleague, and it becomes, very suddenly, a hundred times harder to back out — and, looking on the bright side, a whole lot easier to continue.

'Morning, Johnny.'

'Morning.'

The nurse continues past me even as this brief exchange takes place. I'm hoping to find out where I'm meant to be from a kind of social binding strength; the people I spend most time with ought to greet me with more than a nod and two words. I wander a short way along a corridor, trying to get used to the squeaking of my rubber-soled shoes on the linoleum. Suddenly a gruff voice cries out, 'O'Leary!' and I turn to see a young man in a uniform like mine, striding along the corridor towards me, wearing a thunderous frown, arms stuck out unnaturally, face twitching. 'Standing around! Dawdling! Again!' His behaviour is so bizarre that, for a fraction of a second, I'm convinced he's one of the patients; some psychotic with a grudge against me has killed another orderly, stolen his uniform, and is about to produce a bloodstained hatchet. Then the man puffs out his cheeks and stands there glaring, and I suddenly twig; he's not insane, he's just parodying some obese, aggressive superior. I prod his inflated face with one finger, as if bursting a balloon, which gives me a chance to get close enough to read his badge: Ralph Dopita.

'You jumped a mile! I couldn't believe it! So at last I got the voice perfect!'

'And the face as well. But you're lucky, you were born ugly.'

He shrugs. 'Your wife didn't think so last night.'

'You were drunk; that wasn't my wife, it was your mother.'

'Don't I always say you're like a father to me?'

The corridor, after much seemingly gratuitous winding, leads into a kitchen, all stainless steel and steam, where two other orderlies are standing around, and three cooks are preparing breakfast. With hot water constantly running in one sink, the clunking of trays and utensils, the hissing of fat, and the tortured sound of a failing ventilation fan, it's almost impossible to hear anyone speak. One of the orderlies mimes being a chicken, and then makes a gesture — swinging one hand above his head, pointing outwards, as if to take in the whole building. 'Enough eggs to feed—' he shouts, and the others crack up, so I laugh along with them.

Later, I follow them to a storeroom off the kitchen, where each of us grabs a trolley. Pinned up on a board, sheathed in transparent plastic, are four patient lists, one for each ward, ordered by room number. Beside each name is a little coloured circular sticker, green, red or blue. I hang back until there's only one left to grab.

There are three kinds of meal prepared: bacon and eggs with toast, cereal, and a mushy yellow puree resembling baby food, in descending order of popularity. On my own list there are more red stickers than green, and only a single blue, but I'm fairly certain that there were more green than red in total, when I saw all four lists together. As I load my trolley on this basis, I managed to catch a second look at Ralph's list, which is mainly green, and the contents of his trolley confirms that I have the code right.

I've never been in a psychiatric hospital before, either as patient or staff member. I spent a day in prison about five years ago, where I narrowly avoided getting my host's skull smashed in; I never discovered what he'd done, or how long his sentence was, but I'm rather hoping he'll be out by the time I get back to him.

My vague expectation that this place will be similar turns out to be pleasantly wrong. The prison cells were personalised to some degree, with pictures on the walls, and idiosyncratic possessions, but they still looked like cells. The rooms here are far less cluttered with that kind of thing, but their underlying character is a thousand times less harsh. There are no bars on the windows, and the doors in my ward have no locks. Most patients are already awake, sitting up in bed, greeting me with a quiet 'Good morning'; a few take their trays into a common room, where there's a TV tuned to news. Perhaps the degree of calm is unnatural, due solely to drugs; perhaps the peacefulness that makes my job untraumatic is stultifying and oppressive to the patients. Perhaps not. Maybe one day I'll find out.

My last patient, the single blue sticker, is listed as Klein, F. C. A skinny, middle-aged man with untidy black hair and a few days' stubble. He's lying so straight that I expect to see straps holding him in place, but there are none. His eyes are open but they don't follow me, and when I greet him there's no response.

There's a bedpan on a table beside the bed, and on a hunch I sit him up and arrange it beneath him; he's easily manipulated, not exactly cooperating, but not dead weight either. He uses the bedpan impassively. I find some paper and wipe him, then I take the bedpan to the toilets, empty

it, and wash my hands thoroughly. I'm feeling only slightly queasy; O'Leary's inurement to tasks like this is probably helping.

Klein sits with a fixed gaze as I hold a spoonful of yellow mush in front of him, but when I touch it to his lips he opens his mouth wide. He doesn't close his mouth on the spoon, so I have to turn it and tip the food off, but he does swallow the stuff, and only a little ends up on his chin.

A woman in a white coat pops her head into the room and says, 'Could you shave Mr Klein, please, Johnny, he's going to St Margaret's for some tests this morning,' and then vanishes before I can reply.

After taking the trolley back to the kitchen, collecting empty trays along the way, I find all I need in the storeroom. I move Klein on to a chair — again he seems to make it easy, without quite assisting. He stays perfectly still as I lather and shave him, except for an occasional blink. I manage to nick him only once, and not deeply.

The same woman returns, this time carrying a thick manila folder and a clipboard, and she stands beside me. I get a peek at her badge — Dr Helen Lidcombe.

'How's it going, Johnny?'

'OK.'

She hovers expectantly, and I feel suddenly uneasy. I must be doing something wrong. Or maybe I'm just too slow. 'Nearly finished,' I mutter. She reaches out with one hand and absent-mindedly massages the back of my neck. Walking on eggs time. Why can't my hosts lead uncomplicated lives? Sometimes I feel like I'm living the outtakes from a thousand soap operas. What does John O'Leary have a right to expect of me? To determine the precise nature and extent of this relationship, and leave him neither more nor less involved tomorrow than he was yesterday? Some chance.

'You're very tense.'

I need a safe topic, quickly. The patient.

'This guy, I don't know, some days he just gets to me.'

'What, is he behaving differently?'

'No, no, I just wonder. What it must be like for him.'

'Like nothing much.'

I shrug. 'He knows when he's sitting on a bedpan. He knows when he's being fed. He's not a vegetable.'

'It's hard to say what he "knows". A leech with a couple of neurons "knows" when to suck blood. All things considered, he does remarkably well, but I don't think he has anything like consciousness, or even anything like dreams.' She gives a little laugh. 'All he has is memories, though memories of what I can't imagine.'

I start wiping off the shaving soap. 'How do you know he has memories?'

'I'm exaggerating.' She reaches into the folder and pulls out a photographic transparency. It looks like a side-on head X-ray, but blobs and bands of artificial colour adorn it. 'Last month I finally got the money to do a few PET scans. There are things going on in Mr Klein's hippocampus that look suspiciously like long-term memories being laid down.' She whips the transparency back in the folder before I've had a chance for a proper look. 'But comparing anything in his head with studies on normals is like comparing the weather on Mars with the weather on Jupiter.'

I'm growing curious, so I take a risk, and ask with a furrowed brow, 'Did you ever tell me exactly how he ended up like this?'

She rolls her eyes. 'Don't start with that again! You know I'd get in trouble.'

'Who do you think I'd blab to?' I copy Ralph Dopita's imitation, for a second, and Helen bursts out laughing. 'Hardly. You haven't said more than three words to him since you've been here: "Sorry, Dr Pearlman."'

'So why don't you tell me?'

'If you told your friends—'

'Do you think I tell my friends everything? Is that what you think? Don't you trust me at all?'

She sits on Klein's bed. 'Close the door.' I do it.

'His father was a pioneering neurosurgeon.'

'What?'

'If you say a word—'

'I won't, I promise. But what did he do? Why?'

'His primary research interest was redundancy and functional crossover; the extent to which people with lost or damaged portions of the brain manage to transfer the functions of the impaired regions into healthy tissue.'

'His wife died giving birth to a son, their only child. He must have been psychotic already, but that put him right off the planet. He blamed the child for his wife's death, but he was too cold-blooded to do something simple like kill it.'

I'm about ready to tell her to shut up, that I really do not wish to know any more, but John O'Leary is a big, tough man with a strong stomach, and I mustn't disgrace him in front of his lover.

'He raised the child "normally", talking to it, playing with it, and so on, and making extensive notes on how it was developing; vision, coordination, the rudiments of speech, you name it. When it was a few months old, he implanted a network of cannulae, a web of very fine tubes, spanning almost the entire brain, but narrow enough not to cause any problems themselves. And then he kept on as before, stimulating the child, and recording its

progress. And every week, via the cannulae, he destroyed a little more of its brain.'

I let out a long string of obscenities. Klein, of course, just sits there, but suddenly I'm ashamed of violating his privacy, however meaningless that concept might be in his case. My face is flushed with blood, I feel slightly dizzy, slightly less than real. 'How come he ever survived? How come there's anything left at all?'

'The extent of his father's insanity saved him, if that's the word to use. You see, for months during which he was regularly losing brain tissue, the child actually continued to develop neurologically — more slowly than normal, of course, but moving perceptibly forwards nonetheless. Professor Klein was too much the scientist to bury a result like that; he wrote up all his observations and tried to get them published. The journal thought it was some kind of sick hoax, but they told the police, who eventually got around to investigating. But by the time the child was rescued, well—' She nods towards the impassive Klein.

'How much of his brain is left? Isn't there a chance—?'

'Less than ten per cent. There are cases of microcephalics who live almost normal lives with a similar brain mass, but being born that way, having gone through foetal brain development that way, isn't a comparable situation. There was a young girl a few years ago, who had a hemispherectomy to cure severe epilepsy, and emerged from it with very little impairment, but she'd had years for her brain to gradually switch functions out of the damaged hemisphere. She was extremely lucky; in most cases that operation has been utterly disastrous. As for Mr Klein, well, I'd say he wasn't lucky at all.'

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I seem to spend most of the rest of the morning mopping corridors. When an ambulance arrives to take Klein away for his tests, I feel mildly offended that no one asks for my assistance; the two ambulancemen, watched by Helen, plonk him into a wheelchair and wheel him away, like couriers collecting a heavy parcel. But I have even less right than John O'Leary to feel possessive or protective about 'my' patients, so I push Klein out of my thoughts.

I eat lunch with the other orderlies in the staff room. We play cards, and make jokes that even I find stale by now, but I enjoy the company nonetheless. I am teasingly accused several times of having lingering 'east-coast tendencies', which makes sense; if O'Leary lived over east for a while, that would explain why I don't remember him. The afternoon passes slowly, but sleepily. Dr Pearlman has flown somewhere, suddenly, to do whatever eminent psychiatrists or neurologists (I'm not even sure which he is) are called to do with great urgency in faraway cities — and this seems to let everyone, the patients included, relax. When my shift ends at three o'clock, and I walk out of the building saying 'See you tomorrow' to everyone I pass, I feel (as usual) a certain sense of loss. It will pass.

Because it's Friday, I detour to the city centre to update the records in my

safe-deposit box. In the pre-rush traffic I begin to feel mild elation, as all the minor tribulations of coping with the Pearlman Psychiatric Institute recede, banished for months, or years, or maybe even decades.

After making diary entries for the week, and adding a new page headed JOHN FRANCIS O'LEARY to my thick ring-binder full of host details, the itch to do something with all this information grows in me, as it does now and then. But what? The prospect of renting a computer and arranging a place to use it is too daunting on a sleepy Friday afternoon. I could update, with the help of a calculator, my average host-repeat rate. That would be pretty bloody thrilling.

Then I recall the PET scan that Helen Lidcombe waved in front of me. Although I don't know a thing about interpreting such pictures myself, I can imagine how exciting it must be for a trained specialist to actually see brain processes displayed that way. If I could turn all my hundreds of pages of data into one coloured picture — well, it might not tell me a damn thing, but the prospect is somehow infinitely more attractive than messing about to produce a few statistics that don't tell me a damn thing either.

I buy a street directory, the brand I am familiar with from childhood, with the key map inside the front cover. I buy a packet of five felt-tipped pens. I sit on a bench in a shopping arcade, covering the map with coloured dots; a red dot for a host who's had from one to three visits, an orange dot for a host who's had four to six, and so on up to blue. It takes me an hour to complete, and when I'm finished the result does not look like a glossy, computer-generated brain scan at all. It looks like a mess.

And yet. Although the colours don't form isolated bands, and intermingle extensively, there's a definite concentration of blue in the city's north-east. As soon as I see this, it rings true; the north-east is more familiar to me than anywhere else. And, a geographical bias would explain the fact that I repeat hosts more frequently than I ought to. For each colour, I sketch a shaky pencil line that joins up all of its outermost points, and then another for all its innermost points. None of these lines intersects another. It's no perfect set of concentric circles by any means, but each curve is roughly centred on that patch of blue in the north-east. A region which contains, amongst many other things, the Pearlman Psychiatric Institute.

I pack everything back into the safe-deposit box. I need to give this a lot more thought. Driving home, a very vague hypothesis begins to form, but the traffic fumes, the noise, the glare of the setting sun, all make it hard to pin the idea down.

Linda is furious. 'Where have you been? Our daughter had to ring me, in tears, from a public phone box, with money borrowed from a complete stranger, and I had to pretend to be sick and leave work and drive halfway across town to pick her up. Where the hell have you been?'

'I — I got caught up, with Ralph, he was celebrating—'

'I rang Ralph. You weren't with Ralph.'

I stand there in silence. She stares at me for a full minute, then turns and stomps away.

I apologise to Laura (I see the name on her school books), who is no longer crying but looks like she has been for hours. She is eight years old, and adorable, and I feel like dirt. I offer to help with her homework, but she assures me she doesn't need anything at all from me, so I leave her in peace.

Linda, not surprisingly, barely says a word to me for the rest of the evening. Tomorrow this problem will be John O'Leary's, not mine, which makes me feel twice as bad about it. We watch TV in silence. When she goes to bed, I wait an hour before following her, and if she isn't asleep when I climb in, she's doing a good imitation.

I lie in the dark with my eyes open, thinking about Klein and his long-term memories, his father's unspeakable 'experiment', my brain scan of the city.

I never asked Helen how old Klein was, and now it's too late for that, but there'll surely be something in the newspapers from the time of his father's trial. First thing tomorrow — screw my host's obligations — I'll go to the central library and check that out.

Whatever consciousness is, it must be resourceful, it must be resilient. Surviving for so long in that tiny child, pushed into ever smaller corners of his mutilated, shrinking brain. But when the number of living neurons fell so low that no resourcefulness, no ingenuity, could make them suffice, what then? Did consciousness vanish in an instant? Did it slowly fade away, as function after function was discarded, until nothing remained but a few reflexes, and a parody of human dignity? Or did it — how could it? — reach out in desperation to the brains of a thousand other children, those young enough, flexible enough, to donate a fraction of their own capacity to save this one child from oblivion? Each one donating one day in a thousand from their own lives, to rescue me from that ruined shell, fit now for nothing but eating, defecating, and storing my long-term memories?

Klein, F. C. I don't even know what the initials stand for. Linda mumbles something and turns over. I feel remarkably unperturbed by my speculations, perhaps because I don't honestly believe that this wild theory could possibly be true. And yet, is it so much stranger than the mere fact of my existence?

And if I did believe it, how should I feel? Horrified by my own father's atrocities towards me? Yes. Astonished by such a miracle of human tenacity? Certainly.

I finally manage to cry — for Klein, F. C, or for myself, I don't know. Linda doesn't wake, but moved by some dream or instinct, she turns to me and holds me. Eventually I stop shaking, and the warmth of her body flows into me, peace itself.

As I feel sleep approaching, I make a resolution: from tomorrow, I start anew. From tomorrow, an end to mimicking my hosts. From tomorrow, whatever the problems, whatever the setbacks, I'm going to carve out a life of my own.

* * * *

I dream a simple dream. I dream that I have a name. One name, unchanging, mine until death. I don't know what my name is, but that doesn't matter. Knowing that I have it is enough.