

Something Meaningful

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Sometimes, cures don't exactly work out as they are intended. Such is the case in Brian Plante's story about a unique second chance.

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"Irene, where's my pipe?" I called. That woman was always hiding it on me. Can't a man even smoke his pipe without his wife interfering?

Irene pointed to my hand. I looked down, but the pipe wasn't there. In my palm were pills. Lots of them. Blue, like the color of those space aliens. Was that really *my* hand, all covered with freckles? When did I get freckles? No, wait, they were ... liver spots. And the knuckles were all gnarled. I remember now, I had arthritis. *Stop shaking.*

When had I gotten so old? What year was this, 2011? No, that would make me 55, and my hands looked older than that. The aliens came in 2020, and that was ... how many years ago? I was holding ten or twelve blue pills and a couple of white ones. The blue ones were the nighttime ones, for when I couldn't get to sleep. See, I do remember! And the white ones were for motion sickness, so I wouldn't barf. Was I going on a trip, then? Could this be the aliens' ship? Irene kept telling me something like that ... something about a lottery and the aliens coming for me. Did I win? But no, the surroundings looked too familiar. It was just a regular bedroom, not a cabin on a spaceship. Was this ... yes, I think I was in my own bedroom.

"What are these for?" I asked, dropping the pills onto the sheets beside me. Didn't I just take a bunch of pills? Was it time for more?

Irene gathered them up and put them back in my shaking hand. "It's to help you sleep, George."

Irene was all gray-haired and wrinkled. Perhaps sixty or so. Older than I remembered, and I was ten years older than she was, so I must be *really* old, although I couldn't remember when that might have happened.

"Sleep?" I said, looking over at the alarm clock and squinting. Both hands were on the ten ... it was ... it was..."But it's ten o'clock in the morning. Where's my pipe, Irene? Have you seen my pipe around here? You're always losing my things."

Irene frowned. "You haven't smoked a pipe for twenty years, George. Now swallow these pills. It's time to go to sleep."

"Ten o'clock in the morning and time to go to sleep? And they say *I'm* the one losing my marbles. Bring me my breakfast, and stop this nonsense."

Irene walked over to the window and opened the blinds to show the inky blackness outside. "It's nighttime, George, not morning. Time for a rest. Please don't make this any more difficult than it already is."

"I am not tired," I said. "Get me some raisin bran and an English muffin, and don't make me wait all morning."

"This is for the best, George. Please swallow these pills, and quickly."

I put a couple of the pills in my mouth. Irene handed me a tumbler of water to wash them down. At least, I *thought* it was water. I sputtered on the first sip and nearly spit out the pills. The glass contained vodka, not water. Now I remembered. I *did* just take a bunch of pills earlier. Maybe a lot of pills. And I remembered being surprised by the vodka.

"Christ almighty, Irene, what are you trying to do, kill me?"

Irene looked startled. "It will help you sleep," she said, putting the remaining pills in my hand.

"Dammit, woman, stop talking nonsense. I'm going down to the park for my walk. Get me my clothes. Is Bernadette coming over?"

Irene bit her knuckle. "Bernadette died twelve years ago, George. It's just you and me." She turned away, but I thought I saw a tear roll down one cheek. "Would you like to see Bernadette again?"

Bernadette dead? It couldn't be...I just saw her the other day. I must have heard Irene wrong.

"I *would* like to see Bernadette," I said. "When is she coming over?"

"Please, George, take your medicine," Irene said, pushing my hand toward my mouth.

I looked down. In my hand was a bunch of blue pills. Same color as those aliens on TV. Didn't I just take some pills?

"What are these for?" I asked.

"George, please! Just take them."

I swallowed a few of the pills, and sputtered on the vodka again. Irene cleaned me up and gave me more.

“Quickly,” Irene said, handing me a glass of water.

I put the pills in my mouth and took a sip from the glass. Why, it wasn’t water at all...it was vodka!

“God dammit, woman, you’re trying to poison me!”

I tried to fend her off weakly as she poured more vodka into my mouth, but my arms were like lead weights on the bed. I sputtered out a spray of the liquor, and must have gotten some of it in Irene’s eyes, because they were red and flowing with tears.

“This is for the best,” Irene said.

“Oh my God, it’s true,” I said feebly. “You really *are* trying to kill me. Can’t wait to get your hands on the insurance money, I’ll bet. Just wait till Bernadette gets here.”

Irene wiped her eyes, and dabbed the spilled vodka from my chin.

“Murderess,” I whispered. My speech was slurred and my eyelids drooping. “Bring me a phone so I can call the police. You won’t get away with this.”

Irene held my hand, but I could barely feel it. My head was spinning and I struggled to keep my eyes open. If I fell asleep now, I might never wake up.

There was a knock on the front door.

My eyes widened momentarily and I tried to call out. Maybe it wasn’t too late, if I could get to a hospital and have my stomach pumped. It was probably Bernadette, and she would save me from Irene’s scheme. But my voice would not work, and I was already too weak to lift myself from the bed.

Irene left the bedroom and closed the door behind her. I heard her answer the front door, and then there was the muffled sound of strange voices. It didn’t sound like Bernadette.

The bedroom door opened and Irene came in. She was white as a sheet, and her mouth was hanging open. Following her through the door was a group of ... *what* ... some kind of animals? No, it was a bunch of those alien things. Four of them, right there in my house. They were ugly creatures, with skin the color of robins’ eggs, and faces that looked like they had been rearranged with a sledgehammer.

“Mr. Hemlick,” the leader of the group said in a thin, artificial voice, “your wife summoned us. We are here to help you. We can alleviate the condition you call

Alzheimer's disease."

I could barely keep my eyes open, and my breathing had become shallow and labored.

"Why didn't you come sooner?" Irene said to the blue men. Was she crying? "I put his name on the list two years ago. You're too late now. I've already ... *you're too late.*"

Irene spoke some more with the aliens, and she was clearly alarmed, but I could barely make out the words. The leader of the aliens gestured back and forth with its ... whatever it was. Its appendages looked like small octopus tentacles on the end of thin, blue arms.

"George Hemlick, do you want to be cured?" the alien said.

I wanted to scream, yes, yes, save me from this murderous woman, but my eyelids were so heavy. One of the aliens leaned over me and I felt something cold and wet covering my mouth before I blacked out completely.

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The blue spaceman sucked the life from me. Like water rushing through a pipe, I felt myself draining ... *out.*

And then it all went topsy-turvy.

Everything was different. In mid-thought, the dull old bedroom where I lay rotting was transformed into a vibrant, surreal vision of the familiar space. The scene swam before me in a riot of colors that I don't remember seeing even when my eyesight was still good, and I couldn't focus properly on anything. Sounds jumped out at me from all corners of the normally quiet room: a faint electrical buzzing from the table radio (which was turned off and should have been silent); the tick-tock of the alarm clock like the beat of a drum; some scratching sounds from a cockroach, perhaps, within the walls; and the breathing noises of the people in the room sounding like a windstorm. The odors of sweat, vomit, vodka, and ... *old-people-smell* was overpowering.

Everything was the same as before, only magnified tenfold. No, that's wrong. More like a thousandfold.

Was this finally death, then? An out-of-body experience? I knew Irene was trying to kill me, but I didn't feel dead yet. I just felt ... *different.*

Despite the circumstances, I was thinking clearly, like a curtain had been lifted from my mind. And I definitely *was* outside my body, because I saw myself lying there on the bed, an old, withered carcass all flushed and convulsing. Three of the

blue people, Canopians, were gathered around me and Irene was making a great show of it, wailing and throwing off great drippy crocodile tears.

After a minute or two, the room stopped swimming and I began to realize I wasn't some discorporate soul floating on the ceiling. My brain was telling me this was real, not some near-death hallucination. I was flesh and blood, but I wasn't *human* flesh.

I was one of them. I was the fourth Canopian.

Opening my mouth, I tried to yell to the strange blue men that Irene was trying to kill me, and to have them call the police, but I couldn't open my mouth. I tried frantically to point, but I barely succeeded in raising the strange tentacle hand at the end of my arm. My brain, my *Canopian* brain, sent the signals to move human fingers, but there were just the blue octopus fingers that only fluttered aimlessly at my command. After a few seconds of frenzied fumbling, I realized I did not know how to make this body breathe, and I became consumed with the thought that my salvation from Irene might be very short lived, indeed. I would soon suffocate.

Be calm, George Hemlick, a voice spoke. This body knows what to do if you only relax and let it. It was one of the Canopians, turned to face me, only he hadn't really spoken. The creature's voice was somehow in my head without being in the air, perfectly understandable without being in language, absolutely clear without being audible. It was the most immediate communication imaginable, speaking directly into my brain, this alien brain, without a word being uttered.

It reassured me. How could I not trust it? It didn't seem like the kind of voice that *could* lie, like the voice of God. I stopped trying to scream and relaxed, and sure enough, my Canopian eyes focused and I began drawing breath.

Irene was slumped on the bed over my dead human body, oblivious to the exchange between the Canopian leader and me.

Can you hear me? I thought at the creature, wondering if the telepathy, if that was what it was, worked both ways.

The Canopian didn't react. I attempted again to lift my arm and point at Irene, to tell them about her plan to poison me, but I couldn't control any of my new body's muscles, and nearly toppled over before the two others grabbed me and held me upright.

Don't try to move, George Hemlick, the voice thought-spoke in my head. Something unexpected has occurred.

The others converged on Irene, helping her into the rocking chair by the window. They spoke words of consolation and grief to her. Real words, in English,

not the silent signals I was picking up from the leader, and Irene was assuring them it was all right, that I was too far gone and it wasn't their fault.

Damn straight it wasn't their fault. I'd have been in that dead body if it weren't for the Canopians. Now I was alive. Not human anymore, but alive. And Irene would get away with murder if I didn't make these blue people understand.

She killed me! I mentally screamed at the aliens. *She gave me bad medicine. Call the police!*

The Canopians all turned to face me, so I knew they must have picked up something, but instead of calling the police they gathered around me and half pushed, half lifted me out of the room and through the front door. I tried to fight them off, to break away and lunge for Irene and wring her scrawny neck, but I couldn't make that strange alien body move. The funny arm with the octopus fingers just flopped about uselessly at my side.

The trio of Canopians rushed me out of the house. There on the driveway was a strange vehicle about the size of a Winnebago. It wasn't a car or truck, though, since there were no wheels, and it looked too flimsy for the road...all glassy and transparent. Inside the vehicle were two rows of odd-looking seats...odd for humans, but my alien body fit into one just fine. When the other Canopians were in and the door was shut, there was a slight humming sound and we were off.

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Through the transparent walls of the vehicle, the ground quickly slipped away, until I could see the Earth below us like in those NASA films. As if I hadn't already had enough excitement for one day, the aliens were abducting me, and I was helpless to stop them. The vehicle approached and rendezvoused with a much larger vessel of the same type, and the two craft joined seamlessly to form one.

During the brief trip into orbit, I felt myself become weightless. Nevertheless, something in the chair held me fast and kept me from floating away until we reached the larger vessel. Then the Canopians pushed and pulled me, floating my body through the hatch and into the cavernous space of their main ship, which somehow still had gravity, although I felt lighter than I did back on Earth. There were dozens of Canopians milling about, carrying strange objects and performing functions I couldn't even begin to guess about.

You are one of us now and are welcome here, a silent voice thought-spoke inside my brain. *Do not be afraid.*

Sure, don't be afraid, he said. I wasn't even sure which one of them was addressing me, let alone how to respond.

Let me out of here, I thought at the group of them. My wife tried to kill me and now I'm some kind of a monster like you. I want to go home!

The Canopians made excited gestures among themselves.

You are not thinking correctly, a voice thought-spoke.

Fear muddles your idea-casting, thought-spoke another.

Relax and concentrate, thought-spoke the first. *Your body already knows how to project your thoughts, if you can calm yourself.*

I looked at the blue men and knew there was nothing to be afraid of. If it weren't for these people, I'd have already been dead, poisoned in my bed by Irene.

I ... thank you for saving my life, I thought-spoke, slowly and with as much calmness as I could muster. *Can you hear me now?*

Several of the group made elaborate hand gestures with their sinuous fingers and then all but one walked off.

Uh-oh, I thought-spoke. *Was it something I said?*

We heard your thoughts, George Hemlick. You will grow better at it with experience, but for now we are satisfied that you are an intelligent being. We will try to make you comfortable here. I am called Ecreath. Do you wish to ask me any questions?

Jeez, what the hell am I doing here? I thought-spoke. *How did I get in this body? How do I get back to normal?*

Please calm yourself, Ecreath replied. *It is much harder to understand when you are excited.*

I'll ... try, I thought-spoke, making an effort to keep my composure. *How did I get to be in this body?*

Your human body was suffering from a disease, Ecreath thought-spoke. *Your spouse entered your name on our help list some time ago, but there are so many of you and relatively few of us. We came to you as we have to many others, to cure you. The Canopian who touched you, Davril, was a healer, but something unexpected happened.*

My wife poisoned me, I thought-spoke. *Did your healer know about that?*

No, but that explains it. We Canopians heal from within. Many species,

including your own, have some capacity to heal many infirmities by the power of the mind. The healer goes into your body, and uses its own internal capabilities to heal. Unfortunately, counteracting large doses of toxins is not a task the mind can easily perform.

But then why am I still alive?

While Davril was in your body healing your Alzheimer's disease, he parked your mind, your healthy mind, into his own body for storage. It should have been temporary, but Davril got caught in your body by the poison and succumbed.

Then my wife is doubly a murderer, I thought-spoke. Your Davril is dead, and I might just as well be.

You are not dead. We will attempt to make your new life as comfortable as possible.

Okay ... Ecreath ... thanks for your hospitality, I thought-spoke. But what I'd really like is for you to take me home. I have to make sure that murderer of a wife doesn't go unpunished.

We are home, Ecreath thought-spoke. You cannot live among humans except for brief periods. The atmosphere on Earth is not sufficient to sustain your present bodily needs.

Great, just great, I thought, but not to Ecreath. Thinking to yourself was somehow different from thought-speaking.

How is it we are communicating? I thought-spoke.

We Canopians are more sensitive than your kind to the electromagnetic waves in the brain. When you have been with us long enough, you will become more adept at reading and projecting thought patterns.

But I want to go home.

That is not possible.

Well then, what do you propose to do with me?

We will find something meaningful for you to do. Come along.

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Over the next few months, I learned to become a Canopian and control the strange blue body. Call it physical therapy. More than just learning the correct mental

commands to make my body parts do what I wanted, I had to unlearn the human patterns. It worked best when I didn't think about it too much. As Ecreath explained, my new body already had a "muscle memory" for most common motions...walking, picking things up, eating. I only had to think about what I wanted it to do, and let the body take over.

Ecreath remained my teacher. True to his word, the Canopians tried to make me comfortable, although I was a square peg in a convoluted hole. At first, I was surprised at how much of the ship was transparent. The Canopians seemed to not have any need for privacy. When I had asked Ecreath about sleeping arrangements, he replied, *You have been with us three of your Earth days. Are you feeling sleepy?*

It hadn't occurred to me up to that point, but I was *not* sleepy. Ecreath explained that the need for sleep was a condition that the Canopians could have cured the humans of, but the daily sleep cycles seemed such an ingrained part of our psyche that they thought it best not to interfere. Canopians just went about their business all the time without resting.

Eating like a Canopian was also something I had to learn. They primarily ate several varieties of a yellow fluff that was grown shipboard in large spongelike mats. It was some kind of fungus-like material, and I learned how to appreciate and select good fluff from the nearly identical but deadly variety that grew side by side along with it. The poisonous fluff was a different stage in the lifecycle of the fungus-fluff, and therefore impossible to eliminate. You just had to know there was some poison hiding in all the good food, and trust your judgement in picking the right one.

There was also a mildly hallucinogenic syrup the Canopians drank that I liked quite a bit. It didn't taste too bad for whatever gustatory organs I had, and it made me remember, for short periods of time, what it was to be a human, and imagine that I could be human once again.

I learned why Canopians kept popping up all over the Earth to heal the sick. *You humans are not a very trusting people, Ecreath thought-spoke. That is fairly common among the intelligent races. Caution is a valuable trait in the early development of a species, but now you must transcend those primitive fears. We would like your kind to share in our knowledge as equals. Before we can be confident you will not use our knowledge against us, we have to be sure we have won your trust.*

And if we fail your test? I asked in thought-speak.

It is not a test. It is merely a period of becoming acclimatized to each other. If we cannot gain your trust, it will not make our people enemies. We will just have to be more cautious about what knowledge we can safely pass on to you.

Knowledge about healing diseases and flying between the stars on crystal ships, I thought to myself. That was really important stuff. A test, by any other name, that humans dare not fail.

And how long will you go on trying to win our trust? I thought-spoke.

That is up to your people, Ecreath replied. *It will take as long as it takes, or we will give up and go elsewhere.*

And what will the Canopians get from sharing their knowledge with us? I thought-spoke.

Companions. Friends. All intelligent species have worthy ideas to share.

I thought of interstellar empires, science fiction stuff with strange alien races doing battle with ray guns over myriad worlds.

Don't you worry about the competition? I thought-spoke.

It is a very large universe, Ecreath thought-spoke. *There are enough empty worlds and few intelligent races. Direct competition will never be a factor.*

Why don't you just explain all this to my people? I thought-spoke. *It might make humans trust you more to know how ... altruistic you are.*

Trust is earned. If we merely asked for it in exchange for knowledge, how could we ever be sure the trust was sincere?

I almost replied, *You can trust me,* but how many times had that been said by humans, and how often was it a lie?

In any event, you're prepared to be here a long time? I asked.

We few will be here several more of your years. Then we will return home and another Canopian crew will take our place here.

Then I will miss you, I thought-spoke, sincerely. They really were a generous people and I had come to like them.

You will be returning with us to Canopus, Ecreath replied. *There are many fulfilling activities there to make your life rewarding. For everyone, there is always something meaningful to do.*

But I wanted to stay on Earth. If my mind had been transferred from a human body into a Canopian one, than surely someday, somehow, there was a way to transfer back into a human body. Any body would do. I just wanted to be human

again.

I know what I want to do, I thought-spoke.

What is that, George Hemlick?

I want to be a healer.

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Three years went by, and I learned the power of the Canopian healing arts. My healer-teacher was called Omornia, and she had began the course of study by planting her mouth on mine, as if to kiss me, and taking over my body, swapping me out to wander around in the caverns of her own mind. It was disorienting the first few times, but like anything else Canopian, you got used to it after a while.

One thing that was especially unnerving was the fact that when you were in someone else's brain, even though their consciousness was swapped out, you could still tap into some of the deep-seated thoughts of that person. It was like plugging into a video library, only the videos were pure thoughts instead of just sights and sounds. You knew how the person felt, not just what they saw and heard.

Several times when I was exploring in Omornia's mind, I found some disturbing thoughts. I saw my face, human and old, convulsing on the bed in my familiar bedroom. Irene was there, play-acting her phony grief after having just poisoned me. And I saw my new Canopian body (actually Davril's) as he was in the act of trying to heal me. Omornia had been one of the other Canopians in the room when I died ... when Davril died. She had witnessed the death of her friend and fellow healer. I experienced her grief.

I discovered areas of doubt in Omornia's mind: *Is the human sincere, or is he just trying to learn the healing arts for some deceitful human stratagem? Be careful of this one, even though Ecreath says he is earnest, he hides his true thoughts. Beware, he learns too quickly.*

And while I was picking through Omornia's thoughts, what was she picking up from my brain? There were secrets in there I didn't want uncovered. Could I lock them up in a place Omornia couldn't find? I learned to bury my innermost thoughts, and each time I entered Omornia's mind, I looked to see if she had uncovered anything dangerous in her last foray into my brain.

I was relieved to see she had not. On returning to my own body, I could read traces of thoughts she had left behind. She was deeply puzzled and bewildered by what she perceived as the confused state of my mind, and never could figure me out. Some things about the human mind were even more alien to Canopians than they were to us. It was something I could use to my advantage.

Omornia had two other healers-in-training, true Canopians, not impostors like me, but neither was as adept as I. Maybe it was because Davril had already been an experienced healer, and when I inherited his body, I inherited some of his talent. A mental form of “muscle memory” perhaps. The other students and I would practice on each other, jumping in and out of one another’s minds. I was clearly better at it than they were, and hiding my inner thoughts from them was child’s play.

None of them ever knew why I *really* wanted to be a healer. If a Canopian healer had once taken my human body, then one day I, too, could take a human body. Any human body would do.

What I really wanted to do was heal myself.

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The time is coming to return to our home world, Ecreath thought-spoke. Another crew is coming to replace us here.

But I have so much more to do as a healer, I replied. I wanted to learn the healing arts so I could help my people.

Your people are the Canopians, Ecreath thought-spoke. I have sensed that you are not comfortable with your body. Haven’t you become one of us yet? It is best for you to come home and experience fully what it means to live as a Canopian.

What a ridiculous, chauvinistic statement, assuming that anyone would naturally want to be a Canopian instead of a human. I was careful to keep those thoughts to myself.

Yes, I trust you are right, I thought-spoke. But I still feel a bond with the humans, and think I can be of some service here. There is so much death and disease on Earth. So many people to be helped. Who better than I can help win the humans’ trust for us, especially now that I have learned some of the healing arts? I understand human thoughts and fears better than any Canopian.

Yes, that is probably so, Ecreath thought-spoke. But it would be unfair to make you stay here, so close to your old kind and never know what it is truly like to live as a Canopian. When the relief crew arrives, you will return home with us.

So, it was decided. Whatever I did, I would have to work quickly.

Ecreath, I trust your judgement, I thought-spoke. But before I leave the planet of my birth, I would like to exercise the new healing knowledge I have on some humans just once, so my talent does not go totally to waste. It would be a

fitting farewell, to help someone in need, as I once was helped by Davril.

Ecreath finally agreed, and before the relief crew arrived, I would be allowed to go one last time among the humans and heal some worthy person.

And who was worthier than I?

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The Canopians selected a proper candidate for healing someone old and infirm, as I once was. I would enter that human's body and use the powers of its own mind to give that person as many more healthy years as possible. It was in my best interest, since I didn't plan on giving the body back, once I had taken possession of it. And if that person was so far gone that only a few years of useable life were all that was left, so be it. I just wanted to be human again.

I knew how to make sure the transference was permanent. Just as had happened before, the body I inhabited had to die while I was in the other person's body. Then I would be trapped, gloriously trapped, in a human body once again.

And what about the poor sap of a human that got caught in Davril's dying Canopian body? Well, this *was* someone the Canopians had selected because death was already imminent. It wouldn't really be like I was killing the person. That person was already doomed.

Before the appointed time, I went fungus-fluff picking. I stocked up three times enough of the deadly poisonous variety as was needed to kill a Canopian. It compacted down nicely into a wad the size of a marble. Once I ate the stuff, this Canopian body of mine would be dead in a matter of minutes.

Omornia and Ecreath accompanied me down to the surface, to walk the Earth again before being whisked away to Canopus. The selected candidate for healing was in a hospital, and the startled doctors and nurses gathered around when we entered. The Canopians had been making frequent healing appearances on Earth for several years by this time, so the staff was amenable to letting us have the run of the hospital, hoping we would cure as many patients as possible.

Ecreath knew exactly where we were going as he ushered me up several flights of stairs and down a long corridor. Nurses and patients poked their heads out of rooms to see who the lucky recipient of our attention would be. Ecreath waved me into a room, and there on the bed was our patient. She was an old, gray woman, barely conscious.

It was Irene, my wife.

She looked as if she didn't have much time left, having degenerated into mere

skin and bones. Her arms were like twigs and the weight of her body was so slight that it lay high on the mattress, hardly making an impression.

Her face looked as I remembered it, not affected as badly as the rest of her. Perhaps a few more lines around the eyes, and her hair had probably not been washed in a long while, but she still had flashes of the beauty that had made me want to marry her so long ago.

But she was a murderer, and I was her victim. How fitting, then, that she would give up her body for me, and lose her own life, trapped for however briefly in a dying alien body. Any qualms I had about killing an innocent person so I could be human again were erased. She was not innocent. It was perfect.

It occurred to me that this could hardly be a coincidence. Ecreath surely knew this patient was my wife, and had selected her from among the entire planet of sick and dying people to serve as my one healing opportunity. He certainly knew how much I hated Irene for having tried to kill me. For having trapped me in this body. And now, what, did he really expect me to cure her?

Perhaps Ecreath was testing me. Would I go through with it and cure the one person who had tried to kill me? Would I give up my desire to be a healer and now go quietly back with him to Canopus and forget about the world of humans?

But he couldn't have expected me to do what I was about to. Crowding near the bed, I lifted one of my legs under an IV stand, toppling it and sending it crashing to the floor. While Ecreath and Omornia were distracted, I quickly swallowed the dose of poisonous yellow fluff I had gathered earlier. In minutes, my Canopian body would be dead. It didn't matter. I didn't plan on being in it that much longer.

She is suffering from a stroke, Omornia thought-spoke. You have to heal the brain, and the rest of the body will come around.

Very well, I thought-spoke. I will do my best.

We trust you will perform correctly, Ecreath thought-spoke.

I bent down and put my mouth over Irene's and made the transfer. It was simple.

Her brain was heavily damaged from the stroke. If I were to live in this body for more than a few days, I'd have to do some major repair work. I summoned up Irene's own powers and focused them on the site of the stroke, causing the body to consume the dying brain tissues there. The neighboring tissues had to be rearranged to grow around the damaged sections, and fill in for the missing tissue. I also detected some heart disease and the start of what would probably develop into a cancer in her colon, but I easily corrected those, too.

Irene's body would heal from this stroke, and have a good many more years of useful life ... for me to enjoy.

I opened her eyes and saw the room through her sense of vision. So inefficient, these human eyes. I had forgotten how much keener the Canopian senses were. Davril's alien body loomed over me, his mouth covering mine. In a very short time, the Canopian body would fall away and die, while I watched safely from within my new human body.

I wondered what Irene was thinking inside the Canopian. Was she confused or terrified? Did she have any idea what was happening to her?

While I waited for the Canopian body to collapse, I decided to explore Irene's brain, to see what vestiges of her memory had been left behind. What useful things might I discover, tucked away in there?

The first thing I stumbled on was a memory of Bernadette, our daughter. A scene of Bernadette and Irene baking a cake. She looked about ten years old. It was Father's Day, and I was stuck working at the office on a Sunday, and they both wanted to surprise me when I got home. Promptly after frosting the cake, Bernadette dropped the thing on the kitchen floor and made a mess. She cried and cried, and Irene tried to calm her down while they both cleaned it up, but Bernadette was heartbroken. Irene made some calls and found a bakery that was still open. I remembered that cake, and that day. Bernadette was such a great kid. Irene was still pretty good back then, too.

Next, I found a huge memory, hovering like a dark cloud over everything else. It was obviously an important one. It was the memory where I died.

I saw myself through Irene's eyes. "Where's my pipe, Irene? Have you seen my pipe around here?" I bellowed for the umpteenth time. "You're always losing my things on me."

Irene just handled it, like she had for many years before the end. "You haven't smoked a pipe for twenty years, George." she said. She didn't scream it, she didn't get mad, even though she had heard that request countless times. I felt the sting of tears in her eyes as she had felt them, turning away from my line of sight. I had glimpsed those tears before, and always tried to ignore them, but I never really understood who they were for.

I never knew, really. Until now.

When I demanded my pipe, or raisin bran and an English muffin, or whatever damn fool thing I asked for at any hour of the day, Irene had stoically complied. Lord knows how she had put up with me for so long. I had become a little dictator.

But I knew how Irene had done it. I didn't just see myself through her eyes, I *felt* her emotion, too. While I was making my unreasonable demands and being boorish, she didn't see me as the tyrant I had become. She saw underneath all that I had become, the man that I had been. The man she had married.

And despite what I had become, she still loved me.

I could feel it in her heart. In her brain. She loved me. *She loved me.*

And I loved her back.

I watched her count out the pills and pour the vodka that day. It wasn't an act of murder, it was an act of love. She just couldn't bear to see me like that. Through her eyes, I couldn't stand to see myself like that, either. My God, what had I become? What torture had I put that woman through for those last few years? And when she had tried to kill me, it wasn't for insurance...how could I have ever believed that? It was a mercy killing.

I was proud. Proud that my wife had loved me enough to help me out of that situation. Proud that she had the courage to do what the doctors would not help her do, and let me die with some semblance of dignity, before I became a total basket case. And when I had drawn my last breath, she had planned to take the remaining pills herself, and join me in death.

I was ashamed that I had ever doubted her. Thank God she had never gone through with her plan to kill herself.

Enough prying in her mind, I decided. Her body was fixed; the damage from the stroke and the other things was gone. She could live another ten or twenty years now. And I would see to it that she did. My Canopian body was already faltering.

I reached up and pushed Davril's face away from mine for a moment, so I could speak through Irene's lips. "Ecreath, I have fixed the woman's body," I said aloud, in English. "But Davril's body is dying. I will give this human her body back now and die with my Canopian body."

"We hoped you would make the right choice," Ecreath said aloud. "Trust is earned. Self-sacrifice is an advanced notion, so there is much hope for your people. You would have made a fine Canopian."

Of course the Canopians had known. Perhaps I had passed a test, but I would die now and let Irene live. They said they'd find something meaningful for me to do. Maybe this was it.

Irene, I leave this memory for you, here in this place in your mind where you

will surely discover it. All this stuff about aliens and healing may seem like a dream when you first wake up, but believe me, this is real. It's George. Write it all down as soon as you can, so you don't forget. What you did, trying to put me out of my misery when I needed it, was the right thing to do. The best thing. I'm so proud of you. Never, never feel guilty about what you did.

When you think about me, try to remember my younger self, not the beast I became at the end. I love you. Remember.

I have to go now. â€”FO