

Replacement

Welcome back.

Shelly Li

You stand over her grave, tears splattering onto the 100-year-old dirt. It's been ages since you saw her in the flesh, since you watched that crooked smile spread from one end of her face to the other.

God, she was so beautiful, so flawless... and you're so drunk, you almost think about dropping to your knees, digging for her. But instead you clutch the whiskey bottle closer to your heart and tell her, like you always do: "Happy birthday," and walk away.

The next year you are back, and the next. You know what you want to happen, but after so many years, the pain never fades, and the memory of her has never left your mind for a single second.

Then one afternoon you show up, high off your ass and ready to collapse in front of the tombstone, when you see someone else standing in your spot.

"Hey," you say, stumbling over. "What are you doing?"

The man turns to you. "You must be the poor bastard she left behind." He turns off the PRIVATE reading in his brain chip, giving you his name and information.

Owen Powers, Brain-Chip Transferor

You understand and don't have to read further. You look up at the man, study him for a while. He looks to be about 20, 25 years old, but in the year 2230, who can tell the difference? He may well be, like you, rounding the year 200.

"So," you say. "It's been so long, I was afraid that you people didn't even exist."

"Well I'm here now, aren't I?"

You pause after that, think for a minute before saying: "And you're here to offer me your services?" You've spent too many years on this godforsaken planet to display too much emotion, only to be stabbed by lies, over and over again.

But the words that come out of Powers's mouth next make your heart beat to an irregular tune again, bring life back into your old, empty soul. "Yes. We will return your wife to you," he says.

A little smile touches your lips, but you don't let it travel far before stomping it

back down again. "It's been more than 50 years."

"Yes, it has, and we're sorry that it's taken this long to move down the wait list to you. Our scientists had some technical issues to resolve on the new models, but we think that you will be pleased with the progress we have made."

This time a wind of joy flies in and slams into your chest, lights you all the way up.



"Okay," you say, "then how does this work?"

"We will pull your wife's brain-chip records, put them inside a body and ship it to you. You won't get to choose the body we put her in, but we'll try to make an android that looks close enough."

You shrug. It was never the outer appearance that was the most beautiful, but the angel on the inside. The only question left is: "Will she be the exact same person?"

"The brain-chip recorder stops as soon as the heart does. Trust me, it'll be like she never left."

The doorbell rings two weeks later, and you stand up, shuffle to the door.

Each step seems heavier than the one

before, as each heartbeat becomes harder and harder to slow down.

Love, warmth, any feeling you thought you'd lost forever when she left is back again, pumping through your body like liquid fire.

Your finger hesitates for a second on the OPEN DOOR button, but you finally unfreeze yourself and pound on it.

The door slides open...

Your whole body stops, and your brain spins into orbit.

It's her. It's really her.

You reach out, pull her into your arms and take a deep breath...

But then you realize that something's wrong.

She used to smell like pomegranate and raindrops. Now all that's left is the scent of nothingness.

Her hair, she had a cowlick in the back, where a patch of rebel hair always stuck up. This woman standing before you, however — her hair is annoyingly perfect.

Her outer shell feels like the skin of a human, but you know that she never will be. All she's done is taint your memory of her.

"Come in," you say with a smile on your face, taking her hand and leading her into the house.

You walk with a tightening inside you to the drawer, pull out your gun. Before she can even say a word, you pump three bullets into her chest. She falls to the floor, crackling with electricity, emitting a screen of a smoke. Amid the fire starting in your living room, you squeeze a final shot, and she stops moving completely.

As you stand over her body, tears start to slide down your face once again. "I'm sorry," you say, "but an android can never replace her."

You scoff at yourself and look around the big, empty house. This was a stupid, stupid idea. Love and loneliness blinded you, drove you to accept this offer.

But what's done is done.

Now the curtain of tricks has parted, and you see the truth.

The sealing hollowness of it. ■

Shelly Li is a 15-year-old who aspires to finish high school and go to college, perhaps get in a few rounds of golf in between. She can be found at www.shelly-li.com.