

Lunch

Lunch. Should be simple, right? It wasn't.

I didn't think I was going to eat, but I ordered food anyway. Old habit, maybe? He ordered. Trebor, I mean. Trebor ordered a simple sandwich. I wasn't sure how much I should talk while he ate. I think I said a couple of small things here and there. Commented on some of the other people walking by the windows. Small talk. That was another old habit. Lately, I've been very conscious of all these little things I do.

But I'm already getting off the subject. Lunch. Trebor finished his sandwich. I was playing with the straw in my drink. It was so awkward. Neither of us were comfortable speaking. I kept looking at the walls. Pretending to stare at the artwork. Was that art? Trebor was playing with his napkin. He just kept folding it, making these precise creases. Seven of them. I watched him make each one. He didn't look at me the whole time. He did his best to concentrate on the task at hand – napkin folding. I'm not sure if I wanted him to look at me, either. I mean, his eyes... wow, those eyes. They were light blue and I could stare into them forever. They saw right into my soul. Those blue eyes were largely responsible for my falling in love with him. He knew just how to *look* at me. He knew just how to look *in love* with me. I haven't seen that look in a while, but it was burned into my memory – I think at this point I knew I would never see it again any other way.

Again, I've digressed.

Maybe I should just explain what's going on. The man sitting across the table from me is Trebor Warc. The short explanation is that two years ago we met and fell in love. Unfortunately, Trebor, who's almost 80, is about twice my age, which makes the idea of having a long-term romance and a life together very difficult. Trebor would tell me he had these images that in 10 years I would wind up leaving him for someone younger, no matter how much I reassured him that wouldn't happen. We needed to find some way to be together for a good, long time.

About a year ago, we decided we would go through an integration process at the Institute for Robotics. This is the only place on Earth today that is devoted exclusively to the research and development of all things robotics. The Institute was originally founded on the concept of attempting to develop intelligent machines – robots that thought for themselves. But there were problems developing something intelligent *and* stable. After many years, and many failed experiments, they realized that they could build the machinery – that was the simple part – and *integrate* a person's mind into the artificial brain they had created. For the past several years they've been looking for volunteers to undergo the procedure. Trebor and I decided that's what we wanted to do.

As it turned out, it's what I wanted to do. Trebor never went through the procedure. Which brings us here.

Sitting at lunch. It got to the point where the moment was so awkward that we would either have to look at each other and talk or at least make an agreement to leave. I didn't want to leave. I kept playing with my food. It was my way to keep us there. I knew I wasn't going to eat anything. I could have. A fully equipped digestive system came as part of the package. The thing I don't understand is that he knew I wasn't going to eat either. I'm still not sure why he didn't just leave.

Finally, there was a quiet “I’m sorry.”

I looked up from my lunch and straight into his eyes. “Sorry?” I said with exasperated disbelief. “I can’t believe that’s all you have to say to me.”

I think that came out a little too aggressively, since Trebor stopped looking at me and began to focus on his napkin again. I needed him to talk more. Sorry wasn’t enough for me right now. It wasn’t that simple. I needed more. I put my elbows up on the table and my face in my hands. I did this with a good frustrated grunt noise. It was one of those forced noises to get someone’s attention. It worked. He looked up at me again.

“I never promised you I would go through with it.”

I spread my fingers apart and just stared through them at him for a second. It was hard to know the right thing to say anymore. It felt so futile. One part of my brain was telling me to get up and walk out. This conversation had no purpose. He wasn’t going to change his mind. Nothing I could say could possibly help any, or make him change his mind. But I couldn’t just leave.

“I don’t know what to say to that.”

It was easier when I was back at the Institute and all I could do was write. Writing has always been a better way for me to communicate. I can think of good responses, and can make sure I’m getting my meaning across. I don’t think on my feet too well, and have difficulty responding to impromptu comments. But writing letters, I always seemed to be able to communicate exactly what I wanted to say. My letters were eloquent and meaningful. Did he save them?

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry you went through with it. I’m sorry I can’t do it.”

“Trebor, I have no regrets about the procedure. Remember, this was *my* idea. I *wanted* to go through with it. I would have anyway. It was the right thing for me to do. My life now... well, it’s... it’s different. But it’s what I wanted.”

He was looking at me again. But this time, he was simply looking me up and down. I followed his eyes as he looked and each part of my face, my hair, arms, hands. I was feeling a little self-conscious.

“You look great.” Now it was my turn to get really uncomfortable again and look down at my hands. Trebor instantly realized that wasn’t the right thing to say. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“You know that wasn’t the point of all this, Trebor.” I was still staring at my hands. They felt right, they moved right, but I still wasn’t used to the color. My skin used to be a very Mediterranean olive green hue. One of the first things they told me was that it wasn’t currently possible to reproduce my natural color. The Institute had spent considerable time and money trying to perfect the varying tones of human skin color to graft onto their robotic exoskeleton, but the choices were still limited. This pale-white color – as normal as it might have looked on other people – still felt strange to me. I missed my olive green skin. Maybe in fifty years or so when this skin would need to be replaced anyway, I would be able to get something that looked more like *me*.

“I love you.” Now that came out of nowhere.

“How can you say that? How can you expect me to believe it?” What was he trying to do to me?

“It’s true.”

“I don’t understand. If that’s true, then you can do it, too. We can be together.”

“I can’t. I want to be with you, but I can’t do it. I still love you.”

“You’ve got to be lying.”

“I’m not lying. I love you.”

I looked for a distraction. Lunch. I fiddled with and then pushed my plate of uneaten food away. Stirred my drink with the straw. All the ice had melted. I stirred it some more, then pushed that away, too. I looked directly into Trebor’s eyes one last time.

There were so many questions in my head. They came into my consciousness just long enough for me to know they were there, but then seemed to be pushed out by others. I must have been lost in some type of processing loop. I’m not a neural scientist, so I didn’t understand how my new brain worked. That was actually fine with me, since I never understood how my human one worked, either. I didn’t really notice when Trebor leaned over the table to nudge my arm.

“Are you okay? You seemed... um... distracted?”

I took me a second to clear my head and remember where I was. I blinked hard a couple times.

“I’ve got to go.”

I was doing my best to be strong. Trebor had no idea how much force of will it took me to say that, and then to get up and walk out of the restaurant. But I did it. I started walking back to my apartment. Since I had been discharged from the Institute, I was renting a small apartment only about a kilometer away from here. Actually, the Institute was renting it for me. It was close to the lab where the Institute had me working, as well as the Institute itself. My “integrator”, Dr. Rory Nerit, still made me come in four to five times a week still for some tests. It sounds like a lot, but considering I was one of just a couple dozen people the Institute had

worked with so far, I completely understood their need to continue to collect data on me. And besides, it was part of the arrangement to begin with and there wasn't much else for me to do.

Why was my life not as I had seen it only a few months before?

Integration. It was a hard decision – giving up my natural, universe-given, oxygen-breathing, blood-pumping body for a seemingly immortal, artificial one. It seemed like a good idea at the time. It still was a good idea. I have no regrets. Even if I had, the psychological testing before hand would have ruled me out. The shrinks are there to do their best at ruling out people who exhibit any characteristics that might make it hard to accept their new body.

Dr. Nerit, Rory, had advised me against meeting with Trebor recently. Since there were no secrets between me and the Institute, she knew that things hadn't been going well. Rory had overseen the integration of 19 people, including myself, and not one was involved in such a psychodrama like this. She just plainly didn't know what could happen to me if things got too emotional. Well, I had been warned.

How could I make him change his mind?

It was a fifteen-minute walk back to my place. Gave me some time to think. If I could still cry, I would have. *He says he still loves me.* I shook my head. When did this all go awry? I thought we were in this together. I was so convinced of that. I guess beforehand I had some idea that he was not totally committed. But I think some part of me thought that when he saw me go through with it – he was with me when I checked in, he was there before the procedure, he was there when I was in re-integration and recovery – he would, too. Maybe that's just what I wanted to believe.

Was there any way we could be together?

There was no way we would have been able to be together without the procedure. He's about to turn 80. I'm 42. It just wouldn't have worked very well. At least, that's what he kept trying to tell me. The procedure, even with all its unknowns, would still have at least put us on a level playing field. Physically, we would be the same. And there's such a good chance that our life expectancy would be the same. And it would be long, too. Who wouldn't want that? There's so much we could have done together. There's a galaxy of things we could have done, explored, experienced. And it would have been together.

If he loved me, then why did he back out? Was he lying? Or was he scared? If he was scared, then of what?

Each question brought a flood of following questions. I couldn't keep up. There were no answers. Only questions that led to others...

I was definitely lost in my head. This wasn't a problem until I was disturbed by a large *whump*, and looked up to discover that I bumped into a small man. Or he bumped into me. I don't know which, but he was the one who wound up on the ground. I held out my hand and tried to help him up. He wouldn't accept it. He got himself up, dusted his legs off all the while looking at me with disgust out of the corner of his eye. It was a look I was getting used to a bit. I know my skin just doesn't look right.

"Leave me alone, freak-o." And then he scampered away.

Ordinarily, it wouldn't have bothered me, but I was already so depressed, I was really wishing I could cry at this point. That was when I realized I overshot my apartment by about 50 meters. I turned back and just focused on getting home.

There were a few messages waiting for me when I got back. None were from Trebor. Did I expect any? There was one from Rory at the Institute. She wanted to know how I was

doing and if I would come back the next day. More tests. There were a few others. My father wanted to know how I was. I figured I'd get back to him later. I looked at the saved stuff from my inbox. There were dozens of messages from Trebor. Most from before my stay at the Institute.

Delete.

That was the healthy thing to do. Right?

I had to walk some more. I wasn't ready to sit down and do any work. There were a lot of questions in my head that I needed to sort out.

I got up and went back outside and continued to walk back towards the shops. My neighborhood was on the outskirts of a "planned town." Nothing was built here just because. Every detail was planned before hand. The walkways were pretty wide, and great care was taken to grow and maintain several kinds of fauna. It was soothing, I guess. One of the best things about my new brain was my memory. I remembered everything. Every detail. Or, I could conveniently forget things. If I didn't want to remember the way the flowers were planted along the street I could "forget" – and then look at them later as if for the first time. For the first couple days after I moved in, I liked to play games like this. Today I didn't even care.

What was the truth?

He said he loved me. He said he wanted to be with me. But he wasn't. How was this possible? Where did this go wrong?

I felt pain. Something wasn't right here. But it was just emotional, right? Right? What was right? What was the truth? He was not with me. I feel pain in my head. But he said he wanted to be with me. But he was not with me. Processing failure? He said he was not lying

about when he said he loved me or when he said he wanted to be with me. Something was not right. It hurts. Something does not process. Does not compute...

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I looked up and saw Rory and a couple other doctors and nurses I recognized. I knew instantly I was at the Institute, but why? I examined the faces in the room before I said anything. What had happened to me? There was only one face I didn't recognize, one man standing in a corner.

“What happened?”

Rory took a seat on my bed and was doing her best to be reassuring.

“Your neural net got stuck in a processing loop failure. When you were brought in, we had to do some ‘surgery’ and clean up some of the affected neural pathways. We did our best to leave all of your memories intact, but there might be some unexpected blanks.”

I sat up. Rory and the other doctors were looking at me as if they were expecting me to say something. I was trying to see if I had any memory of what happened. Last thing I remembered, I had eaten lunch, then went back to my apartment. I must have been thinking a few seconds too long. Everyone in the room was intently focused on me.

“How did I get here?”

“Apparently at some point you started to wander outside your apartment. By the time you bumped into this gentleman here,” Rory waved her hand in the direction of the stranger, “you were completely incoherent. He recognized that you were probably from the Institute and brought you here. His name is Trebor Warc.”

Rory and the other doctors looked back and forth from me to the stranger. The stranger was looking at me oddly. He seemed very concerned, or was he looking for me to recognize

him? I thought I had some memory of bumping into someone. Didn't he call me a freak or something? Oh well, I must have scared the living hell out of him.

“Thank you very much, Mr. Warc. This is still all new to me... I'm sorry for any trouble I might have caused you.” If blood ran through my veins, I would have been blushing.

He was older. I guessed he must have been in his late 70's at least. It was a simple guess judging by the color of his hair and some of the wrinkles on his face. He was tall and looked in very good physical condition. For a brief second or two I got a look at his eyes. They were blue and comforting. I kept trying to get a better look at them, but he seemed extremely uncomfortable and kept looking away.

“That's okay,” he answered shyly and looked back to Rory as if waiting for a cue. He looked back at me, into my eyes this time, “I had a friend who underwent the same procedure not too long ago.”

Something about that look made me silent... but only for a moment.

“Really? Who? Less than 30 people have done this. Maybe I know him!” I definitely wanted to talk to him more. He was the first person I'd met in the past year who had nothing to do with the Institute and didn't seem bothered by the fact that I was no longer human.

Mr. Warc took a step closer, which seemed to disturb all the other people in the room. I was slightly puzzled by this, but I'm sure I gave everyone such a fright recently that they were only being a little cautious towards me. He did have beautiful eyes. Mine must have been so artificial looking – but he held my gaze this time anyway. He was definitely about to say something when Rory interrupted.

Rory stood up pretty quickly and began to usher Mr. Warc out of the room. “Thank you again, Mr. Warc. Don't worry”, she said with her best smile, “she'll be just fine. Let me take

you back down to the main desk. Someone will contact you in a few days to let you know how she's doing." She signaled for the rest of the crew to follow her and glanced back at me once more as the door closed behind them.

I caught one last look at his eyes. Those I won't be wiping from my memory.