

## Mistaken Identity

I've been living in this body for some time now, but I don't think I'll ever get used to it. The previous occupant isn't here, as far as I can tell, but he's left his mark everywhere. It's patently obvious this body isn't mine, and I have to assume someone has been displaced by my presence. It is not comforting to think of oneself as a body thief, a usurper of someone else's life. I have to assume that if I'm in here, then he's somewhere else, most likely dead. This line of thinking makes me miserable.

He is taller than I was. I can remember my old body quite clearly, and it was stocky, a bit flabby, and quite a lot older than this one. I suppose I should be grateful, since this body should last a good long time. It's in better shape than I ever was, and couldn't be more than 25 years old. I can feel that spring in the step. Everything's lighter, quicker, easier. The energy, in fact, is palpable, even when I'm not doing anything. I can feel how the merest impulse will catapult me to my feet, ready for anything.

Aside from the terrible questions of who gave up this fine piece of physiology, and how it was done, and why I find myself in here, and what happened to the former occupant, there is this pressing matter of identity. Every time I use the first person pronoun, I feel a twinge of guilt, and on top of that is a major question that defies an answer. I suppose this question is valid for anyone, even in one's original body, but I don't think it ever came up before, at least not for me. I really never cared whether I was the body, or part of it, or living inside it, or completely separate from it, but I do now.

Maybe I'm suffering from some obscure psychological affliction. I've read about people who believe so strongly that their leg is not theirs that they have it surgically removed. What a horror! This is definitely not what I

want. The whole body is unquestionably someone else's, but I do not want it removed. Without it, I would be nothing. Deceased. As must be the former occupant. Someone, myself perhaps, pushed him out, and without a body where can he be? Nowhere.

Ach! The very thought of being pushed out is terrifying. What if some other entity comes along and pushes me out? What will happen to me then? I'll just die, I'm sure of it.

When I look back, there are clear memories of waking up in this body about a year ago, and then, before that, clear memories of my whole life going back to childhood, except in a very different body. Strangely, there's nothing in between, nothing that intervenes after the old and before the new. No transition. The first day here, when I awoke, I remembered going to bed the night before and everything was normal, nothing was pending, I had no unusual expectations. During the night I slept undisturbed, and had no unusual dreams. In the morning, I got up, went to the bathroom, and saw someone in the mirror I didn't know.

It was a terrible shock, and for hours I feared I'd lost my mind. But if I didn't look at the body, and didn't dwell on the feeling of fresh energy and youthfulness, everything was completely normal. It was a work-day, so I called the office and told my assistant that I was taking a day off. He asked me if I was alright, and I assured him I was. Then he said my voice sounded strange, and I realized it wasn't an illusion. Something really had changed.

I moped around my bedroom for an hour or more, not knowing what to do. Could I get in trouble for this? Was it my fault? Should I stay out of sight? Did other people know something about what had happened? Would they think me crazy not to know? Then a shocking thought arose: Would anyone believe that I was still me? I knew everything that I should know, but anyone could tell at a glance I wasn't the person I claimed to be.

I still remember going down stairs for a cup of coffee. While I was waiting for it to brew, my attention went to a strange feeling in my legs. They felt like they were glowing inside. Something drew me back to the stairs, and I remember thinking, I could just run up a flight of stairs now without a second thought. I tried it. It was exhilarating. I ran up and down the stairs repeatedly, bounding down three steps at a time, deftly balancing with a few fingers on the railing, and then I ran back up again, two at a

time, and jumped up and down at the top. I thought of “Rocky” bounding up the steps in that old boxing movie. I felt invincible.

It was a strange day. I recall striding confidently back into the kitchen, where I poured my coffee and tossed in two teaspoons of sugar. But when the coffee touched my lips, I knew something was wrong. Just a little thing—too sweet—but I also knew why. This was the wrong body. I should be in my body, not this one. And my world came crashing down again.

I carried my too-sweet coffee to the living room and sat down. That’s when I first realized I was three inches taller—I was sitting at the back of the couch with my feet flat on the floor. Funny, how so many little things need to be *just so*, in order for the world to seem real. I looked around the room, and everything was slightly off, maybe because my vantage point, even sitting, was just a bit higher. Or maybe his eyes were slightly different, with a subtle color cast to everything. Then I realized everything was in focus. No glasses. Don’t need them.

I should have been overjoyed. Suddenly I was younger, healthier, with more energy, perfect vision. I did feel a swell of excitement, like on my birthday as a kid, knowing celebration and gifts were in store for me. But overlaying the happiness was a thick pall of fear. Something unnatural had taken place, a terrible thing had happened to someone, perhaps not just to me, and I was trespassing, I was hiding out where I didn’t belong. Sooner or later someone would discover the truth, and I would be doomed. The only justice would be to kick me out, and bring back the original owner.

This line of thinking got worse, and it still does today. Even after a year, whenever I think of the original owner, I immediately worry about my original body. Is someone else living in it? Did I switch bodies with this one’s occupant? Was my body part of a long chain of displaced souls, each taking the next body and displacing someone else? Was it an isolated incident, unprecedented, a fluke of the universe? Does my old body still exist? Should I find it? What if it’s dead? Will thinking about it suddenly transport me back? And if so, and if it’s dead, will I get my wish and simultaneously die?

One of the worst discoveries about my new body was its total lack of memory. Not that I wanted to intrude into someone else’s inner history—god help us!—but I needed to know at least a little something about whose body I had stolen. I was torn between accepting my situation

as an inexplicable fluke, opaque to inquiry, and turning it into a detective project, searching for the true identity of this new body. Then I could explain what had really happened to the two of us, the two people involved in the swap, or displacement, or theft, or mix-up of our respective bodies.

There was a strange side-effect of my situation that had nothing to do with being in a new body. Until that morning a year ago, I had never reflected on the distinction between me, the person, and my body, the biological machine that housed me. In fact, I would never have used those words to describe my personal reality. I was I, not a person stuffed in a body. There was no boundary between personality and physicality. My body was my very existence, and when some part got wounded or damaged, or even mildly hurt, it was I who was wounded, damaged, or hurt. The word 'I' included everything, from my dim recollections of childhood to the impact of a concrete sidewalk under my feet.

Now, however, it's a whole new game. Whoever I am, or whatever 'I' is, it's displaced, relocated, and the utter strangeness of someone else's body is an inescapable truth that colors every experience. No, let me correct that. It colors every experience involving the body interacting with the world. This wrong body is so clearly and indisputably not mine that I can't pick up a glass without knowing in the pit of my soul that I'm manipulating an arm and hand that are not mine. They are not part of me, or part of my self-image, and they don't belong to me any more than someone else's car or dog.

This puts my sense of reality in a difficult position. Although it's patently obvious that the body isn't the one I was born in and grew up in, nevertheless this body works just like my old one. There's no problem using it. It fits like an old glove, albeit someone else's old glove. And even though this someone is bigger than I was, his glove still fits. There must be a million little connections that make a body respond so intuitively to every little thought and intention, and I haven't noticed a single thread disconnected. The body puppet is completely under my control.

And yet, at times, my sense of being an outsider is so intense that I am compelled to test the connections. I'll clap my hands, or slap myself in the face, just to see if the experience feels right, or complete. Sometimes I've gone farther, poking a fork down onto my thigh with increasing force until it begins to hurt and this body reacts to protect itself. When this happens,

the warning in my brain—his brain, I suppose—is perfectly familiar. “Stop! You’re about to injure yourself.” For a moment, it’s my thigh at risk, and of course it’s my hand holding the fork. But beneath that obvious organic knowledge, another layer of awareness has a completely different take on things. “That hand is about to damage that thigh; this personality is experimenting again. They are both nuts.”

A few weeks ago, I experienced a particularly concrete example of this now obvious separation between me and this body. I was driving home on a warm breezy day, with scudding clouds, and I decided to wash my car. This meant parking in the driveway, and hauling out the bucket and hose—the usual procedure. As I turned into the driveway and pressed the garage door opener, I clearly thought, “Yes. Stop well back from the garage door. I think there’s a new box of car soap by the lawnmower.” Then, as I watched helplessly, the body drove the car all the way into the garage and shut the door. It wasn’t until I was half-way into the house that I realized the body had completely ignored my plan. Even though I had expressed my intentions quite clearly, moments before, the body had not immediately applied the brakes, and had proceeded with a completely different plan.

Who, in other words, is driving my car? This new body performs the same tasks I’ve always done, but now it seems to be doing them with its own volition. My intentions aren’t always taken into account. Even now, as I type this text into my computer, I notice that the body moves its fingers in compliance with my mental sentences, but only when I insist. If I merely think some words, nothing happens. I have to think the words and then, deliberately, command my hands to press all the keys. At the same time, however, I’m completely unaware of how each key gets pressed.

When I hold up my hand and make a fist, I know *what* I’m doing, but not *how* I’m doing it. I can look at my hand and think about a fist in a hundred different ways, but nothing happens. Then some invisible process occurs and I decide—or someone decides—to really make a fist, and instantly the hand closes up. So I examine the difference between almost making a fist and actually making a fist. I can see no distinction. Somewhere, far in the back of my mind, someone is deciding whether I’m serious or not. Or perhaps the I itself is operating independently of the thinking machine. This is his brain, after all. Why should it think only the thoughts I want it to?

These last few weeks have become increasingly difficult. Now that I know my visitation in someone else's body in greater detail, it's difficult to perform actions of my own. I'm constantly confronted with the realization that his brain and his body can operate without any involvement on my part, completely independently. What more is needed? This brain looks out through these eyes, thinks whatever thoughts it wants, including these thoughts I'm writing now, and moves its fingers on the keyboard. When this body needs fluids, this brain will experience thirst, and these legs will walk it to the kitchen for water. What role do I play in that? Nothing, as far as I can tell.

And yet I feel. I feel the motivations, the thirst, the walking, the satisfaction of the water. I read over what I have written and enjoy faint pleasure in having stated, however clumsily, my present incredible situation. What biological mechanism lets me feel these things, yet keeps me so definitively disconnected? It is so obvious that I am not the body, or in this case even the mind, since the brain and the whole contraption are someone else's, and they so readily operate without any need for my involvement. But the connection is so intimate, so convincingly real. At times it almost could be my own body, and my memories of a different life just an illusion. But then the fundamental question arises again: What does this intimate connection, so real, actually connect? On one end is the body and nervous system, but on the other end what is there? I look so carefully, with such desperate penetration, but I see nothing. There isn't anything to see.

Maybe this other man's body, his brain and self-reflection faculties, simply can't see beyond itself. Maybe the mind can't see the inner person who experiences its thoughts, especially when the inner person is an interloper, an invader who has no right to be there. I can't remember if this kind of reflection was possible before I got into this predicament. Did I even try, in my old body, to see who it was before the thoughts? I suspect not. Why would anyone care about that? Philosophers, perhaps, but I've never been one of those. I just try to do what I'm supposed to do, and get on with things. Now, however, it's not so simple.

I must attempt to master this body and use it to resolve things. However terrifying the prospect of finding my real body, older, less healthy and vibrant, and perhaps already owned by someone else or dead at the side of

the road, still, I must get to the bottom of things. It's imperative. I can't live my new life inside someone else's body without at least trying to find its rightful owner. I don't know how I could ever recognize the original owner, but surely he would recognize me. Recognize this, I mean, this body. Just as I would recognize mine, if I passed it on the street or saw it sipping coffee in a restaurant, chatting with friends.

Would these be friends of mine, or friends of my body's new occupant? My own friends had only stared blankly at me when I tried to convince them who I was. But the original owner's friends, they would know who he was. This must be the only viable way to reveal the next piece of the puzzle. I must find his friends, and keep an eye out for myself. For my old body, that is.

The plan is clear enough. I've managed to direct the typing with relatively little effort, and here it is, laid out in plain English. The feeling of control is lively and convincing. This body seems content to execute my directions now, and once again I've grown to feel more or less at home in this thing. Perhaps the solution isn't as metaphysical as I've feared. It's time to act. Up!

Stand. Get up. Please, it's time. Let's go.

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