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The Beginning

It all started, as an autobiography always does, with the mind-body transfer. No, this is not science fiction, although it might be more satisfying if it were. The mind-body transference I'm referring to really happened—not in a mad scientist's lab, but it could have been a mad creator's lab. Alright, no shit, it was my mother's womb. That's what I've been told, as have we all, and by sheer testimony it's hard not to accept it, however impossible and bizarre the process might seem. The trick is not to think about it in too much detail.

This particular fetus had been growing in there, following its natural course of mitosis, or so the story goes, steadfastly recapitulating phylogeny, and somewhere around the three-month mark, this particular mind (mine) got transplanted into the fetus's barely-functional recently-embryonic central nervous system. That's about all anyone is sure of. Since then, things have gotten increasingly incomprehensible.

Naturally you may inquire as to why I would say transplanted—metempsychosis, transmigration, reincarnation? No, not at all.

So here's why. Before I began inhabiting the fetus, with its woefully inadequate physiology, floating helplessly in its little sack of bodily fluids, I was definitely not some previous celebrity like Moses or Genghis Khan or Paul Revere—and yet I can say that I definitely was. That is, I existed, although I wasn't inhabiting anything. Inhabiting *anyone*, I should say. Unfortunately, I cannot elaborate on what I was doing, as there doesn't seem to be any doing in that prior state, but it definitely didn't involve inhabiting. I'll have to say that I just was, and leave it at that.

But this isn't really where my story should be going. I wanted to start at

the beginning, because that's where one might expect to find some answers to the forthcoming questions, which I'll get to soon enough. But as you can see, starting at the *absolute* beginning has its own pitfalls, and we're already failing to answer even the simplest of questions, and there's no point going any further in this direction.

Later on, you'll probably be thinking I should have spent more time on this, because there simply must have been some clues that an astute reader could pick up on. Because then you could contact me, through my publisher or whatever social medium is ubiquitous in your day and age, and try to shed light on at least one or two of the conundra which have made such a muddle out of what could have been a perfectly normal, even productive, life. I would be so grateful to escape the traps of my imagination, and you would feel so good, being able to help.

At this stage, after so many years, I'm quite convinced that there can be no help, but I shan't blame you for feeling compassionate. For now, please just trust me—don't waste your time second-guessing what's going on here. I'd love to think it is just a story, a contrivance for simple entertainment, but it is, after all, my life, and I'll stake my reputation on the conclusions I've reached. Conclusions I've been forced to. If you can even call them conclusions.

Continuation

For several more months I languished in the vat, cooking up a full-fledged human body with a lot of help from my mother. Again, this is just what I was told, but I'm not arguing with it, although from what I understand the vat was more of a bladder. Eventually, my body was extruded into the world, smacked on the back, and I began to spread out into the newly-minted brain of this burbling little proto-person.

Things went fine for many years after that. The people in my little world were successful in convincing me that I was a person. It (the person) was named Millard, and it lived in a body that was also named Millard. The distinction between Millard the person and Millard the body was moot—by now they might as well have been one and the same. But my intuition, and later on innumerable layers of experience, told me unequivocally that there were two of us. At least.

Still later, well into my second or third decade, it became apparent that the body had a mind of its own, and that raised new and unwelcome questions. For one thing, if the body had a mind of its own, whose mind did the person have? Were there two minds? Or was the body's mind actually another kind of person? It was very confusing, like everything else during those decades, so I concentrated ferociously and tried to make sense out of everything.

Unfortunately, it wasn't very long before I realized that the mind, too, had a mind of its own—several, in fact. But we'll have to get to that later on in the story.

In sum, having a mind of its own isn't any better than not having a mind at all, but that, too, took a while to recognize. You can thank me now, dear reader, for telegraphing all these profound messages early on in the process.

Aside

We should ban the first person singular from our vocabulary. I, me, mine—they imply there's only one of me. What nonsense.

Prelude to a Slight Digression

Here I must digress slightly. There was an interesting side-effect of concentrating ferociously, or of trying to make sense out of absolutely everything, and it revealed something that might be important.

For most of my school years, people told me I was one of the smart ones. I knew that was a big misunderstanding, but who was I, a shy kid, to argue with adults trying to praise me? They thought I was smart because of my language skills, but language skills have nothing to do with being smart. Expressing smart, maybe, but not being smart.

Although I correctly assumed that these flattering adults meant I was more intelligent than some average kid, I knew quite clearly from innumerable social failures and breaches of protocol that obviously most people were a lot more intelligent than me. The only difference was that I could explain myself. This, it turns out, goes a long way to make up for not

being brave or strong or an especially adept center-forward on the soccer team.

Years of schooling conditioned me to continue acting smart, or risk being discovered as the nothing I assumed I truly was inside.

Now don't get me wrong—I wasn't a sad, existential kid. I had a great childhood, and my parents did everything they could to encourage my putative smartness, and they succeeded in building a pretty solid foundation of self-esteem. But self-esteem is a judgment call, an intellectual evaluation of one's self, and has little to do with one's experience of life. Specifically, it doesn't mean you're not also scared most of the time. But you draw on this deeply implanted judgment and do your best to explain yourself, and after a while people just assume that your tone of voice represents a solid rock of courage and certainty that can't be easily shaken.

Somewhere in the beginning of my second or third decade, I noticed that I could think about myself with the same analytical tools I had been taught to use on frogs or the Louisiana Purchase. This meant that my penchant for understanding everything now had to include understanding myself, and a great paradox-ridden feedback loop got started. This self-energizing recursive compulsion is still running full tilt, and I've had lots of fun and frustration over the years trying, without success, to extinguish it.

The Digression

Which brings me to the digression itself. Concentrating ferociously to make sense out of everything is a dangerous and pointless practice. I speak from experience, not to discourage anyone from being cerebral if they like that sort of thing, but to warn anyone who does like swimming in the convolutions, and keeping the taxonomy sorted, that too much of a good thing can do you in. Of course, too much of this particular good thing is likely to make your friends and associates do you in long before you even notice your own oblivion gathering.

It turns out that the brain, which is more or less responsible for the physical side of mental activity, is a lot like a muscle. It consumes plenty of oxygen when it's working hard, and it tends to scrunch in on itself when you persistently force it. And if you strain it enough, it gets cramps.

Not many people recognize a brain cramp when they get one, and for

good reason. A brain cramp feels like something unknown and invisible is about to devour you, and your blood chemistry suddenly floods every neuron with the brain's version of lactic acid, cramp-juice. Subjectively, this is experienced as sheer, pure, elemental terror. Not fear, which is anticipation of something dangerous that *might* have an effect on you, but terror, which is more like the certain knowledge that you will immediately be totally obliterated, and the resulting oblivion will be absolute and inescapable: quite final. Terror doesn't make you nervous like fear does. Terror consumes your awareness and feels a lot like standing on the most crumbly edge of the tallest cliff in a hurricane with nothing to hold on to.

All this terror was of course totally debilitating, and I fought against it without success. When it struck, within seconds my sense of 'I' was hanging on by its proverbial fingernails, the fingernails of my persona, I suppose, or my ego, and it took a huge effort to keep the persona or the ego or my whole damn body from being most utterly obliterated. The best possible outcome was being reduced to a squirming idiot gabbling incoherently on the floor of a padded cell. Unfortunately, any serious effort to resist this, in turn caused more brain cramps, which brought on still more terror.

But hidden in this wretched cycle of terror and resistance was something unexpected. Remember that terror is anticipation of oblivion, dread of the imminent loss of everything. So consider for a moment, just what is this "everything"?

In a weirdly retrograde way, terror provided my first glimpse of everything, of the totality. It was my first opportunity to connect an experience of any kind to the categorical word "everything." It didn't give me an experience of everything, but it did afford a colorful sense of the opposite—oblivion. Oblivion is what you get when you remove everything. So, perversely, my dark night of the soul was also my first glimpse in the direction of nirvana.

Another more mundane effect of the terror was to provide a memorable disincentive to persist in my penchant for understanding everything, through ferocious concentration on integrating every single experience into a massive intellectual overview. I didn't perceive this connection for a while, but once I learned to stop, it was obvious.

Post-Digression Continuation

After living with terror, born simply of trying too hard, and then learning to stop, I also realized that most people I had ever met were telling me to lighten up for years. It was one of those realizations that suddenly makes sense out of a lot of confusing history, and also makes you want to crawl into a hole. You want to tell everyone about your new discovery, but you don't want them to find out it took so many decades to catch on to the obvious.

Now back to the main story, which I may as well admit is not going to continue the way it began, as a long chronology. It's a story, but it's not a history, and if I were to continue to chronicle all the formative moments of my life, we would both soon run screaming from the room.

Note from Author to Writer

The dweller in the body wishes to expound briefly upon the ironies and joys and angst of the Attractions, so many of them, so powerful, so hard-wired, so inexorable, so seemingly fulfilling, so impossible to fulfill. But worse, each Attraction, in its pursuit, renders its attainment less satisfying, and reinforces the impossibility of the utter ownership and union that the desire spawns in the heart.

Why is the Other, the object, the unattained, so perfect? It is because of the way the senses are skewed, to find a perfect emulation of a pre-recorded internal model—it is not due to any particular perfection that might be present in the object and presumably missing in its alternatives.

Why is food, why air, so compelling and irresistible? It is because it is against the most basic chemical laws of the body to avoid it, to be anything other than obsessed by it, not because there is anything fundamentally appealing about seared muscle fragments, dead plants, or certain gasses. Where is meaning in all this? There is none.

Possible Postscript

I think I should have waited a bit longer. Writing this now, at this stage, has to be merely, I don't know, premature. The only truly effective or justifiable way to address all this is to write it after I'm dead. Otherwise there is no way to properly sum it all up. To sum it up, you see, that's what I

need to do here—find the common thread, discern the real pattern of my deception, my self-deception, not that it didn't fool everyone else as well. Then, moving that aside, there's nothing left but the real self. But how can I know the full measure of my delusion while it's still going on? Can't. Have to put this off a little longer, just until death is at the door, coming inside, approaching my chair, gently pushing the notebooks and yellow pads and tablets and smartphones and laptop computers off the table onto the floor, wiping away stacks of paper and file cards and post-it notes, reaching slowly for my hand—

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As I drove down my street, I decided to park at the curb in front of the house so I could wash the car later on. I pulled into the driveway, hitting the garage-door opener button as I turned the wheel, mildly proud of this minor multi-tasking maneuver. The garage door had almost closed behind me when I noticed that I had not parked at the curb.

I walked into the kitchen, thinking, "I'm definitely not going to have any ice-cream tonight; putting on too much weight." As I opened the freezer side of the refrigerator, the thought came, "I'm not going to do this. I really shouldn't do this." Minutes later I walked into the living room with the whole container of vanilla. "I'll just have a few spoonfuls," I said to myself.

While surfing the cable channels, I thought, "I should call Linda. We haven't spoken since her operation. I hope she's doing alright." There wasn't much on tonight, so I kept switching around. "I really should call her, but I'm not sure if I will. It's always a bit awkward." A huge black fishing boat was plowing through high seas in a gale, with crew members staggering around on deck trying to launch crab pots without being swept overboard. "I'll call her after this show," I thought. When the crab men were done, I returned to flipping channels.

Much later, I noticed it was after midnight. I'd eaten all the ice-cream and hadn't called Linda. I also hadn't washed the car, but it was obviously much too late for that. "I really should get to bed before 1:00 AM tonight," I thought. There wasn't anything interesting on the TV anymore, but I

started one more scan through the channels, just in case. Around 3:15 I woke up in my chair and went to bed.

It takes only a moment's reflection to see that every day is the same, no matter what I decide. Whoever is running things isn't me. Deciding makes no difference at all. Whatever I think about doing, somebody has other plans.

What is most frightening is that the plan is apparently to perform exactly the same pointless, deadening actions, and never to do anything else. The tedium is overwhelming, although only in the region of my brain that is aware of the repetition. Somehow the rest of the system is perfectly content to eat and vegetate itself into spherical oblivion. Perhaps this is abetted by some deep but misguided faith that oblivion is different from death. Oblivion is a recurring theme.

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For most of the day, now, I study every conscious moment, watching to catch the intervention of some doer, some inner entity who is the real author of an action.

I sit at the kitchen table, sipping a cup of hot coffee. Looking at my right hand, which holds the cup, I think, "Pick up the cup." The cup lifts.

"There," I think. "I had the thought to do something, and then the hand did it." Simple, like everybody already knows.

Then I try thinking "Pick up the cup," but without actually doing anything. My fingers still hold the handle, and I still know the mechanical differences between picking and not picking, but I don't pick it up.

So there it is: I have authored an action and an inaction. And yet, when I examine the details, when I take a close look at the difference between raising the cup and just imagining that I will raise it, I see nothing. There is no difference. The one in charge is the one who tells the mind to think about raising and then tells the body not to. The distinction is so fine, so thin, so tenuous, so inscrutable, that it might as well not exist.

Transcript from Radio Received Last Thursday

I don't know if you can hear this, but we're transmitting on our last battery.

We have no more power for our transmitter or for any of our equipment. The entire station has been buried in what we fear may be four or five hundred feet of snow and ice. Only a small portion of the station is still intact, and our collective body heat is all that keeps us from freezing. The face of the glacier began crumbling two days ago and we started collecting our supplies to attempt an escape before large portions of ice fell near the camp. Unfortunately we didn't have enough time, and we believe the section called Maria's Node is the one that broke off yesterday and collapsed alongside the camp, with a great deal of additional snow and ice. Judging from the signals we were able to receive before the generators quit, we feel there are now probably several hundred feet of glacial rubble above us. Please give our families our best and if it's possible to send a rescue party, that would be great. Of course we realize the chances of that are not very good. And even if you did send a rescue party it would take a very long time to dig down to us. And we have no spare oxygen in this part of the camp. So, from all of us here at the research station, it's been great, and have a nice day. Signing off: Team Nine.