

Solitude

The front door of the two-story colonial split easily beneath the man's boot. The wood had gone soft and the houses in the neighborhood were dilapidated versions of their former selves. The neighborhood had certainly been wealthy at one point. It was mostly two store homes with manicured lawns gone to seed. The cars that were left in the driveway were nicer than anything he used to drive.

As the man entered the house he glanced at the sun and decided that this was going to be the last one for today. To not get greedy and play it safe was a lesson he'd learned the hard way.

The entryway of the house was bright with natural light and the air was full of dust particles floating in the air. It was clear he was the first visitor in quite a while. Working his way through the house without finding much of anything, the man tried one last room and was surprised by what he found. It was a great find as far as he could tell although he'd probably have to abandon some of the things he'd already looted that day to make room. It didn't matter, what he could get in trade for these would be much more valuable than anything else he'd pilfered that day.

"Darius! Good to see you. It's been quite a while. So what have you brought for me today?" the portly trader asked two days later. Old Tom had set himself up on the north side of town in a massive warehouse. It used to be some sort of distribution center before. Now it was crammed with junk.

After digging a moment in his pack he came up with a loose bundle. "You know I don't really have an eye for this sort of thing," the man said almost apologetically, "but I think these are what you want."

Darius had taken the time to individually wrap each figurine in a t-shirt or rag and then had wrapped the whole collection into a larger bundle. After separating out each item and placing them on the table, he had a small formation of figurines, twelve in all. Most of the figurines were little children with swept hair and exaggerated rosy cheeks. They were mostly boys, a couple of them were girls, and one was a pair of children sharing an umbrella.

"These are nice, good quality," the trader acknowledged after taking time to inspect each one individually. "What do you want for them?"

The man looked around the large warehouse, his eyes trailing over the mounds of junk, racks of old goods, and quite a bit electronics that they both knew would never function again.

"I could use some seeds I guess. I'm thinking of growing carrots."

"Well the carrots are no problem, anything else?"

"Oil or gas if you have any. You know the real reason I'm here."

"Yeah I know. Supplies have been running low however. For these," he gestured to the figurines, "I can spare three liters."

"Five, and you give me a container to haul it."

"Four, and you can owe me for the container."

Having reached an agreement, the two men shook on it and the trader went to the racks looking for the seed packets and a container for the gas. The haggling had mostly been grandstanding; a ritual they both played out every couple weeks.

They both knew Darius could only reasonably haul four liters on his bike, and the gas was in abundance anyway.

Within a twenty mile radius there were around a hundred thousand cars, most with reasonably intact gas tanks and the man didn't even need the fuel. Getting around in a car was impractical and a bike suited his needs much more anyway. The bargaining was more a pretense for the little bit of human interaction he wanted. The trader appreciated his visits, the man knew, and he was sometimes able to get supplies he'd have to really search for otherwise. And on top of that it kept him from having to siphon fuel out of cars when he actually needed fuel.

After about twenty minutes the trader came out from around the back of his warehouse lugging a small metallic can.

"Here you go, and here are the seed packets," he said, handing over a small bundle.

"Many thanks," the man replied as he loaded up his bike.

As the man peddled away the trader waved, happy for the visit. There were so few people left. Even fewer decent ones.

"How's the trader?" Joan queried as he set his pack down on the table. "Did he appreciate those silly little figurines?"

Darius had been running late, the satellite feed had been up for a couple minutes already. It wasn't like him to lose track of time; the brief windows of communication were so few and far between.

"He appreciated them quite a bit, more than I thought he would," he typed out. "It's funny, Tom could be collecting art, sculptures, jewelry, whatever. But instead it's those cheesy figurines of little kids."

"He's into what he's into I guess," she messaged back. "Did you get anything good?"

"Carrots," he replied, "or carrot seeds I guess. Future carrots. A good amount too, hopefully they're still good. I don't really know anything about carrot seeds."

"They only last about three years or so," she replied almost instantly.

Of course she would know, he thought to himself. Even after all these years it still slipped his mind that she would inherently know anything that could be looked up.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" she asked. Her voice was uncertain and anxious.

"Do we have a choice," he replied. "I mean yeah we don't have to but there isn't really anyone left. Our friends are all over there. My mom, your cousins. And it's not like it isn't them, they're in there, you've talked to them. When I talked to mom right after her transfer, I asked her a bunch of things only she would know. And it wasn't just the knowledge, it felt like her, you know, the way she phrased things. She did seem happier than I ever remember her being."

"I know, but still..." she trailed off.

"Yeah I know, I'm scared too."

The next explosion in technological advancement hadn't come from the advent of the AI as so many scientists had predicted. Instead it had come from the ability to transfer a human's complete consciousness into a digital medium. Moving from the physical to the artificial was the biggest leap in human evolution since an ape on the Serengeti had learned to use a sharp stick to ward off predators. It only took the uploading of a couple thousand brave volunteers before it became apparent to every person on Earth that moving to the digital was the only way to stay a true member of society. The speed in which advances in science, culture, and entertainment came was a thousand fold faster than anything going on Earth, and once it was proven that you stayed you, people migrated by the millions.

Joan and Darius had scheduled their uploads together. That morning when they arrived at the facility they'd been forced to park two miles away. Every lot, every side street, was packed. It took Darius a minute to figure out why but then he realized no one who transferred would be coming back out for their car, himself included.

The waiting room was packed, but after filling out some surprisingly brief paperwork and being shown an instructional video, they were ushered through the double doors at the end of the room and down a hall to the pods, which looked like old sensory deprivation tanks.

Before going in, Darius took Joan's hand.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I do, I think this is right."

With a half-smile she kissed him briefly before turning and climbing into her pod. "See you on the other side."

After watching Joan get in, Darius climbed into his own pod. There wasn't room to stand up, and he had to half crawl onto the low bench in the center. On the end where his head was supposed to go rested a helmet connected to the wall by a very thick bundle of cables. Following the instructions they'd been give when they arrived, he put the head piece on, laid back on the bench, closed his eyes, and tried to clear his mind. Mostly he tried not to think about what they did with the bodies once the mind had been transferred. It was a one way process.

Sitting in the dark, anxious for something to happen, his mind began to wonder. Almost immediately he questioned if this was what the transfer felt like but it seemed to be taking forever. He waited for what was probably only a couple minutes but it felt like hours. Slowly he opened his eyes and instead of the bright digital future he was promised, he was still in the pod. Maybe it takes longer, he thought to himself, closing his eyes again and hoping the process wouldn't take much longer. After another long stretch an intercom buzzed.

"Mr. Patrick, there is a slight problem, we're trying to work it out."

"Okay," he half mumbled, not sure if the intercom even worked both ways. "I'll stay right here."

"Just stay where you are, we should begin the transfer shortly."

Definitely a one way intercom he thought to himself.

He lost track of time, but it was two hours before someone came to get him and showed him into a small office where an older man in a lab coat was waiting.

"Mr. Patrick, I'm Dr. Anders, have a seat." Darius took a seat, still a little out of sorts that he was still here. After mentally preparing for the transfer, it was a shock for it to not have happened. Dr. Anders continued, "So I'm sure you're wondering why you're still with us. It seems you have a unique genetic mutation. I called a colleague of mine and although

he'd never seen this mutation personally, he'd heard of a few cases. We're working out an alternative, but at this time it doesn't look like you can make the transfer."

"Ever?" Darius asked, jolted out of his haze.

"Well, I wouldn't say ever. It comes down to your neurons. They fire in a slightly different manner than most people and unfortunately that means we won't be able to get you transferred today. With the technological advances that's being done on the other side though, this maybe be solved within the week. Maybe within the next couple of hours. Although your condition is rare, you aren't the only one."

"What about Joan?" he asked, a little ashamed he hadn't asked earlier.

"Joan Demsacase, the woman you came in with? Her transfer went at 99.78%, almost perfect."

"She's over there now, she transferred?" Darius was at the same time so relieved that her transfer had gone okay and frightened that she was over there without him.

"She did, you could probably talk to her right now if you have a connection. As for your condition, make an appointment to meet with me this same time next week and we'll see where we're at."

Darius reached for his phone to see if he could get Joan online but left it at home, no need to bring anything to the transfer, and so he rushed back to his car. At home he was met with the same feelings as when he stepped out of the pod. Surprise and a little disorientation that he was still here. They'd given away some possessions, most everything was where they left it.

Joan had been really easy to get in touch with, and she was beside herself when Darius told her about his condition. A couple days went by and at first it was difficult, they were both realists about what the situation would mean for their relationship. Normal long distance relationships hardly ever work and this was a magnitude beyond that. They weren't even the same type of beings anymore. She said she'd wait for him, keep in touch, and he'd keep working with the doctors for a cure.

The next week Darius again came to the facility for his appointment with Dr. Anders, anxious to see if there'd been any progress.

"I have an appointment with Dr. Anders. I'm Darius Patrick."

The receptionist barely looked up from her computer. "Dr. Anders? He transferred last Tuesday. One of his colleagues is in charge now, overseeing this site and the one up in Andale. Dr. Velasquez."

"Well is he here, can I meet with him? Anders was supposed to be working on my condition."

"I can schedule you an appointment but it'll be a few weeks. Dr. Velasquez has very little time between managing both facilities."

"What about my case?"

"I'll send Dr. Velasquez a note and confirm the appointment. How does the 23rd work for you?"

"That doesn't really work for me at all," Darius replied. "I'll take it but I really need something sooner."

"If something comes up we'll give you a call," she replied. He suspected that was her automatic response to everything.

The next week the power grid was scheduled for shut down due to lack of personnel. Transfers became free and it became a race to get over to the other side for anyone that was on the fence. After the power went out, the only people left were the luddites, the crazies, and the unlucky.

After the carrots, Joan and Darius moved on to other topics. Mostly her trying to describe what was going on with her, his world hadn't changed much at all since the last time they talked. It seemed like so much was happening every day on her side, and he'd never be a part of it.

As they talked the counter in the lower left of the display was slowly ticking down to zero. The satellite was almost out of range.

"We're almost out of time. I'm going to go check the gates and then head to bed."

"Have a nice night, I miss you."

"Me too."

After the power went off and most people had transferred, there wasn't much of a society left. No policeman, a couple fires, looting like crazy. At that point abandoning the city seemed like the safest bet. Gathering some provisions and a couple gallons of water Darius started walking. It took a couple days but it wasn't long till he found a place that looked promising.

The farm house was about thirty miles out of town, but not too far off a highway. Darius figured he could get back to downtown in half a day or so if he really needed to and there were plenty of places to scavenge much closer. The farmhouse had a hand pump well, plenty of

tools, and the place was already set up for farming, not that he knew anything about farming. It worked out for a while but in addition to being isolated and exposed to anyone coming through, the wildlife became a problem.

It had taken about two years for the pigs to really become an issue. They were an okay source of food, and Darius wasn't one to complain about all the pork he could eat, even if it was tough and gamy. The pigs though loved whatever thing he tried to grow. They dug up potatoes, trampled and then ate the corn. They'd eaten his tomato plants whole. He'd also had a couple scares of other survivors just wandering through. One had walked into his kitchen while he was making breakfast.

On a scavenge run he'd worked through the local high school football stadium and it came on all at once what a great setup the place was. For starters no one just passing through is going to scavenge a football stadium. Best case is old concession food. It had taken him years before he explored the place and the only reason he'd stopped at all was to take a break from the noon sun. On top of the inconspicuous nature of the location, there was a perfect plot of land already fertilized and ready to go. He figured the football field was almost an acre of land, plenty to eat off of. Keeping the pigs out would also be a breeze. They'd dig under fences, come on faster than he could shoot them, but no way was a pig getting through chain link set in concrete. Not that they would even try in the first place. The large surface area of the seating with built in drainage made it a breeze to set up water collection and the home team locker room provided a place to sleep. It was a lucky find.

Go Tigers he thought wryly to himself the first night he slept there, his cot set up underneath the giant mural of a Bengal tiger in the locker room.

Three days after he talked to Joan about the carrots, one of his worst fear came to pass. Between the local hardware store, a couple grocery stores, and what his farm put out, Darius' needs were pretty well take care of. The problem was that surviving wasn't enough. It was touch and go years ago when the transfers were tapering off and society was breaking down. Now though things had stabilized quite a bit. Finding items for the trader, reading books, and just seeing what was around were the best ways he found to spend his time. He was always finding something better. Just two weeks prior he'd found an amazingly well stocked workshop. If he ever got into furniture making he'd know where to get all the professional tools he'd need.

Working the south side of town he rounded a corner and found something unusual, an Italian sports car smashed halfway into a house. Burned out homes were fairly common but a car sticking out of a living room was something he hadn't seen before. It looked like it had

happened fairly recently too. Curiosity getting the better of him, Darius couldn't help surveying the scene. Maybe the driver had something good on him too.

The sports car had taken out the front door but left a pretty sizable hole. Stepping over some bricks, Darius felt the house shift slightly just before the front half of the roof collapsed. Darius tried to push himself free as chunks of the house crashed down on top of him, and he felt like he was moving in slow motion as a large crossbeam crashed into his chest knocking him to the ground. The wind was knocked out of him from the fall and with all the dust in the air Darius started coughing while trying to sit up. He struggled against the debris that had crashed around him and could budge no more than an inch or two. Putting his weight on some of the rubble had caused the roof to slide forward then collapse entirely. All those years of meticulously treating any cuts and bruises, always aware that he couldn't call 911, and he'd still managed to succumb to an accident.

He was pinned under the crossbeam for about four hours before he heard the whistling. It started slowly at first, and was so faint he was sure he was imagining it. Already going crazy he thought to himself. Able to hold it together through the end of the world all these years but a couple hours pinned under a house and you start to hallucinate. Nice.

The whistling grew louder though until Darius was certain he couldn't be imagining it.

"Help..." he managed weakly before starting another coughing fit.

Just outside his field of vision he heard the sound of boot steps walk right up to the collapsed house and stop. Encounters with new people were fraught with danger. Most of the people left were at least a little crazy and more often than not dangerous. To be caught out like this in such a precarious situation was the worst case scenario. On more than one occasion he'd barely survived an encounter even with the ability to defend himself.

"Well," said the voice that went with the boot steps "Let's get you out of there. If I lift up on this cross beam, can you slide yourself out? I don't think I can lift it all the way off."

"I can, for sure."

As the stranger lifted Darius was able to pivot his body and slide from underneath the wreckage. It was hard getting to his feet, but once he was able to stand he took a good look at the man who had saved his life.

"I'm Coker," the man said as he offered his hand. Coker was a little taller than Darius, dressed in a flannel shirt despite the warm weather. He was bald with a mostly gray beard and looked to be a bit over fifty.

"Darius," he replied shaking Coker's hand. "I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't found me."

"Probably dehydrated to death, I'd guess. Maybe some of the local wildlife would have gotten you."

"You're probably right." Darius stood there for a moment. Coker seemed content to enjoy the silence and didn't seem to be in a hurry to get anywhere. Darius didn't want to be rude but he was starving. Digging in his pack he found some granola bars he'd found earlier in the day. They were years past due but he'd yet to find a granola bar he couldn't eat.

"Want one," he asked offering the box.

"Sure, thanks." Coker replied.

"So, just passing through I guess?"

"Yeah just passing through." Looking directly into his eyes, the man asked, "Genetic abnormality 728?"

"What?"

"The reason you're not over there. You have genetic abnormality 728. I can see it in your eyes. Seen it a lot, most common reason people couldn't transfer that wanted to."

"I never heard it called that, I just couldn't transfer. Think the doctor said it was something with my neurons."

"Yep, that's it. We've got that solved though," the man added nonchalantly.

"Wait, solved? And who do you mean by we?"

"Up north I'm part of a group, mostly people like you who wanted to transfer but couldn't. A couple scientists on the other side solved the problem in about a day, but the fix wasn't widely known with the huge glut of people coming over."

"So your people, they can fix it so I can go over?"

"Oh yeah, they've done it for about two dozen so far. Not a big deal, just have to get up to camp. We're based at a university campus, about three or four hundred of us. Got a small power plant running, water, all of it. Even have a steady connection with the other side. Some of them have really taken an interest in us, help us out and everything. Help us get people over who wanted to transfer and couldn't. It's kind of like an embassy or I guess a gateway. There are a couple around the world, ours is the closest for about three thousand miles."

"So let me get this straight. Your people can get me to the other side?"

"That's the gist of it, want me to draw you a map? It's pretty easy to find, but it's about a thousand miles east of here, over near the coast. It took me about three months to get out here."

"What exactly are you doing out here then, if you guys have this great setup?"

"Recruiting I guess. This is really a sabbatical for me. I've been at camp a couple years now and I really just wanted to get out and see how things have changed. Sometimes I run into people like you, someone who just got stuck here, and I point them in our direction."

Darius and Coker talked for a bit more and Coker put together a rough map. Once Darius was completely sure he knew where he was going he bid Coker farewell and rushed home.

Checking the satellite feed, the system wouldn't make a connection for two more days. Getting out a map, Darius traced the best route to the camp. He could probably do forty miles a day if he booked it, and if what Coker had told him was the truth, he could upload in less than a month. Probably should wait, he decided. What's two more days to let Joan know, he asked himself? Still, he was filled with excitement, and the prospect of his exile being at an end was too much. After an hour or so he started packing the essentials.

Packing took a surprisingly short amount of time; he knew most things he could just find as needed. His legs still throbbed from earlier in the day but even so he loaded up his bike and started out of town a couple hours before sunset.

On the console he'd spent so much time in front of these last years, he'd loaded a message that would send as soon as the satellite connection was made. He knew Joan would be furious but that would all be in the past when he made it over.

> Joan,

> I've met a man who has told me about a group of people who are still in touch with the other side. They've worked out a fix for my problem.

> Going to try and see, can't stay here any longer. I'd rather know for sure one way or another than wait it out here. Love you.

> Darius