

THE MAN WHO LIVED TWO LIVES

and accomplished nothing

I happened to be reading the news on my phone screen the other day when a news tidbit caught my eye. An important breakthrough in the category of the invention of the wheel had been reached. For the first time in the annals of medicine, a brain transplant had been successfully accomplished in China. A Chinese surgeon had transplanted the brain of a young accident victim into the body—the skull—of an old man of 90. The news launched me into a paroxysm of frenetic daydreaming. I'm too old for today's standards, but what if I could?... No, no, my imagination is getting the best of me. I'm going too far. It's too late for me. I soon landed back on the ground.

I had reached my 90th birthday. Divorced once. I had two offspring. Males, now in their 60's. With children of their own. I have two grandchildren, males too. I met the pair of them once, when newly born, at my wife's urging. I don't remember reencountering them more than a few times. I never felt the need to. I've been estranged from my offspring since my wife passed 20 years ago. I've lived my life; they've lived theirs. They know I'm not the type to socialize. Always felt uneasy in company. I was born that way, I can't help it. And I didn't know it till mature in years: I suffer from autism. The kind that's hardly detectable. Not even my mother suspected it. I found out accidentally the day my mother told me, recalling my childhood, that I had the habit of interchanging pronouns. Son, she continued, at five you liked your milk warm and extra sweet. Once, I forgot to sweeten it and handed it to you warm but without sugar. You startled me going into a paroxysm, screaming, Got... got a lot of sugar!, while

you meant that it *did not* have any sugar. My strange behavior puzzled my mother but she dismissed it as natural for a child my age, incidental to my growing pains.

I remember my young mother. Loving, caring, kind, compassionate, selfless, patient, devoted and unconditional; and she was very elegant, swaying in front of her mirror like a graceful cat modeling a new coat of fur.

Regarding me, the following was higher on the scale of the weird, the absurd, but she still did not suspect anything outside the normal in a growing kid. My mom and I happened to be eating brunch in the restaurant of an exclusive hotel. It was a busy day. Full house along the tables. She would tell me—and still blushed recalling many years later—the time I had diarrhea and was forced to unload in my pants in this public place. I screamed in desperation, Mom, YOU POOH-POOHED in your pants! YOU POOH-POOHED in your pants! My words hit her like a ton of bricks. It was not her but I who had discharged in my clothing, the smell and the pouch on my shorts left no doubt. Twenty years later she still blushes re-telling the story. She vividly remembers the crowd of faces in the sala, in unison, craning out in her direction. She was the center of attention of nasty frowning faces. Red in the face, desperate to leave, she remembers, I tossed a bill on the table, pulled away my purse and yanked you by the arm through the exit door! This story by my mother, told twenty years later, convinced me that I was a statistic for *autism*. Further signs reinforced my auto-diagnosis: I feel uneasy in public. I don't have close friends and prefer to keep my distance from anybody. I'd rather live my life like a loner while letting others live theirs. Introverted, I hate being the center of attention. That takes me definitely to the level of autism.

Back to the present. I am now retired from forty years in real estate. I have navigated graciously through the *life landmarks* or stages, those that most males of the species necessarily travel. The *first landmark* happened at the beginning of my teen years. An explosion of the sex glands accompanied by the prepotency of an excess of manhood. The feeling of eternal youth where the notion of growing old is inconceivable. For many of us, our first landmark lasts until the first gray hairs start protruding on our temples, event that lunges us into the *second landmark*, when our feeling of eternal life is shattered against the realization of our own mortality.

For many of us the *third landmark* appears when our hair starts falling off. We look ourselves one morning in the mirror and find something missing on top of our head. We lean down and notice a patch of skin where a heavy tuft of hair used to be. Each day the patch grows bigger and wider baring an expanding patch of pale skin. A few months later hair keeps falling off as if our forehead had grown back and covered our entire head top leaving only two tufts of hair stubbornly clinging over our ears. We feel naked, embarrassed. We consider the alternatives: a hairpiece, a hair transplant, shaving our heads to cover up partial baldness with total baldness. Our panic is accompanied with the awareness that we are *growing old*.

And then, we enter the *fourth landmark*. We cannot perform sexually like we used to. Penile disfunction takes over. Libido takes a plunge and our member can not reach the hardness to accomplish a penetration. Prostatitis. Inflammation of the prostate gland. The urge to pee, passing urine, wetting the pants; the need for adult diapers, urine blockage, but worst of all, penile disfunction (devastating to a man's ego, and

self esteem). The shame of failing to perform in bed and turning our face away in shame. The medical remedies: prostate removal surgery; water vapor therapy; Holey (laser); Rezum; Urolift. Good remedies but you'll never be the same.

Many of us go into a deep depression—a feeling of worthlessness. We pay a visit to the urologist. His diagnosis? ED—erectile dysfunction and prescribes medications to bring us back to par. Some of us try to find a solution abandoning our present mate, who is about our own age, and finding a younger woman to prove that we can still satisfy any one no matter how young she is (if we have the cynicism and the money to do so). Some months or years later, when we can no longer play the sex games young women like to play, or after we discover that she's been fooling around with a younger guy, we finally come to terms with our own impotency and old age.

It is during the last landmark, *number five* that I decided to give more meaning to my life. I decided to write a novel after being an arduous reader of everything I could get my hands on. Adventure, politics, fiction, non-fiction. After several years, I became good at it. Local writing clubs and friends and relatives lauded my work. Secret for my success: Once you reach a mature age never leave what you gotta do for tomorrow because tomorrow might never come.

In *landmark five* Nature renders us irrelevant. When we can no longer reproduce, mission accomplished, she says. The fate of salmonfish at this stage is death. But are we mere salmons? Maybe not. I have been lucky to retire and live comfortably the last, the many last years of my life. I have reached the age of 90. In perfect health and physically active, I plan to last at least ten more years. This is something my grandsons

can not tolerate. Nothing or nobody has been more emphatic about my irrelevancy than my relatives, Grandpa, you're stealing oxygen from the rest of the world. I suspect that for years, they've been trying to kill me.

Sophocles: his own sons tried to have him declared legally incompetent in his nineties (to pounce on his riches), but he refuted their charges in court by reading from his new play *Oedipus at Colonus*. The judge was so astonished by his brightness of mind and mental acumen that he filed in his favor and let him continue enjoying his fortune.

My relatives, especially my two grandchildren, dragged me to court to declare me legally incompetent and lacking the capacity to make sound decisions, especially writing a will. It misfired, the judge declared that I, at my age, was much saner than them. Tony, how has Tony changed! Now, a caricature of himself as a young man: junk food and adulterated liquor have changed his appearance. He's gained weight. His chiseled, youthful image has deteriorated into a caricature of himself twenty years later; cheeks, puffy and swollen; once flat stomach, a belly pouch protruding through an oversized shirt; his muscular legs, now hairy cedar logs bumpy with cellulite.

I guess we all change in old age. Some of us to the bad and others to the worst. The end of the life cycle can be very cruel. As we age we physically approach the image of death. Reason the young often try to avoid us. Grandson Tom, younger than Tony by a few years, on the contrary, had kept in good shape. He's been for years a gym trainer and lucky with women. His problem is his mind, it's rotten.

The last months I was the subject of a chain of incidents that were surely precipitated by them. I was at the wheel of my Lexus sedan when I ran into a post when the brakes failed. Investigators found that the car computer had been tampered with, yet, they found no culprits. Disabled brakes: you may control your brake pedal, but microprocessors in your onboard computer really make your brakes work. Hackers who get into your onboard computer can disable your brakes and even stop the engine.

The attempt was followed by a week or two of digestive distress that almost did me in. Lab tests found castor oil in my tissues, but without evidence, they refused to blame anybody for attempted homicide. While castor oil is fairly common in households, the beans it is extracted from are extremely poisonous. In fact, one bean is enough to kill a person, and four to kill a horse. All this, because of a chemical called ricin. I suspected ricin as I had some of its symptoms of poisoning: blurred vision, tearing and sweating, loss of bowel and bladder control, difficulty breathing, as my airway filled with fluid, tremors, muscle twitching, seizures.

Grigori Rasputin, the Russian monk employed by the family of tsar Nicolas II, survived four assassination attempts. He was poisoned with cyanide. When that failed he was shot in the chest. An hour later he awoke, ran, and was shot in the back and head. He was then tied and dumped in a river. The coroner found that they had attempted to asphyxiate him before dumping him hogtied into the water. Rasputin cultivated an immunity to poisons by regularly ingesting sub-lethal doses, practice, called mithridatism, first tried by King Mithridates the Great. My strong constitution and my practice of mithridatism saved me from demise this time but days later someone took a potshot at me. It razed

my head and made a hole in the windshield glass but spared me serious injury.

Fearing for my life and unable to rely on the authorities I concocted a plan to hit back at my relatives and get rid of them definitely. Finally, an event unravelled the whole conspiracy when my two grandkids were killed in an explosion. I heard street rumors that my two grandchildren were in the underground market for a bomb that they planned to place in my car. Amateur assassins, they were dismayed with the failures of their hired hitmen and decided to try the job themselves. It backfired. I booby-trapped my car with a bomb of my own bought in the criminal underground and waited for their actions. Rightly so, they were in the process of strapping the device under the driver's seat of my Lexus when I detonated my charge killing them both. As their bomb also went off, the police and ATF never discovered the presence of my bomb. Dynamite is a good destroyer of evidence.

I have reached 92. I look back and I feel I've wasted a life. Not one but two lives. My first life was not a complete waste though; I had added a few million dollars to my portfolio: real estate, stocks and savings, product of my years as a real estate broker. Besides, agreeing with what's politically acceptable, I married only once. Anyway, wives are a waste of time and money.

By my 60th birthday, I was an avid reader; yet, I didn't realize that I had a talent for writing until my 64th. After a few years of trial and error, of writing, rewriting and editing, I penned a couple of novels, a few novelettes and some short stories and sent them out to publishers. No luck. Rejection letters every time. I attempted to write a few short plays (in college, my major was theatre arts). My last works are not bad at

all. Reader friends are very congratulatory specially about a play after Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliette and a novel after Sophocles' Trichinae.

I was an old man by society's standards but took good care of myself: nutrition and exercise, exercise and nutrition; yet, I was not a happy man. I dreamt of a time machine that could transport me back to my young years again where I could re-launch my writing career and, after the necessary span to get known, become a famous author. Life is unfair. I was toning my muscles at the gym one day when I had a brain storm. I was watching a young man working out with weights. He was medium height and muscle-chiseled and proud. Black hair, chiseled features, six-pack abs and very white skin; chiseled cheekbones and defined muscles, a square jawline and an oval-shaped face paired with light eyes; medium-thick straight eyebrows, brown hair, average lips, and a straight, slim nose. Nature had been splendid to him, the image of Adonis of Greek fame even to the marble tone of his skin.

I followed him for some time with my eyes. He must have thought I suffered from the Old and Gay (from *Old and Grey*) syndrome and was melting for him. He said it sardonically with his smile and I smiled back.

I daydreamed a plan that I soon delegated to a back burner in my mind: what if I could transplant my brain into his body? I'd still be myself, my own conscience, but in a young vigorous body. And young and new, I could wait out the time to realize my dream of becoming a great author, be recognized as such, win prizes and accolades, and enjoy the fame and world renown that famous writers enjoy. But, but... I had to commit murder and that stopped my delirium cold.

My plan broke out of the realm of fiction when I heard the news of the successful brain transplant that had

been performed in Shanghai, China, by a neurosurgeon—a doctor Jim Pao. I gathered my travel items and took a flight to Shanghai. I interviewed the scientist responsible for the medical breakthrough, and his subject, a once old man who was now convalescing in a hospital like an energized young man. This one was very friendly, content like a kid with new shoes, and healthy and exuberant though still under observation a few months after surgery.

I asked the doctor, a middle age man in the plenitude of his faculties, with intelligent and penetrating eyes, if he could do the same on me, that I had up to one million dollars to pay for his services. He was sorry to refuse me revealing that the Chinese government had other projects in store for him, and that that was final. I said good bye to China resigning myself to my fate as a decrepit old man. I took the next flight back to the States.

When I arrived home, I was surprised by an email from Doctor Jim Pao. He stated that he had received authorization to perform the surgery on me, that it was good PR for China, but that I needed to find a suitable donor who had recently passed. I felt exhilarated and aloft but I promptly landed back on the ground. The idea was far-fetched. First, would the young man at the gym be compatible; and second, would he be agreeable to being murdered even for a noble cause? And once I got hold of the body, how to ship it to Shanghai?

Back at the gym, I followed my subject around until I observed him blowing his nose in the bathroom and discarding the tissue. I picked up the tissue from the floor and had a DNA analysis performed in a private clinic. It was not cheap but I obtained the results: to my delight, surprise and shock, I and the man were compatible. Blood type, all markers agreed with mine.

But now, the hard part: how to obtain his body quickly and without damaging it.

In the town of my birth, Tucson, Arizona, I drove to skid row and observed a drug transaction. Clearly a plastic envelope was exchanged for a roll of bills in a dark alley. I approached the pusher and offered five hundred dollars for a reference to a hitman to take care of someone. He was reticent at first but then he snapped the bills from my hand and said someone would contact me soon.

That evening I received a call from a certain Stiletto Jones, You want me to take care of somebody? he asked in a cavernous voice. I said yes, but it was to look like a heart attack; the body should be pristine as I need it for medical research. It had to be delivered to a funeral house I had selected. We won't damage the body; will smother him slowly with a plastic bag. Doctors will think it's a heart attack. I've done it before. But it's going to cost you, he warned me. It was not cheap by any standards but I had invested already too much on my plan and... how can you put value on a human life? I met him at a convenient dark place and placed the money envelope in his hand. That was the only contact we had. I washed my hands with plenty of soap and splashed them with disinfectant as soon as I arrived home.

I got busy doing more research. First, I needed a death certificate and permission to ship the body out of the US. The funeral house I had found specialized in transferring bodies across the border. Next, to get the fake papers that I was transporting a Chinese national. Fate was friendly to me. The young man had no relatives but a distant sister who travelled back to her home town in Texas right after receiving an urn with the purported ashes from the cremation chamber (In case you want to try this yourself, I warn you that you must be

ready to dish out a lot of funds). As to the body itself, they agreed to prepare all the paper work for shipment to China. It wasn't cheap, I repeat. I sold many of my assets to raise enough cash.

Back in the states after the successful transplant I was arrested for murder. FBI agents told me they had Stiletto in the cross hairs for some time. They were sorry they were late catching him before the murder. He sang like a canary on a stool to save his skin. He knew who I was andll my location. He had me followed after the money exchange in the dark alley.

I was convicted and sentenced to life without the possibility of parole. Prison time's been a complete waste. Trying to survive multiple plots on my life concocted by my victim's sister, I had no peace of mind for writing. Besides, no publisher was willing to handle the works of a convicted murderer.

Today is my birthday: 95, but no reason to celebrate. A decrepit, penniless (except for prison pay, a few cents per day) old man who lived two lives and accomplished nothing.

End of story