A GAME OF SELF-DECEIT

The resurrection shuffle

BY CLAYTON LOCKE

I saw him duck under the cover of the awning, collapsing and shaking his umbrella, and step into the lazy smoke of the *izakaya*. When he raised his gaze to sweep the diners and drinkers at their tables, it took me a moment to work out what was wrong. Then I got it: I was looking at myself, not as I usually did, left-right inverted in the mirror, but as I saw myself in photographs. It's funny that my brain should pick out such a subtle detail. He saw me sitting at one of the outer tables, next to the plastic sheeting turned opaque with hammering rain. Then, as he moved away from the door, another figure entered. He was with my wife.

His greeting bow was the slightest nod. "*Konbanwa*."

"Why did you bring her, you fool?" Without thinking I had addressed him using *temee*, an aggressive personal pronoun. I didn't even dare look at my wife, for fear of choking emotion.

"Because, *Koji-kun*, I want everything we do here to be witnessed. I'm not underestimating you."

I composed my face into the ever-necessary mask of neutrality. He had taken me off-guard, and I silently reprimanded myself. I harboured a sense of superiority over him, although I knew it to be illogical. This man was exactly me. Well, almost. I had the memories of the mountains and the time of cold, the experience that has shifted my entire way of thinking. A way of thinking I intended to preserve.

"This is illegal. You have to stay more than 20 kilometres away from me," he said.

I couldn't help but laugh at the notion that a bystander would pick us as clones; a salary-man in a crisply tailored suit, and a man in ill-fitting rags. He was right though, yet still he came. That's good, it meant he was afraid. I flicked a glance at my wife. For a heartbeat our eyes met and the blood sang in my ears.

"I've got a proposal for you," I said. I nodded to the empty chairs at my table and after a moment of hesitation they sat. I reached down for the plastic bag beside my chair and placed it on the table between us. Inside were documents and photos.

"So it's blackmail? I credited myself with more imagination than this. Where did you get these?" He paused a moment: when he spoke again his voice was level. "What's your problem? It's legal, you've been given a new identity, you're still *you*. You're wallowing in this self-serving misery, don't look to me to pull you out of it!"

"You don't know the half of it," I said. I reflected on all that had brought me here, how I should never have gone mountaineering without a backup hoverbelt. It was

How easily they'd discarded me. Life was cheap now, but death was cheaper. Already a clone body had been grown and my latest memory backup imprinted on the fresh brain. It wasn't possible to re-enter my life, for my new self had all the rights and identity: everything from bank accounts and job qualifications to friends and my wife.

I had changed in those weeks. Although I cursed myself for my stupidity, I held the experience in the mountains as the most important thing that had ever happened to

me. I wanted to keep it and shape my life with it as part of me. I'd spent long nights seething with jealousy at the imposter taking over my life. Then I had a plan, and the very next day I spent the last yen of my pension on a full up-to-the-minute memory backup at a professional storage agency.

I blinked back into the present. The new me snatched across the table and tried to grab the plastic bag but I caught his wrist and in a moment we were both on our feet and struggling. In the confusion I pulled the gun from my rear pocket. This is where my preparations paid off, my risky burglary of what had once been my own home to retrieve this very weapon.

The gun was between us now (it was an evenly matched fight, I observed wryly) and I sensed a crowd gathering. I twisted backwards, keeping my hold on him,

and we fell to the ground, and the gun was pointed at my own temple, my finger around the trigger. I didn't think I'd have the courage, but now in the moment it was all too easy.

"Murderers don't come back," I said. I saw his eyes widen as he recognized his pistol, the realization he'd been out-played. He knew what I knew, the death penalty was sure and a criminal would not be resurrected. It would be the *real* me, who had lived through the mountain cold, who would live again. He tried to withdraw his hands from the pistol but it was too late. The muzzle tight against the side of my head, I pulled the trigger. ■

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only when the primary one didn't catch and I slipped and fell that I'd realized how stupid I'd been. I'd come to a stop in a deep ravine, my knees shattered, coughing blood. A blow to my head had cracked the personal smartphone chip embedded in my skull. Suddenly I was cut off from the world, no Internet access, no emergency calls, and a silence like I'd not known in many years. I'd been missing for less than two days, but who could survive those subzero temperatures? Lost in the mist and rain, hearing the electric hiss of hover-copters as they glided overhead, and shouting myself hoarse. I'd finally been

found, but by the time the gears of bureaucracy had turned, nearly two weeks had passed, and to the world I was dead.

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