

MIRROR

Reflected glory.

BY TAIK HOBSON

“Mr Wollensberg, please. Stop. Shouting.”
“You stop playing doctor and give me what I need!”

The physician unit took a step back; 5.72 minutes of acrimonious negotiations later and they had barely chipped the ice. In the uncomfortable silence filling the room, neither unit nor patient seemed inclined to talk. It fell to the unit to make the next move. D0K retook its step and dropped its voice; from its internal store of social cues it chose a quirk at random.

“Mr Wollensberg, can I be frank?” Raising a hand, D0K pinched at the bridge of an imaginary nose. “My suggestions, far from being arbitrary, are meant to reflect six decades’ worth of MED treatment data ... Miraculously, we are no closer to addressing your problem than when I first entered this room 6.5 minutes ago. Therefore I don’t believe that it is my method that you object to, but something else —”

“What?”

“Your aversion to units. To put it bluntly.” A snort came from the patient’s direction. “Evidenced by your refusal to adopt a unit assistant, as per unit legislation, even when you were still in service, as well as your current attitude —”

“Nothing in the law says I have to like them. Now, are you going to bring me a real doctor, or what?”

Two black pupils balanced over a hooked nose closed the distance between patient and physician unit, proving that back in the day the notoriety of Dr Justin Wollensberg had been well deserved. Not three days out of the ice, and the ex-surgeon had already cowed the entire surgical wing.

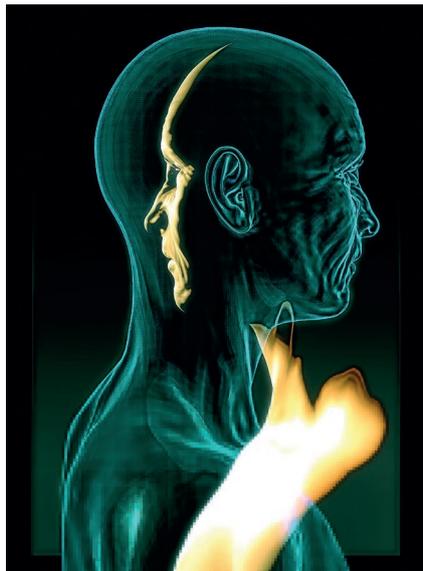
“As I explained, 2.13 minutes ago, there are no more human physicians left.” In spite of itself, D0K had to fight to stand its ground. “Not after the responsibility of caring was rescinded from human hands in 217—”

“More nonsense.” But the patient went quiet. For all their disagreements, he must have seen that they were going in circles. “Fine. Then give me the Mirror Option.”

D0K cross-referenced the patient list. “You’ve been speaking to your ward neighbour, Mr Bhullar.”

“Damn right I have. Didn’t think I’d wait this long just to have someone else treat me, did you?”

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Bhullar had a digitized copy of *himself* treat his illness. That’s what I want.”

“That explanation oversimplifies the option, I’m afraid. Mr Bhullar was an exception; the offer was made so we could archive his approach to the Whipple’s procedure —” D0K hurried to make its point when it saw the patient’s mood start to change. “The Mirror Option confers full authority upon a digitized copy of yourself. Yes, this is correct. But we would have no control over it —”

Wollensberg sneered. “I don’t see a problem.”

“Kindly explain how that is superior to what we are offering you now.”

“It would have a nose, for a start ... But you weren’t planning on offering me this choice.”

“The Mirror is not without faults. Sometimes it ... reflects more than what’s desired, to put it one way.”

“Ha! And just the kind of poetic nonsense I wanted to avoid when I had them freeze me all those years ago. Mirror, indeed! Count yourself lucky, robot, because you’re in for some real schooling.”

“In that case,” said D0K, realizing that it had reached a solution, albeit not the one it had hoped for, “on to the issue of consent.”

Fifteen minutes later, just as the unit had secured the patient’s consent, a hawkish nose appeared from behind the door, followed by a pair of dark eyes that turned first to the end of the room where the patient was bedded, then onto the readings of a medical pad held out by the physician unit.

“And who do we have here ...?”

“A Mr Justin Wollensberg,” said D0K. “Cryonized in 2031, age 68; decryonized three days ago for further treatment of his Stage T4 pancreatic adenocarcinoma. Non-smoker, with a significant social history of four drinks a day, on average, for 20 years up until the time of diagnosis. Whisky, mostly. Presentation: jaundice only. Condition flagged as inoperable owing to age.”

“Mr Wollensberg,” said D0K, looking across the bed, “your Mirror.”

“A real doctor. At last! I must say —”

“Why’s he here, then?” asked the Mirror.

The unit looked up.

“Why —”

“Cryo hasn’t made anyone younger yet, or has it? And is this or is this not the surgical ward?”

“It is, doctor. But our Nanosurgery Option has an 87% —”

“Robot, MED does not condone acts of heroism. Not in 2031. Not now. Has the patient funds for recryonization?”

“No.”

“Then I want him out of here and in palliative by noon. Understood?”

“Yes —”

“Clearly long-standing pancreatitis that’s been self-managed ... And poorly too —”

A shout brought both the Mirror and the unit around. Yellow and deathly, the patient had pulled himself up to sit.

“How dare you! I didn’t spend all those years on ice just so you could brush me off like some —” jabbing his finger in the air, he settled at last on D0K “— like some *machine!* It’s a trick! That’s not me! I would never —”

“And a psych referral, if he’s still in denial during transfer.” The Mirror left the room.

The physician unit waited until the patient had stopped shouting before turning around.

“That was the likeliest outcome by 73.7%. Please explain why you chose the Mirror.”

But the man didn’t answer. D0K made a psychiatry referral anyway. “Your transfer will effect —”

“What happens to the Mirror now?”

“As an autonomous program it will be offered a position in the appropriate consultancy, with the opportunity for retraining.”

“... maybe —” the man’s eyes were dull, “maybe you should delete it.”

D0K looked away, disgusted. “I will not. Good day, Mr Wollensberg.”

The unit left the room. ■

Taik Hobson lives in Japan, where he averages four cups of tea per day all year round.

ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY