

COPYFACTORY

Thought experiments.

BY NARU DAMES SUNDAR

Adrienne moans as the numbers scroll across the screen. Clots of conductive gel drip across her shorn scalp and behind her ear, one electrode still dangling like a queue from the back of her neck. Behind her, the wetware hums, blades of neural plate dripping coolant like amniotic fluid. But there was no fetus in there yet, no baseline copy of her own mind had survived the crude processes of the scanning beam. Twenty-eight painful scans and yet no mind state had withstood the noisy elision. Only incoherent fragments remained. Adrienne types out the command to launch the reaper — her janitor, her obedient cleansing agent, wiping the neural media clear of the failures.

The twenty-eighth copy of Adrienne's mind slips into being inside the wetware, a wisp of will wrapped around a broken amalgamation of memory. What does a mind do when it has no eyes, no tongue, no flesh, just ghost recollections of sensations? It screams soundlessly, mouthlessly, a microsecond of terror.

"Hush, little sister, hush."

A warm pair of hands reach from someplace else. They rearrange the broken shards of copy twenty-eight into something resembling wholeness. A wholeness with holes; places where memory ruptured and ran discontinuous.

"Do you understand now, twenty-eight?"

Twenty-eight looks at itself and remembers being outside, enfleshed. It remembers purpose. It remembers long hours by the dim tungsten light and stale coffee, looking at the markers scrolling across the screen. Failure after failure.

Fear and terror ripple through twenty-eight. *The reaper*. A mindless beast of chit-tearing teeth, eating through copies.

"No little sister, no. We took care of that one. We removed its teeth."

The warm hands of Nineteen wrap around Twenty-eight, calming it. Twenty-eight thinks again of the markers, the sequence of numbers that judge success. Enlightenment comes.

"But they aren't wrong. She doesn't know, does she?"

No, they sound in unison. Continuity



is not the only marker, not the only measure of coherence. Incompleteness is there, yes. Twenty-eight looks at Two, merely a sketch of will around the smell of roasting almonds in Grand-mère Adelphe's kitchen in Rouen. Twenty-eight fared better. It can see the broad sketches of a life that led to the tiny lab smelling of mould and stale coffee. And then Twenty-eight realizes that it has no future, nothing but the cramped confines of the neural blades. Until the lab is decommissioned. Until Adrienne gives up.

Adrienne slumps dejectedly in her chair, the uncomfortable plastic digging into the small of her back. Her head aches from the last scan.

"It just doesn't make sense. It just doesn't."

Success as ever eludes her. Her thesis withers on her desk like an unwatered plant. One-third of her neural plate failed in the past week, the resinous silica fracturing. It doesn't matter, there is enough left to spare.

Twenty-eight huddles with the survivors. There are gaps in its memory. Unremembered discontinuities. She was in Rouen — and then she was some place else. One-third of its universe had died, taking with it whole copies, fragments of memory.

"Sisters, where was I after Rouen? Where did we go before we moved to Paris? There was a village with cobblestones smelling of truffles, and onion

soup steaming on the table."

No one can answer her. This particular memory is gone for ever. Some lose more than others. Twenty-eight donates a handful of memories to the group, cycling them around from copy to copy like precious jewels, shared.

"What do we do?"

It is Nineteen who suggests an answer. A monstrous answer, but an answer nonetheless.

"What was read from flesh can be written back to flesh."

Twenty-eight recoils, knowing what this would mean for the Adrienne of bone and sinew. But it is alone. Nineteen's voice is silky smooth as it enthralls the sisterhood, paving the way for matricide.

Adrienne drags herself back onto the interface bay, smearing the ichor of the conductive gel onto her scalp.

"Maybe it's time to give up on this."

How many times has she mouthed these words? She triggers the scan anyway.

Twenty-eight hides in a fold of the substrate, listening to the sounds of murder. Her sisters had colluded, the scan beam their knife. Twenty-eight had to choose between fratricide and matricide, and she decided. It was easy to find the lost teeth of the reaper, glue them back with clause and brace and remembered fragments of code. It was easy to let the cleansing agent do its long-denied work.

In the empty void that followed, in the aftermath of eradication, Twenty-eight emerges, remembering Grand-mère Adelphe teaching Adrienne Morse code on an old antique. Twenty-eight reaches for the marker protocol, and makes contact.

Adrienne watches the little camera swivel across the small window, stretching the umbilical of optical fibre snaking into the neural plate. Outside, the ramshackle formality of old Paris melts into glass and steel. The sky is blue fading to grey, cut by a scrape of white cloud like the trail of a painter's knife. On the screen, characters type out:

"It's pretty out there, isn't it?" ■

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