

Ivy Alvarez - Cipher

They looked trivial. He knew the crowd was made up of individuals, each one with a story, each life holding value, but what of it? Together they made up an apathic crowd. One which, from his perspective, looked trivial.

He was unsure though what he meant by perspective. Was it his vantage point from up here, at the top of this building? Was it his back story, the only good thing about which was that he no longer had Alzheimer's? Or was it his mind-set, which in the midst of calculating the jump from here to the pavement below, was feeding back to his senses the insignificance of the crowd?

The crowd was buzzing. The more he thought about them the angrier he got. Where was society's concern when the big decisions were made, the ones that wound up breaking his life into a million pieces? The people were nowhere, until here they were, the immediacy of his situation somehow spurring them into action which was no action at all, but regret in retrospect.

You hypocrite, he thought to himself, *you should ask yourself where you were.*

Where had he been indeed? He could remember now how he had received the diagnosis. At least he thought he could remember. His memory was like a tattered book with crucial pages torn out at random.

He was better now, of course. He wasn't slipping away anymore. No longer did his memories recede away in tides spurred by a fickle moon, in waves that may or may not return. The thoughts that died though. Those were buried in unmapped parts of his brain and there was no technology that could exhume them. They were working on the science now, of how to save your personality, upload it to a software. But how would that work, arresting your personality at a point and capturing it, not letting it develop?

That decision was not his to agonize over. There were other minotaurs in his labyrinth. Looking back now he had to guess what was memory and what was a story he told himself.

And sometimes he wondered whether it was all a story, told to him by the doctors. What if he hadn't agreed to the treatment, but was being told now that he had? He could see his signature on all the documents, but he couldn't remember signing them. And how had they taken his consent? How far had his dementia gone? And what about now? This new person that he was, did he give his consent?

When he'd gone home after the treatment he'd hated it. He couldn't fathom why he had the furniture in black leather, the walls done in paisley, the curtains frothing in white lace. He didn't know why there was cheese cake in the fridge. He was astounded when a gardener insisted firmly that he was under his employment. He yearned for a dog. He thought that the television set was on the wrong side of the room.

Never mind that though, was what everyone said. You're better now.

Better, he thought, looking down at the crowd, now joined by a few police cars. This is better.

The reasons put forward to convince him to accept the treatment had so little to do with him and so much to do with things he had nothing to do with. The recipients of the treatment were pioneers, they said. Links in a chain of research studies thrown into the mists of the future, saving the next generation of the demented. And of course, he must have wanted to stop the slow, eerie erosion of himself. He had read of how leprosy caused its victims fingers and toes to fall off, their noses to become flattened. He had seen photos of patients of the now extinct disease, with stumps at the end of their arms, noses almost missing. He almost envied them the clarity of the physical manifestation of their loss. The understanding it must have generated in those who'd come across them. If you didn't have hands nobody would ask you to carry things or to clap your hands. They could SEE you didn't have any. No "I'm your daughter, don't you remember?" or "That's not the way to the toilet, don't you remember?" or "But you don't like your coffee without milk, don't you remember?"

Whatever reasons he'd had for the treatment, he couldn't remember. What he could say, in the ruins of this post-apocalyptic world, was that he'd wanted to get better for himself. So that he could

go back to normal. “Like when you get a cold,” he’d reasoned with people, “You get a bug, you get rid of it, you go on with your life.” He could remember being cautioned that it wouldn’t be exactly the same. He remembered being told the mind wasn’t like the body. That thoughts weren’t like cells, regenerating or healing or whatever. It hadn’t felt real though, or perhaps the essence of the cautions paled compared to the prospect of potentially halting the degeneration of his mind. And outside the medical facility it never occurred to anyone he’d known that he would be anything other than the person who had left for the treatment. He now realized, with the foreign intrusions in his head, that he couldn’t build himself again on the crumbling foundations of an amnesiac being he could only view from a distance.

Which was weird. Because these kinds of surgeries were pretty wide-spread now. A lot of people had gone in for mind altering. To wipe out hated memories, for example. People from high achieving fields auctioned off substrates for genetic transplants. One of the side effects of the research on uploading personalities to software was talk of downloading personalities into people after the original person had died. A virtual reincarnation. How could people still not understand minds and how unpredictable and tenacious they were? Tenacious beanstalks hurtling towards unknown skies. And if you were to consciously climb them, in full self-awareness, you could find in their skies man-eating

giants and geese who laid golden eggs, things the people on land both feared and coveted.

Perhaps that was it. People in his generation didn't value freedom. They simply wanted. And what the people wanted was on land. They didn't need magic beans, they shied away from beanstalks. Perhaps they felt pangs of despair, but they couldn't visualize the world any other way. This was the world they had been born into, and they would keep up with the genetically modified Joneses or die trying.

Someone was talking to him. He could see it was a man in some sort of uniform.

"Well," the man said, "you gonna jump or what?"

He blinked at the uniformed man. "I will. If you give me a minute," he said.

"Right," the man said. They stood there for a moment.

During the celebrations, the visits, the interviews, the chaotic joy set off like a minefield in the wake of the headlines that Alzheimer's had finally been cured, everyone just assumed he was the same person who had left. Maybe it was because nobody really thought about *why* they were who they were. Personality was something that just happened to people as they grew up. What fed into your sense of self? Your memories. Your opinions. Your sense of right and wrong. The conclusions you constructed on the basis of these, a tower mounting higher and higher, as you built and created links.

“Seems like a waste though,” the man continued, “Why did you go for the treatment then, if you weren’t going to like it? Unless you miss it, of course,” he snorted, “Unless you miss being all the way out of your head. Why you up here, then?”

Why? Even now when following a thought pattern he’d receive a shock if he happened across a now demolished part of his construction of the world, screeching his entire mind to a halt as he sat and mourned. It was these shocks, perhaps, that had led him here.

“There’s a way out. You know that, right? There always is,”

The old him wouldn’t have listened, maybe. But the new him was listening. Or perhaps a melding of old and new him was behind this, the rooms in his mind undiscovered by his previous self being ransacked by whoever the hell he was now. One of these rooms, apparently, was greed.

The man was still talking. “They don’t want the publicity, like. They want to offer you...”

And he reeled off an exorbitant sum, a list of properties, some titles.

As he talked, the crowd swam in front of his vision. He still hated them, but now he wanted to crack his whip at them, make them jump. Throw largess in front of them as they scrambled.

He felt a crumbling within as he accepted the man’s offer. *But perhaps, he thought, this is as good a way of killing yourself as any.*

