

History

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fiction



“One-way or round trip?” The technician doesn’t glance up from the glowing tablet strapped to her wrist.

“Round trip,” Marie decides on the spot.

“Class?”

“Class? As in First or Seco--?”

“No, no: *class*, as in class, genus, and species. What are you coming back as?” The technician’s false-fingernail stylus, polished with gold and blue stripes, hovers over her tablet screen. Marie is momentarily distracted by the fingernail, which reminds her of the colorful King Tut poster she displayed in her 6th-grade classroom for nearly 40 years: Tut’s headdress was striped precisely the same lapis blue and burnished gold. Funny how humans, so dazzled by technology, never really stray far from their ancient roots, she muses. Does this brisk young woman interrogating her realize that tablets and styluses were popular 3000 years ago? Humans are humans are humans.

“So... class?” prompts the tech impatiently, tapping her screen.

“Um, I’m thinking maybe... bird?”

The technician sighs and swipes rapidly at her little tablet with the long nail, like she’s scratching an electronic itch. “Here we are: Class, *Aves*. Given any thought to genus and species?”

“Well, no. I was just diagnosed last month; I’ve had other things on my mind...”

The technician sighs again and attempts some perfunctory sympathy: “I’m sure this is a difficult time for you.” She pauses three seconds, as if to allow Marie to resign herself promptly to her fatal condition, then resumes business.

“You might want to consider a less-tricky procedure,” she suggests. “A lot of our clients go the robot path. One, because it’s easier to transfer their files, and two, because they continue to be useful to society. We have a 94% success rate with human-to-robot transfers. And the life of our robots exceeds 100 years, which means a whole range of new technologies may be available to you at your next... demise. Perhaps then our engineers will know how to recycle you back into human form.”

Marie, a bit groggy from chemotherapy, is not sure she’s following this, but says with conviction, “Oh, not a robot; I would hate that...” She thinks of the malfunctioning machines that constantly plague her—her officious home-coordinator, which insists she wants her morning coffee at 3 am, and her perverse self-driving car, which seeks out wrong-ways and scrapes curbs with abandon.... And that damn postal-delivery drone! She could swear it aims for her delphiniums. No, she refuses to come back as a machine.

“Ooookay, bird.” The tech’s tone straddles dubious and disapproving, but Marie, 18 months from dying according to the unfeeling algorithms of her oncologist’s supercomputer, finds herself unperturbed lately by criticism, or any such “small stuff”—which, it turns out, includes nearly everything when contrasted with eternity. Her only concern for the next few months is to spend time with loving family and close friends, maybe take a few trips to her favorite beach. Not an ambitious bucket list, she’s aware, but the last thing she wants now is a lot of frantic, impress-the-neighbors activity to pad what she imagines will be a rather dull obituary: wife, mother of three, grandmother, schoolteacher for 38 years.... She’ll skip the skydiving and the trip to Disney Moon, thank-you-very-much.

The technician is staring at her now. Did Marie just miss something important? She lifts her eyebrows and smiles to appear attentive.

The tech continues to explain today’s procedure. Apparently, she will be hooking Marie up to a scanner, which will copy all the sensations recorded in her brain during the first year of life—her “cognitive essence.”

“Just the first year?” Marie remembers exactly nothing from that time.

“Yes. That’s what works best. After all, most of us start acquiring language at a year old, which interferes with our essential ‘self.’ Language is like those software cookies that hijack your computer—it molds the way you think, but is not ‘you.’ Think of language as a cultural cookie.”

No, how about *you* do that, thinks Marie, smiling even more brightly.

Ancient History was always Marie’s favorite subject to teach, but sometimes she can’t help her amazement at how drastically, how historically, the world has changed in her own lifetime. Why, 40 years ago people were just coming to grips with gender fluidity; it hadn’t occurred to them that they might one day cross into other species. To be honest, back then she always cringed at those “Proud Dog Grandma” bumper stickers, which conjured unwelcome images of wet-muzzled chimeras in perms and reading glasses....

And here she is now, about to have her “cognitive essence” copied and eventually downloaded to a bird.

The technician seats Marie in a puffy armchair and affixes a coppery metal disc to her forehead. “A penny for my thoughts,” Marie almost says, before deciding the technician is too young to remember coins.

“Relax,” the tech urges. “This will take about an hour. You won’t feel much, maybe a slight buzzing sensation. The procedure is perfectly harmless, but it may temporarily stir up some memories. We are probing your frontal and temporal lobes, after all. Afterwards, you will be good as new, and our copy of your ‘self’ will be stored on a secure computer until... it’s needed.”

Marie sinks back in the chair. She hears a click and detects a faint humming inside her skull, but it’s not unpleasant.

“Close your eyes and count to three,” suggests the technician.

One. Marie is wearing her favorite nightgown with the purple roses scattered across it. She is sitting on her pink-gingham bedspread, leaning against her mother, who reads *Mary Poppins* aloud. It’s the part where the chatty starling perches on the twins’ windowsill after their first birthday and discovers they can no longer converse with him, because they have grown too old. Marie finds the story unbearably sad, and starts to cry. Her mother hugs her closer and asks why she’s crying, but Marie can’t explain. She wipes her nose on her soft flannel sleeve and sobs.

Two. Marie and her husband have hauled their three cranky, quarreling pre-teens 300 miles to Cleveland for Easter, stopping only once for toilet-paper-strewn bathrooms and sugary snacks. Her mother-in-law, in anticipation of their lunchtime arrival, has microwaved a few Kielbasa and a cardboard container of mushy baked beans from some previous outing to a chain restaurant. Marie whispers to her husband that she is going to zip out for a sandwich somewhere, and some fruit for the children. After visiting the grocery store and bolting down a deli sandwich in the car, she permits herself a quick stroll through the Cleveland Museum of Art to soothe her frazzled soul. As she is about to leave the 19th-century gallery, she notices one last painting—dark foreground, radiant background—that draws her closer, until what she first took to be a large, dark cliff in the bottom corner resolves itself into the monumental, black-robed figure of a seated man. Earthbound and apparently heavy-hearted, he stares wistfully over a railing toward a glimmering yellow and orange sky. Sun-lit doves whirl in the upper reaches of the painting, reveling in flight and freedom. Marie reads the accompanying brass plaque: “Oh, that I had the wings of the dove! Then I would fly away and be at rest.” She recognizes world-weary King David from the Psalms. “You and me both, bud,” she thinks.

Three. Marie is at the beach with her young grandchildren. The baby snoozes on a towel, covered by a pale green baby blanket and pink sunbonnet, reminding Marie of a little, ground-clinging flower—a primrose. Her two grandsons throw Cheez-Its to the seagulls and laugh uproariously as the birds compete for the crackers. Eventually all the seagulls, even the raggedy one with the limp who settles for the others’ leftovers, have their fill and fly off. Two of them loop back to drift in graceful circles above the ocean directly in front of Marie and the children. Her three-year-old grandson stands stock-still, toes in the water, staring at the birds.

“But Grandma,” he gasps.

“What, sweetie?”

“But Grandma, *I* want to fly.”

Marie is startled awake when the technician peels the metal disk from her forehead.

“So,” the technician says, “we’re all set for today. Give us a call when you decide what type of bird you’ll become.”

And Marie, still muddled, imagines herself as a seagull, soaring above the shore, glancing down at the upturned faces of tiny children on the sand. She can almost feel the lift of wind under her wings, the surge of elation as her aches and worries drop away like so much ballast... but she also detects a sharp tug from below. Longing, that's what it is, she decides: the human condition. Robots may be exempt from it, she supposes, but humans, never—no, not even her ancient Egyptians, who tried to smuggle wine and gold and their favorite sandals into the afterlife. As she fumbles with her purse strap and hoists herself from the deep cushions of her chair, she realizes with piercing clarity that any shred of her human self that transfigures into a bird will always long for the past, just as surely as small boys and weary kings long to fly.