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Dropped out of Time

A Narrative from the Future

Translated from the German by
Alex Gabriel

Originally published in German as *Aus der Zeit gefallen*
in 2015

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Produced and published by
BoD – Books on Demand, Norderstedt (Germany)

ISBN: 978-3-7386-1173-1

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He woke up, feeling only emptiness. He opened his eyes. Everything was blurry. Then something happened with his eyes, and he began to register what he was seeing.

He registered something white, and the word “cabinet” came to his mind, just as the words “something” and “white” had a moment earlier. He registered a sound, which caused his head to roll to the side. The word “door” came to his mind for what he saw there, framed in a “wall”, hanging from “hinges” – yet more words that came to his mind. Opposite the hinges was a handle that was slowly being pushed downwards.

The door started to turn on its hinges, opening a crack, which then grew wider, slowly wider, revealing a figure, a figure that then moved closer, growing larger, a figure in white, the figure of a woman, a nurse, a human being with a face, a face with eyes, brown eyes, calm eyes that were moving closer, and lips, red lips that were moving, opening to reveal teeth, then opening again to reveal a tongue moving between the teeth, right in front of his own eyes.

The lips moved and sounds escaped them and he understood that the lips were saying something, that they were trying to communicate with him: “Damian Trank... your name is Damian Trank... Damian... Trank.”

The nurse had moved, she had moved closer then moved away again, she had moved her head and her arms, and even her face had moved. And he realized that he could move too. He turned his head. First to the right, where he saw a nightstand between himself and the door, then to the left, where sunlight was streaming in through a window.

The window was open, and more sounds could be heard from outside – birds singing, crickets chirping, human voices speaking, all soft, muffled by the distance. He registered various other things beyond the window: green treetops above which fluffy white shapes called clouds floated in a vast blue expanse that seemed so far away, the sky.

He registered all the things he was seeing and he knew their names, yet he couldn't make sense of anything at all. He closed his eyes, and the words that had emerged from within him floated around behind his closed eyes in a swirling chaos; they were like snowflakes, rhythmically dancing about as they drifted down to the ground, each one independent of the others.

The notion of "color" then came to him. He opened his eyes, registering the colors white and beige in the room. The blue and green outside the window were colors too. And something inside him said that such colors could only be discerned in daylight, and that daylight comes from sunlight.

He felt a deep bewilderment take hold of him. Although he could register the things around him and he knew their names, he had no idea what they meant for him or how they related to him. He desperately wanted to know more, a process which would require what were known as questions. Questions would lead to answers. But he had none at his disposal. He grew desperate. He could feel how deeply desperate he was – so desperate that water ran from his eyes. He knew that he was crying and he felt disconsolate, until he finally sank into a consolatory nothingness.

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When he woke up, darkness filled the room around him, as well as the vast space beyond the room's window. He knew that it was nighttime. He registered the passage of time, and the fact that there were changes inherent in that process. And now he began to recall what he had seen before everything had sunk into darkness, not only registering the individual things, but also connecting them in his mind, continuously grasping new concepts.

It was an exciting process. He registered similarities – the nurse's clothing, the room's ceiling, and the clouds had all been white. And differences – the sky had been blue, not white, and the treetops had been green. The nurse's voice, the birdsong, and the crickets' chirping were all sounds – but different sounds. Both the door and the window were openings in the walls of the room in which he found himself. He grasped the concept of space – there was space inside the room, and that space continued even outside the room.

Each new realization gave him a sense of satisfaction. The door opening was vertical, he himself was horizontal. The nurse had moved, and so had the clouds in the sky, and even the treetops had moved gently back and forth. He himself could move – he could turn his head, raise his arm. Only the cabinet and the walls of the room stood motionless; he could use them to orient himself and discern the movements of other things.

And then he registered the fact that he was thinking – that this was a process happening in his mind. He, Damian Trank, was lying in a room, at nighttime, thinking ceaselessly. He asked questions and he found answers, but these answers only brought more questions, so he once again surrendered himself to the pleasant nothingness.

When he returned to the world of things, the darkness was gone. Instead, there was brightness all around him. He registered the fact that the light was coming in through the window and, finding it uncomfortable, he turned his head towards the door. Two figures were standing there – the nurse and a man who now turned to her and said, “He’s awake; he’s responding to the light.”

Damian realized that this man must be a doctor, and this meant he must be in a hospital, lying in bed in a bright room, presumably not well – although illness was generally accompanied by pain, of which he felt none, except when the sunlight hit his eyes.

The doctor took his, Damian’s, hand, looked at him, and said, “Damian Trank, say something – repeat after me, ‘I am Damian Trank.’”

He felt his lips move and he heard a sound come from within himself, yet the doctor just shook his head. But then he heard himself say, “Damian... Trank.”

“Excellent,” proclaimed the doctor. He smiled at the nurse, and she smiled back. “Stay with him and help him start talking,” said the doctor as he left the room. Damian heard himself repeating, “Stay... with... him.” He could feel his lips moving, his tongue too. He could speak.

“That was Dr. Meister,” said the nurse. “Dr. Meister’s a master – he brought you back to life after your terrible accident.”

“Dr. Meister... brought... me back... to life,” said Damian, with no idea what the nurse was talking about, but nevertheless unsettled by her words – they had sounded like an explanation, yet ultimately hadn’t explained anything.

“You need to eat now,” said the nurse, taking a bowl and spoon from the bedside table, then removing the spoon from the bowl horizontally and holding it out towards Damian’s mouth. “We brought you out of your coma yesterday and took you off the IV drip; you’ll get only pureed foods for the next few days, but then you can start having normal meals again.” Damian understood only the individual words, without grasping the meaning of the complete sentence; he sensed that it related to some important process.

He felt the saltiness of the puree on his tongue, and then it was swallowed. He noticed that his stomach was disagreeably empty and wanted to be filled. “And now the milk,” said the nurse, lifting his head up with her hand and bringing a cup to his mouth. A sense of happiness immediately came over him – the milk was delectable. The earlier uneasiness was still there inside him, but it was now overtaken by this good feeling.

Damian sat, fully dressed, at the white metal table near the window, waiting for Dr. Meister's morning visit. He was waiting for the master who had brought him back to life – without him even asking. He was anxious to hear more details about what had happened. Nurse Mara had always amicably refused to discuss it with him, saying, "When the time is right, the doctor will explain everything to you." Today, she had ceremoniously declared, was the day that he would find out more. "You were basically like a newborn when you woke up here," she had added. "But with your ability to speak and your already-developed motor skills, you've greatly expanded your cognition of the world over these last two weeks."

The only thing he knew was that he was at the Schinznach Brain Clinic. He looked out at the clinic's gardens and saw the impeccable, lush green lawn stretching down to the riverbank, studded with bushes and flowerbeds and ringed by tall old trees. The clinic was nestled in the woods; a row of trees formed a canopy of shade above the footpath that ran along the riverbank.

He wondered what sort of view would be seen from the window of his home office. As if on demand, a photograph came to his mind that had been snapped by someone, presumably himself, looking out the window from his desk. It too showed the green tree-tops of stately, broad-leaved trees, in front of a two-century-old red-brick building, with fragments of additional similar middle-class buildings visible in the background.

Something in his memory told him that European

building regulations required all houses in a village or town district to be built in a similar style, which meant that even new buildings had to look old-fashioned if they were built in an older area. He knew that he and his wife Leda lived in a five-room apartment in a building that was similar to the ones in the photograph, though new. And he knew that it was located in a residential district of Zurich.

He thought of his desk, the living room furniture, and the façade of the house. Snapshots appeared before his mind's eye as his memory called up each of these images; he could not remember what the rest of the apartment looked like though. However, he could remember the apartment's layout. He could list off the rooms – the living room, his bedroom, Leda's bedroom, his office, the dining room, the bathroom, the kitchen. He was immediately struck by the lack of balance – only he had an office, Leda did not. But this was because he worked from home, while Leda ran a restaurant, Capricorn, downtown.

Damian saw a map of the city before him. He could immediately locate both his house and the restaurant, but he had no idea what Capricorn looked like. Nor could he picture the nearby streets. His mind could glimpse only a few images of the city, and he knew that he had photographed them – but why? And under what circumstances? He began to realize that, although he could recall many individual facts, he lacked any comprehensive knowledge of the whole they comprised. It was as if his mind contained just an empty mesh of information whose contents had seeped out.

He sensed that he was having difficulty remembering – and even simply thinking. In fact, it did not even seem like he was doing the thinking himself, but rather like something inside him was thinking. This jibed

with the fact that he was at a brain clinic; apparently something was not quite right with his brain. A stay at a clinic towards the end of the twenty-first century, if not for psychiatric reasons, inevitably involved organ regeneration.

He managed to recall more information: Any diseased organ could be cloned from the body's own cells; the new organ would then be implanted. The whole thing was regulated by a complicated piece of legislation. The legislature had wanted to prevent people from using the process as a roundabout path to eternal life – otherwise, the population of Europe would grow unchecked. After eighty years of age, patients thus would get no new organs. This development led to a situation in which older people suffered only from brain diseases, and it had become common practice for them to bid life farewell via euthanasia as soon as the first signs of dementia appeared. No one forced them to do so; it had simply become a social standard.

There was a knock at the door. The doctor entered, sat down beside Damian, and asked, "How are you feeling today?"

"Full of questions, doctor. I can think and speak, I eat and sleep, I know that I'm in a clinic, I look out the window and see people of all different ages walking along the river, I can differentiate between night and day, and I can see the changes in the weather. I'm aware of the fact that I exist –but I have no idea why I'm here right now. I know some individual facts and pieces of information; I just don't have my complete memory."

"Today's the day you're going to find out more, Damian. You already know that you're at my brain clinic here in Bad Schinznach. We specialize in brain restoration. Six months ago, you had a terrible accident,

and your brain was almost completely destroyed. Even ten years ago this would've killed you, but nowadays we're capable of using a person's own body tissue to restore his damaged brain – or really any organs that get damaged. I can explain later on exactly how this works, if you're interested."

"And you don't want to tell me what kind of accident I had?"

"Oh, I've got no problem at all telling you about that. I'll tell you anything you want to know – as long as I know myself, though even I don't know everything there is to know. Anyway, your accident: You work as a civil engineer, and you were contracted to do some surveying for the renovation of a century-old bridge that crosses the Rhine at Eglisau. The bridge was closed off after several chunks had broken off. You'd been warned about this, but you were apparently so curious that you entered the closed-off area and even went about hammering at the problematic section. And, in fact, some more chunks broke off and struck you. You weren't even wearing a helmet. I must say, you acted quite recklessly."

"And the others rescued me?"

"Right away. And that was your saving grace, because the entire back of your head and a large portion of your brain were damaged, and if they hadn't managed to resuscitate you in the ambulance within fifteen minutes, then there would've been nothing I could do."

In his mind's eye, Damian saw himself looking up at a bridge deck, directly below which he was standing. He saw himself hitting the old concrete with his hammer, causing an avalanche of crumbling stone to be break loose and crash down upon him. He visualized himself tucking his head down and holding his arms up for protection, then falling on his face and

jerking his arms forward to break his fall, thus allowing the stones to smash into the back of his head. He suppressed the image, as well as the unpleasant feelings it evoked. The accident and the restoration of his brain belonged to a past whose details were useless to him. Instead, he was interested in his past prior to the accident.

“And what about before that?” he asked the doctor.

The doctor made a face. “That’s where the crux of the issue lies. Your knowledge of your life before the accident was destroyed along with your brain. There’s nothing to discuss or sugarcoat – it’s simply a fact. You basically woke up here in the condition of a newborn child, who would need another forty years to acquire those forty years of knowledge – I am, of course, speaking only of your personal knowledge.”

“So then how is it that I know a whole bunch of facts about my life that are completely disjointed yet manage to come to my mind when I need them?”

“I’ll explain that right now. As you know, all current encyclopedic knowledge and all European languages besides our native one are stored on a microchip – the so-called ‘MyChip’ – which is implanted in each and every one of our brains. I’d wager to say that our multicultural European nation would be unimaginable without this. The chip is embedded in the organic brain in such a manner that its information can be called up automatically when required by your thoughts. This information retrieval can be suppressed – otherwise, the flow of information would be overwhelming. On the other hand, the information can also be called up voluntarily. We don’t know exactly how this works, but we’ve confirmed it in experiments. In your case, we’ve stored your native language on the chip as well. This is not quite ideal – we believe that

the personal character and breadth of an individual's mother tongue should be developed through life experiences. However, in cases of accidents involving brain damage, we're left with no other choice."

"So my brain is actually providing me with words as I need them, even before I can properly understand what they mean," interjected Damian.

"Correct, but you would probably agree that your understanding of the words comes rather quickly. That's not where the problem lies. So let's talk about the most difficult part: your personal memory. In order to, at least partially, save you forty years of work catching up, we've reintegrated all documented information we have about you into your artificial memory, and we've also uploaded photographic images that you had created. The only thing we cannot do is reconstruct those personal experiences that existed only in your own memory – the memories of your life experiences and the associated emotions, sensations, feelings that you felt so intensely that they burned themselves into your mind. Or even those emotions that were not quite as strong, but that were experienced repeatedly. You're going to have to learn all over again how to deal with your emotions. We're going to conduct some emotional rehabilitation training for you over the coming weeks, together with some of our other patients."

Damian thought this over for a moment, then said, "So basically, I'm mentally crippled."

"I can't quite agree with that statement, but you can think of it however you want. As far as I'm concerned, here's what the situation looks like: Your genes are unchanged, and thus so is your individual nature. We can presume that your dominant tendencies and predispositions will reemerge. Since the outside world

has changed, you will obviously be missing certain experiences that had contributed to shaping your personality. On the other hand, despite the great advances in technology that have been made, we do not believe that the world has changed quite so starkly that you would end up developing an entirely new personality forty years later.”

Damian was silent.

“Anyway, we obviously won’t leave you in the lurch. At the very least, we’ll help you get started on the process of developing into a complete human being once again. In due course, we’ll arrange reunions with the people with whom you had close relationships – but that’s a very emotional process, and our experience tells us it’s only feasible once you’ve adequately learned to deal with your emotions.”

“You mean my wife? And my mother? My father is dead and I don’t have any siblings – or at least that’s what my artificial memory is telling me.”

“Exactly. You’ll see your wife, your mother, friends, neighbors. But be careful – first of all, these people will have to be told that you’ve lost your memory, and second of all, they will seem like strangers to you. You’ll have to rebuild all your relationships, mutually, and there’s no guarantee that this will happen successfully. Sometimes the patient wants to get rid of his old relationships, and the same goes for his partner. But our emotional rehabilitation training will make you strong – it’ll make you mature enough to handle such a thing. For now, just try to digest all this information. I’ll come back tomorrow, and you can ask me any further questions you may have.”

*

When Dr. Meister arrived the next morning, Damian was full of questions.

"I've consulted my artificial memory. This MyChip you mentioned – it's implanted inside each one of us at the age of five, right?"

"Correct."

"And it contains all of the knowledge that we would learn during primary school?"

"Not exactly. We implant an empty chip. It has an antenna directly beneath the skin – can you feel that stitch on your right temple? It's only after the chip has become ingrown without any problems, which takes about a week on average, that we upload information via the antenna. We test to make sure the system works."

"And then the middle school materials are uploaded at the age of ten, the high school materials at the age of fifteen, and the college materials at the age of twenty?"

"Correct."

"And who decides who gets which knowledge?"

"The parents, although the children have a say from the age of fifteen. The information that's uploaded is the same for everyone, but it only grants each person equal opportunities – the fact remains that not everyone is capable of using this information in the same manner. Genetic intelligence remains quite variable, and this is also manifested in different vocabularies. Not everyone can understand all of the uploaded information. For many people, there are foreign words that they just can't grasp. Even before these chips were developed, having access to encyclopedic knowledge didn't automatically mean that a person would understand it – knowledge must be applied in order to be understood. And this happens in discussion rounds at schools and educational institutions, as well as

interactively at home on the computer. And the discussion rounds at school, alongside the person's family life, also contribute to socialization."

"And a person can have additional information uploaded to their MyChip later on, such as a new foreign language, if they have a demonstrated need for it?"

"Correct."

"For how long have MyChips been around?"

"We started implanting them forty years ago – you're part of the first generation."

"You don't have one yourself?"

The doctor grinned. "Of course I do – we doctors tested the system out on ourselves before we administered it to others. Any more questions?"

"Not at the moment."

"Good. So next comes your emotional rehabilitation training. You'll start tomorrow; the nurse will give you the documents."

3

Damian found the room's ambience pleasantly muted and soothing, with its white walls, light wooden floors, and natural-colored curtains. Being a corner room, it was full of light – a greenish sort of light, since its windows looked out on the clinic's gardens. The furniture was limited to a bare minimum – seven comfortable chairs, arranged in a circle. They were all occupied.

Dr. Meister was sitting in one of the chairs. "Each of you has had your brain restored," he began. "The goal of these training sessions will be to prepare you to deal with the world around you. Over the next two months, you will work intensively with each other. I'd now like to bring the house rules to your attention. They prohibit you from having any contact with either outsiders or other patients during this time, even if you happen to encounter such people. Trust me, this is in your own best interests – and after two months, you're free to do as you please. Other than the clinic's staff, your conversation partners will exclusively be the members of this group."

He made a sweeping gesture around the circle with his arm.

"I will introduce you all to each other now. Beside me is Dr. Myriam Gesell. She's a psychologist, and she leads these sessions. Then – continuing in the order in which you have seated yourselves – we have Ms. Joana Korowski from St. Gallen, Mr. Gotthard Flemm from Zurich, Mr. Mechmed Hodzic from Lucerne, Ms. Joelle Chappuis from Vevey, and Mr. Damian Trank, also from Zurich. I would suggest that you consider yourselves a sort of family and address each other on a

first-name basis. I will now turn you over to Dr. Gesell, and wish you all a successful first step forward.”

Damian’s eyes followed the doctor’s index finger around the circle. He estimated Joana Korowski to be about twenty-five years old; she was fit and pretty, with the exception of an ugly, jagged scar that marred her forehead. Flemm was a stern-looking man of about fifty. The jumpsuit that he wore – as did all the other patients – appeared to be freshly ironed; Damian guessed him to be a civil servant. Hodzic instantly struck Damian as an unpleasant fellow, a wiry young man with a huge shock of hair, who was constantly grinning either deviously or smugly – or at least it seemed that way to Damian. He had a scarred head injury that Damian guessed to be a gunshot wound. Joelle Chappuis was plump and looked like a prototypical forty-year-old housewife and mother; she was glancing around apprehensively at the unfamiliar group of people. No external injuries were visible on either her or Flemm; Damian guessed they might have had brain tumors. The psychologist looked simply professional, with her white coat and oversized glasses.

Dr. Meister stood up, removed his chair from the circle, turned it towards the wall, and left the room. Damian fiercely wished that the doctor would have stayed, and he himself was surprised by this strong reaction. He chalked it up to the fact that there was no one left in the room whom he knew; he felt extremely uncomfortable sitting amongst these strangers. He was torn from his thoughts by Joana Korowski, who casually remarked, “Well, the master’s made his grand exit.”

Hodzic laughed, but Damian felt a wave of anger surge up inside him. He jumped up towards Joana and shouted, “How can you talk about him like that?”

He's the one who brought us back to life! You... you... ungrateful... creature, you should be more concerned about getting rid of that ugly scar!"

Hodzic immediately stepped protectively in front of Joana, grabbed Damian by the shoulders, and pushed him back down into his chair. "Don't try to be a big shot here," said Hodzic.

"Calm down, people, it's not all that bad," said Joelle Chappuis.

"We should start off by discussing the rules of behavior during these sessions," added Flemm. "Maybe the clinic's rules have something to say in this regard."

Joana Korowski wiped at her eyes with a handkerchief. "You don't need to tell me about the scar," she said softly. "I know I look frightful, but the doctor promised me I'd get my skin resurfaced as soon as I leave here. They do it in another clinic."

Dr. Gesell stood up. "Sit down, please, all of you," she said. "And listen to me. You've just demonstrated exactly why you all need this emotional rehabilitation training. You're all emotionally underdeveloped after your brain restorations. In these sessions, you're going to learn how to get a handle on your emotions. With that in mind, let's discuss this incident that just happened right now."

Flemm spoke up. "There's nothing to talk about," he said. "Damian – I'll use his first name as the doctor instructed us – Damian behaved improperly and he should apologize."

"The doctor didn't instruct you to use first names, he merely suggested it – but let's leave that aside. What do the others think? Please, Joelle."

Joelle had raised her hand to signal that she had something to say. She spoke Swiss German with a French accent. "You know, it is natural for there to be

disagreements between us. According to my memory, I have raised three children who are now twenty-two, twenty, and eighteen years old. Naturally things got quite rowdy while they were going through puberty, just like right now, and my husband and I often needed to arbitrate."

"Can you recall one such scene?" asked the psychologist.

"No... not really. I only know that puberty is when a child develops into a socially independent adult. It's a phase of social and psychological imbalance, due to the tensions between the body's physiological changes and a social life that is adapting to a newfound sexuality. Adolescents undergoing puberty thus manifest strong and easily provoked emotions, ambivalent or exaggerated feelings, rebelliousness, and general difficulties with regard to their social lives."

Joelle Chappuis blushed, as if astonished by her own remarks.

"Whoa," interjected Hodzic. "What, are you some kind of psychologist too?"

"No," Joelle replied sheepishly. "I'm just a housewife, and before my marriage I did data entry for a sales organization. I would have continued working, but unfortunately European labor law requires mothers with more than one child to become full-time housewives. Supposedly this helps prevent unemployment. But now that my children have grown up, the housework does not take up all my time anymore, so I also do some unpaid care work at a nursing home."

"That's enough," said Dr. Gesell. "What you just witnessed was Joelle accessing the encyclopedic knowledge stored on the chip that is implanted in her brain. All of you will experience this for yourselves as well. It's possible that you made too little use of this

earlier, as your own personal life experiences were at the forefront. But since you no longer have these experiences, you'll be dependent upon the chip. In any case, as you can see, Joelle adeptly applied this knowledge to the situation at hand. She demonstrated the process quite accurately."

"Really? I can do that too?" asked Joana Korowski.

"Whenever you want."

"Well, then," asked Flemm, "what are we doing here?"

"Getting a handle on your emotions. Let's go back to Damian's reaction again – what did you think of it, Mechmed?"

Hodzic grinned. "Damian wanted to show off for Joana and impress her – he probably just wants to get her into bed. Actually, it's pretty obvious. But I'd say he's too old."

Damian was silent. *I don't need that at all*, he thought. He recalled the photograph of his wife Leda; her beauty far eclipsed Joana's. "It's just that I really admire the doctor," he explained. "He's become like a father to me, and I can't stand hearing someone mock him."

"I didn't mean to mock him," replied Joana. "I like the doctor too. But I don't see anything wrong with making a silly little comment at his expense."

"Well," said Dr. Gesell, "that's enough for today; I'm quite satisfied with this start. Go out for a walk in the gardens now and think about our conversation – that's your homework for tomorrow's session. And if you encounter other people there, remember the house rules – speak with each other instead. You've got enough information about your lives stored on your MyChips to answer each other's questions – although if you have no desire to answer, then there's no need to force yourself."

They all stood up and went out to the spacious gardens. They bashfully lingered near the door at first, watching the outsiders on the public footpath along the river, as well as the other patients who were out in the gardens. These patients were mostly in groups of five; Damian guessed that they must have been other emotional training groups.

As they hesitatingly moved down towards the river, Damian glanced around. He looked at the hundred-and-fifty-year-old buildings, solid constructions from the early twentieth century. Only the roofs had lost their historical design, the roofing tiles having been replaced by solar panels that provided a portion of the clinic's electricity. Flemm seemed to know quite a bit about the place. "These buildings used to belong to a thermal bathhouse. But after the government in Brussels determined that sulfur baths and brine baths were unhealthy, these sorts of springs had to be sealed off all over Europe – which meant that the owners had to close down and sell."

"Interesting," said Hodzic. The others were silent.

Damian thought over what had happened and decided that Joana's interactions with the doctor were none of his business. If she did not quite admire the doctor as much as he did, then that was her own personal matter. He decided to apologize and looked around for her. When he saw her walking down towards the river with Mechmed, he was suddenly gripped by a sense of jealousy.

"Shouldn't the five of us stick together?" he asked Flemm, who was standing nearby with Joelle.

"I think so too," Flemm replied. "And look, the youths are already speaking with outsiders. I think we need to tell Dr. Gesell about this."

"Oh, I don't think that's necessary," said Joelle.

"The younger generation simply does not always play by the rules like we do. Besides, they are probably just making small talk."

*

Later on, over lunch – which the group ate together in a separate dining room – Damian apologized to Joana.

"It's okay," she replied. "Tell us, though – what do you do for a living?"

Damian told them what was stored on his MyChip regarding his job, finding out the same information himself in the process. He explained that he worked as a civil engineer, mostly sitting at home in his apartment performing structural analysis for construction companies via a mainframe located in England. He delivered the results to his clients over the internet, whereupon they transferred the agreed-upon fees to his bank account.

"And what do you do?" he asked.

A melancholy smile flashed across Joana's face. "Well, I hope the doctors can get rid of my scar – I work in the fashion industry. As a model. If you select the fashion channel on your screen and type in the name of our company, then you'll see me modeling clothing that you can order at the push of a button if your body measurements are saved on your computer. It's obviously women's clothing though – I hope you're not a transvestite."

She cast him a lovely grin as she said this; he began to ignore the scar on her forehead. He smiled back. "You can relax about the scar," he said. "They'll replace your skin. And for you I'd even start using women's clothing."

Mechmed became restless. "Enough of this banter," he said. "We're discussing our jobs now. Well, I'm an auditor. I've got all the passwords that give me access to the accounting books of the companies I work for, to check out what's going on at any time. It's interesting, I can assure you – especially when someone's trying to cheat. Now Gotthard's going to tell us about his job."

Flemm smiled sourly. "I've got no problem laying my cards on the table too – I work in the Zurich cantonal administration, issuing special permits for the use of private vehicles."

"Nice to get to know you," said Mechmed.

"That doesn't really interest me right now," said Joana firmly. "I want to hear more from Damian."

She turned to him amicably and said, "Come on, Damian, let's go out to the gardens."

*

After a week, it appeared that Joelle Chappuis and Gotthard Flemm had gotten together, just as Damian and Joana had. Damian had slept with Joana a few times. The first time had been in her room, the other times mostly in his. At first it had felt like they were doing something forbidden, but hints from Dr. Gesell had led to the realization that the clinic, at the very least, tolerated such circumstances – and perhaps even fostered them.

He told himself that these first sexual experiences were like part of a second puberty that he was entitled to go through. And things had, in fact, played out that way from the very first time they had slept together. Damian had been hesitant to make a move, not knowing whether Joana would reciprocate. She had then calmly taken the lead. His heart had been beating so

fast that it had nearly exploded, and he had come prematurely. The next time, she had let him take the initiative. He felt like he was in heaven during the act, but afterwards she was distant, silent. He had no idea what was wrong and he was incapable of getting her to talk about it; instead, she simply fell asleep. He lay on his back, Joana beside him, facing the other way. He felt doubts deep inside that unsettled him. He was behaving recklessly and carelessly, like an adolescent, and this seemed inappropriate; yet at the same time, his artificial memory told him that this was inevitably how things happened during this stage of human development. Even Joana's inexplicable sudden withdrawal made sense in this light.

Mechmed Hodzic, the fifth member of the group, was left out as the others paired off. He began to sulk demonstratively during the sessions, and when this yielded nothing more than a few indulgent remarks, he grew testy and started bitterly criticizing everything. "Why should I continue participating?" he asked Dr. Gesell. "If these teenagers keep using these sessions for their flirting instead of focusing on our discussions, then there's no reason for me to be here. Actually, why aren't we working in groups of six – three men and three women? Or maybe you, Myriam, might stop being so aloof?"

Dr. Gesell cast him a stern gaze. "You know quite well that can't happen. And you all have to participate – you can go your separate ways only after the sessions have been completed. Just make an effort to deal with the situation. That's really what this emotional training is all about – remember, you'll encounter such situations in the outside world too."

"No I won't," grumbled Mechmed. "Trust me, if I end up in another situation like this, I'll just say 'kiss my ass,' and get the hell out of there."

*

Mechmed only opened up when Dr. Gesell started with the brain-teasers; he was always the first to solve them. He was vociferous in his triumph, and Joana started showing more of an interest in him. One day, when Damian wanted to make plans to spend the night together, she claimed that she had a headache. He decided to take an evening stroll in the gardens before

going to bed that night, and there he spotted Joana and Mechmed cuddling on a bench. He quietly withdrew, deeply hurt. Jealousy raged inside him as well.

For some time, he would toss and turn in bed all night, indulging in violent fantasies; he imagined strangling Joana, then castrating and butchering Mechmed. During the daytime, he was depressed, avoiding Joana out of a combination of anger and fear. She didn't seem to make a big deal of it, acting as if nothing special had happened between them; this only irritated him even further.

When Dr. Gesell asked him, during one of the group sessions, why he was so depressed, he broke down. His voice choked with tears, he said that he was disappointed by Joana's infidelity, by her flippancy. Gotthard Flemm laughed out loud and said, "Yes, that's what happens when a couple does not build a mature relationship that can withstand such whims – as Joelle and I have done."

Damian hated him for this remark with all his heart; if they had been alone, he would have bashed Flemm's teeth in. The psychologist seemed to know exactly what he was feeling. She asked him to express his emotions, which he did.

"Excellent," said Dr. Gesell. "Please recall how Joelle described puberty at our first session. This is an emotional phase that all of you must go through now, but it's over rather quickly. Damian had some violent feelings, but he's able to control himself. He's already sufficiently socialized."

"More so than Gotthard anyway," said Joelle, who left her spot beside Flemm and sat down next to Damian. She then turned back towards Flemm. "I really don't like the way you provoked Damian," she said.

After the session, Joelle went for a walk in the gardens with Damian. She linked arms with him, and he was excited by the feel of her mature body against his side. He forgot all about Joana and ended up spending some nights together with Joelle.

Now it was Flemm who was left out – but this did not last long. Mechmed seemed to tire of Joana and started buddying up to the older man. They got their hands on a deck of cards, ordered a few bottles of the non-alcoholic beer that was allowed at the clinic, and sat playing in the gardens for hours. Sometimes they sat at the riverbank and talked about fishing. They invited Damian to join them, which he did only after Joelle turned her attention towards Joana. The two women always spoke to each other in French, since Joana loved the language; they had an endless supply of women’s issues to discuss.

When Damian sat with the other guys at the riverbank for the first time and joked that he’d rather drink wine, Mechmed replied, “No problem. We’ve already moved on to real beer. We just have to dispose of the bottles discreetly.” He took an empty bottle and tossed it into the Aar River.

“How so?” asked Damian, curious.

Mechmed grinned and explained that he had gotten a kid who regularly bicycled along the riverside path to bring him things that he could not get at the clinic.

“Good job,” said Flemm. “I also prefer the alcoholic beer, even though they’re not really so different these days.” He could remember a time when beers were stronger; however, twenty years ago, the government in Brussels had restricted their alcohol content to one percent. “To accommodate the Muslims,” said Flemm.

“Nonsense,” grumbled Mechmed. He finished off his bottle. “The bureaucrats in Brussels are just health fanatics – and there’s no one who can stop them.”

*

Dr. Gesell took the group by surprise one morning, asking what they spoke about with each other. It turned out that the topic of family had remained taboo.

“That’s quite alright,” said the psychologist. “It has to do with the fact that you haven’t yet seen the people with whom you were close before – at the moment, you yourselves are the people who are most important to each other. I’d like to know, though, whether you’ve spoken with each other about the reasons why you’re here at this clinic.”

“Of course,” said Mechmed. “I’ve talked about it with Gotthard.”

“And the rest of you?”

Damian, Joana, and Joelle remained awkwardly silent.

“Talk about it,” said Dr. Gesell. “Practice, right here in this circle. You won’t be able to avoid having to explain it to other people, when you don’t recognize someone from your past or when you can’t find your way around the places from your earlier life. Who’s going to start?”

Flemm said simply, “Brain tumor.”

Just as I guessed, thought Damian. He then briefly told the group about his accident.

Joana grew pale, but got a hold of herself and told about a dispute with her boyfriend – he had become violent and had thrown a heavy glass vase at her head.

Joelle had suffered a massive brain hemorrhage, which had damaged a large portion of her brain.

And Mechmed? “You can tell it’s a gunshot wound, right? I just got caught up in something – one of my friends suddenly realized that he could try plundering a company account using my access codes as an auditor, so he decided to put a pistol to my head. Well, I don’t put up with such things. I went mad with rage – I smacked away the hand holding the gun and I walloped him. And a shot went off in the process.”

“And what happened to him?”

“Well, he saw me lying there with my head bleeding and he thought I was dead, so he ran away – at least that’s what they told me. I don’t think he’s been caught yet.”

Damian didn’t like Mechmed, but grudgingly admired his courage. Gotthard remained silent, as the two women criticized Mechmed’s imprudence.

*

As they approached the end of the two months of which Dr. Meister had spoken, the group sessions grew increasingly boring. Dr. Gesell had trouble coming up with topics that were conducive to a discussion with differing points of view. Emotions hardly ever flared up anymore; the five of them had learned to accept each other. They got along with each other, as is common for members of a group with a shared destiny that has gone through difficult times together.

Damian felt a strong link to each of the others in the group, and he guessed that the others all felt the same. He now thought more often of Leda, his wife, living in the outside world. And sometimes of his mother as well. And he imagined himself sitting at his desk, performing calculations.

At one of the sessions, there was a lively discussion

that yielded some knowledge that Damian felt was quite important. Mechmed had broached the topic. "Tell me, doctor," he had asked, "wouldn't it be possible for them to use these fantastic antennas to plant ideas into people's heads about how the world works?"

Dr. Gesell had beamed. "Finally – if you hadn't thought up this question on your own, I'd have had to bring it up myself. Anyway, theoretically, of course, what you're saying would be possible. But the whole process is governed by strict laws and technical barriers, and it's supervised by an ethics commission on which the entire political spectrum is represented. Only the respective school boards have the capability and the permission to upload information onto MyChips. At first – not surprisingly – there was a movement to have at least the Bible, the Koran, and other such texts uploaded onto the chips. But then things escalated, and all sorts of religious groups and even political movements tried to get their own interests included as well. As a result, the European Parliament decided to allow only academic knowledge."

Flemm had grinned at Mechmed. "It's a good thing you didn't imbibe the Koran – otherwise you wouldn't have drunk those beers with us."

*

Then came the last group session – Damian could tell as soon as Dr. Meister entered the room and joined them.

The doctor announced that they were ready to face the world once again. "You will now step back out into your lives and meet the people who are close to you. Remember, you will have to rebuild these earlier relationships. Don't be afraid if a lot of what you see out

there in the world is unfamiliar to you. This can sometimes lead to difficulties, but I'm giving each of you this card with our emergency number – please don't hesitate to call us at any time if you need our help. We've invested a lot in your rehabilitation, and we'd like to avoid any problems. You can go to your rooms now and pack your things. You'll be picked up tomorrow – we've arranged everything."

Flemm looked around the room, then said, "As the eldest here, allow me to thank you on behalf of the entire group. Believe me when I say that we are all well aware of what you have done for us. We will always think back on you as a true master, Dr. Meister."

Damian found the scene almost unbearably solemn. They all stood up and there was a tangle of handshakes and hugs, but no promises to meet up again in the outside world. Invisible walls suddenly sprang up between them.

They pensively returned to their rooms, without speaking to each other further. And Damian anxiously wondered whether he had ever experienced this sort of parting of ways before. Maybe at the end of high school or college.

Damian's heart was pounding as he heard, through the slightly ajar door, gentle footsteps approaching his room. He opened the door and saw the woman from the photographs that had been preserved in his artificial memory. She was even more attractive in person – his wife, yet nevertheless a stranger, about whom he knew only the biographical data that was stored on his MyChip. Leda smiled at him and hugged him tenderly. He noticed how he involuntarily tried to extricate himself from the embrace.

"Do you recognize me?" she asked.

"Of course. I've recalled your photo quite often recently. But I'm going to have to get you know you again from scratch, and I guess you'll have to get to know me again too."

"Dr. Meister has prepared us for this. Did you know that I visited you here several times?"

"I didn't realize."

"You were in a coma. It was awful, but they gave me hope. I brought them all the information I could about you – about us. I was glad to be able to do something for you. I gave them the personal files from your computer – photos, official documents, correspondence, even your technical calculation programs and data. And I pledged to do everything I could to help you in your return to the outside world. They discussed all this with your mother as well. Obviously she also wants to see you as soon as possible – would you be ready to visit her next weekend? You don't have to answer yet – let's go home first."

He changed out of the clinic's jumpsuit and into the clothing Leda had brought. The clothing was

unfamiliar to him; Leda had to help him get dressed.

They left the clinic. He was curious about the world – but also scared of leaving his only safe haven. However, as he looked back at the clinic buildings from the driveway, they already seemed alien to him. He no longer had anything to do with them.

Ever since the railway line had been laid underground, the tracks were no longer visible from outside the small, ancient Bad Schinznach train station, a museum-like building from the nineteenth century. His artificial memory informed him of these facts. The impressions that the images evoked, however, were new to him. He found the sunshine, the balmy air, and the smell of the plants refreshing and pleasantly stimulating. But he was frightened of the fact that he couldn't find his way around by himself. He was glad to have Leda by his side to show him how the world operates. She patiently explained to him the practical aspects of things for which his chip provided only the theoretical.

He watched her pay the train fare by holding her Mobcom – a personal mobile communications unit for telephony, navigation, payments, and audiovisual recordings, as well as numerous other applications that provided the user with current information – up to a payment machine. They descended several flights of stairs in the hollowed-out station building until they reached a tunnel with subdued artificial lighting, where they were hit by a draft of air. They then waited on the platform for the train – Damian for the first time in his new life.

“I feel like some kind of time traveler or space traveler who entered a completely unfamiliar world armed only with factual information about it, but with no knowledge of how its devices actually work,” he remarked.

“And I’m the native who gladly took on the task of showing you around,” Leda replied with a laugh.

The train arrived – a clean, streamlined machine with comfortable seats. Though it seemed like the doors were the only openings, once inside Damian was astonished to see windows in which parkland was whooshing by. He bombarded Leda with questions, rather than calling up information from the chip implanted in his brain. She explained that the windows were actually display screens on which a film was being played, with images that fit the location and the landscape. “But they always show the area with nice weather,” she said, “even when it’s raining. They only take into account the season – they switched to the autumn scenery on the first day of September.”

It was almost impossible to tell that the train was moving. Damian could only feel a tug at his body when the train pulled into or out of a station, which happened every couple of minutes. People got on and off. Everything happened calmly; everyone seemed to be occupied with themselves. There were just a few mothers and children whose voices rang out through the train car.

Eventually, Leda stood up. “We’re arriving in Zurich,” she said.

She had brought along a new Mobcom for him; his old one had been destroyed in the accident. She showed him how to hold the device so that it would always read his fingerprint. He checked the time and saw that about half an hour had passed since they had boarded the train. As they disembarked and ascended the escalator, they suddenly found themselves in a crowd of people – something unfamiliar to him – that carried them along like a river. Damian grabbed Leda’s hand. He was suddenly afraid of losing her – forever, with

no apparent way of finding her again in the throng of people.

"The city subway trains run on this level," Leda announced.

"Can we go by foot?"

"If you feel up for it. We can also take a taxi."

"The clinic told us to partake in regular physical activity, so let's walk."

They continued upwards. Damian knew that he had walked through the station concourse countless times before, yet he still felt like he was arriving in some foreign city. The people went running off in all directions as they exited the station.

Damian regarded the city before him. He was fascinated by the blocks of modern office buildings, each with its own individual architectural design, yet still fitting together as a whole.

"What are you feeling? Is anything familiar to you?" asked Leda, linking arms with him.

"I'm in a bit of a daze. But I like the building designs; it's nice to look out at the streetscapes."

"Seems like you're just the same as always – you've always been fascinated by architecture. You even applied for a seat on the Swiss Building Commission, which establishes the character of each town and city district. It was all in your correspondence, so it's on your new MyChip too."

"And what came of the application?"

"Nothing yet. You'll have to inquire about it yourself."

"I'll do that."

"Watch out!"

Damian had entered the street without looking and had almost been run over by a car that was passing by noiselessly. The driver honked his horn in loud protest.

“Be careful when you cross the street. Private cars are banned in the city center, but the taxis do drive quite fast.”

They crossed the Limmat and walked uphill past the historic buildings of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, where he had studied, as well as the University of Zurich and its hospital. The buildings were all surrounded by greenery; in fact, the entire cityscape was dotted with green.

The vast hospital complex looked ultramodern; Damian’s artificial memory told him that it had been completely rebuilt during the last twenty years. As gene technology had made it possible for medical professionals to grow new organs and limbs rather quickly, new clinics had been developed. Although diseases such as infections and cancer still existed and people could still die from them, the chances of recovery had been increased tremendously.

“Why didn’t they treat me here?”

“Because brain restoration is practically the latest development in the field of medicine, and Dr. Meister is one of the few who has mastered the procedure. They’ll be able to do it here too in a few years.”

“That means that if my accident had happened a few years earlier, they wouldn’t have been able to revive me. I understand that this is a huge step forward, but there won’t really be many patients for the procedure – most people with brain diseases are at least eighty years old, and organ transplant isn’t allowed anymore at that point.”

“We’ll see. Since the law has been in force, all the political parties have promised to develop the economy to such an extent that more people could be supported – and only then will it be possible to gradually raise the age up to which such procedures are permitted.”

They reached a street of townhouses, some two hundred years old, some new, but all constructed in the same style to comply with the order of the building commission. His own home was in one of them; he recognized the entrance from the picture in his artificial memory. Leda opened the front door with her Mobcom. They climbed the stairs, which were speckled by the light that filtered in through the colorful glass windows. Damian was enraptured.

"Just like back then – even though you don't remember anymore," Leda observed.

"Remember what?"

"How excited you were by this play of light and color when you first saw it – you told me ceremoniously right here on the staircase that you wanted to rent this apartment, no matter the price."

"I don't know anything about that anymore, but I've succumbed to the spectacle again now – I'm glad we live here."

"That's nice," said Leda, "because it once again shows that you're still the same as you've always been."

They entered the apartment. Leda led him through the rooms, showing him everything. The home server, which could play back films, music, and books from the internet on the "Worldview" – the large screen on the living room wall. The separate music server, on which about two thousand pieces of music were stored. And finally, the pieces of art that they had acquired together – Damian liked them all, with the exception of the black wooden sculptures from Africa. He saw that Leda was disappointed.

"But you used to love them," she said uncertainly.

"I don't know why anymore. And what about the separate music system – can't all music just be downloaded straight to the Worldview?"

“You wanted to have your own personal collection of music that you liked.” She turned on the system, and a list of music tracks appeared on the Worldview. “Do you recognize them?”

He shook his head. “I’ve got the names on my MyChip. But I can’t make any connections.”

“That’s too bad. But maybe they’ll come back to you.”

Eventually they reached his office. He sat down and turned on his work computer. The monitor flickered on and displayed the user interface. He opened one of his work files.

“What do I do now?” he asked, befuddled.

Leda laughed. “All the instructions have been programmed onto your chip – even your calculation methods. And you’ve got two jobs waiting for you, so you could even start working right away. But you don’t have to. Your bank balance is still doing fine, despite the lost work time. You can continue looking around here now if you want, or you can come with me and I’ll make you something to eat.”

He followed Leda into the kitchen and watched as she took food from the refrigerator and deftly prepared a meal on the integrated cooking unit, then uncorked a bottle of wine.

“Your favorite – Amarone. A good vintage.”

Damian tasted the wine and found it pleasant, though nothing special. They ate; he enjoyed the food. He praised her cooking. Afterwards, he asked, “Do you know why this was my favorite wine?”

“No, we’ve never spoken about it. But you once told me that you discovered it on your first trip down south, when you travelled alone through northern Italy after your studies.”

“And it’s been my favorite wine since then?”

"You do drink others, but on special occasions it's always been this one."

Damian was bewildered. He pushed his plate away.

"What's wrong? You're all pale!"

"I'm actually not feeling so well."

"Go lie down. Should I come with you?"

"No, I'd rather go alone."

*

He lay back on the bed. An intense wave of sadness welled up inside him as he thought everything over. He was suddenly more aware of what had been irretrievably lost in the accident – he no longer knew the reasons behind his choices of music, his liking of those sculptures, or his preference for that wine. He felt like a light had just gone on in his head, and he could finally see now what the memory loss really meant for him. The fact that he especially loved that specific wine had nothing to do with its particular characteristics – and everything to do with his own personal experiences.

He knew that he had taken that trip to northern Italy fifteen years earlier; however, he had been living fully in the moment and thus had neither taken photos nor kept notes, despite having had his Mobcom with him. He had not phoned home even once; this had greatly annoyed his mother. Drawing upon his favorite books stored on his MyChip, he now imagined some of the experiences he might have had. Maybe he had met a girl there and had enjoyed some Amaranone with her while they spent a few joyful days together at a lake. Or maybe he had indulged in the wine over some unforgettable existential conversation with a particularly intelligent individual. Young people tended to have such experiences and safeguard them forever in a

treasure trove of memories, defining moments in life, which he now lacked.

He felt crippled by the feeling of having lost something truly fundamental. Despite what Dr. Meister had said about the different ways people apply their knowledge, Damian sensed that people who had the same information uploaded to their MyChips were, first and foremost, differentiated and defined by their individual life experiences. And those were what he now lacked.

The excitement that he had felt earlier, while seeing the architecture in the city center and the play of light and color on the staircase, was now gone. Suddenly unsure about whether he even wanted this new life at all, he fell asleep.