

I'm Not Who I Was

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I was having what they called a TLI, a Temporary Loss of Identity. They thought my implanted chip had malfunctioned. Since they didn't seem sure, I wondered whether the *temporary* could also have been mere speculation.

I sat in the common room of a windowless compound. There were five others, a woman and four men, whose identities had also gone missing. They all looked bewildered. In truth, there were windows, but the external steel shutters were always drawn down. I wondered whether our fugitive identities were congregating somewhere in cyberspace. I was the last to arrive here and, because I didn't remember my name, everyone, including the doctors and staff, called me Six. I doubted I was only the sixth person afflicted with Temporary Loss of Identity.

My compatriots also had conditional names and identities which they must return if their real selves ever turned up. None of us had laid eyes on each other before. Phineas had arrived six months ago, the others, less than that. I had been there for four days—what, without daylight, I judged to be days. We all shared the same implanted factual information—nearly everyone on the planet—but our personalities were our own. That was what was stored on our malfunctioning identity chips. Of course, some of who we are resides in our gray matter, too, but it was never clear to science what part of “I” was biologic and what part electronic. So I accepted my confusion and disorientation as the human condition.

On Thursday our keepers brought large sheets of drawing paper and pens, pencils, and crayons. I speculated that they wanted to see what natural talents we possessed, a combination of innate proclivities and muscle memory. It was an intriguing idea, the answer to which might have given a small clue to our identities. I figured our aptitude with musical instruments and electronic circuit boards would be tested next.

I used the pencils and crayons to render an accurate depiction of our common room and everyone in it. It was the only image I had to draw upon. The rest of my memory vanished along with “me.” Mine was the only drawing that bore any resemblance to our surroundings. The other inmates drew colored boxes and stick figures.

Dr. Mallow stepped away from the long table, holding her hands behind her back and making indecipherable faces. She stood behind me and placed a hand on my shoulder. When I looked up from my drawing, I saw the room was empty. The others must have been dismissed.

“You have obviously rendered depictions by hand before, Six,” she said. “Were you perhaps an artist?”

Her question was undoubtedly intended to nudge something loose. I shrugged.

“What else can you draw?”

“What else is there?” I asked. “Just my cell.”

“We prefer the word *cubicle*. It has friendlier connotations.”

Her horseshit was getting deep. I said nothing, but I saw my scowl in the shutter-darkened window glass. I wondered whether my nature had always been so combative.

Dr. Mallow pressed her thumb on an ID screen beside the steel shutters. The far-right one rolled up, creaking and grating. The sunlight hurt my eyes. I squinted until the rough shapes acquired detail.

In the middle-ground I saw a procession of wooden poles across the landscape. Their crossbars and wires had long ago fallen down. Beyond that were steep hills covered with scrubby brush and scarred with gulches and gullies. In the distance, beneath a brilliant blue sky and fair cumulus clouds, was an encircling arc of tall, snow-covered peaks, some rounded, some jagged. The vegetation, which I took to be sagebrush, marched right up to the window. On the hills and mountains stood pine trees and deciduous trees in the process of turning to gold in the sunlight.

“Thank you,” I told the doctor. Unconsciously, my left hand raced across the drawing tablet bearing a blue crayon. My right hand held other colors. I realized I was most interested in the sky.

“Aren’t you curious about where you are?”

“It wouldn’t change the scenery by giving it a name,” I told her.

“No? Are you sure?” She tilted her head like Nipper, the RCA mascot. “We’re in The Aspens. Mean anything to you?”

I shook my head, shutting my eyes for a second to scan the *Omnia Omnium, The All of Everything* for the reference. I continued drawing. The crayon snapped when I realized what sort of clouds I’d been drawing: mushroom clouds.

“This is where the first nuclear device was detonated,” I told her.

“Precisely,” Dr. Mallow replied. “We remain a research facility.”

The shutter rolled down. I realized I was sad to be closed away from the world again. I noticed a tear streak down Six’s face, my face, in the dark, reflective glass.

Thereafter, Dr. Mallow allowed me two hours per awake cycle in the common room with my watercolors and the hand-pressed papers she brought me from Santa Fe. She did not ask Six

for money. I don't know whether I had any, either. She did not pester me to see any of the sketches. She could have flipped through the stack of drawings whenever she wanted anyhow.

I felt the most comfortable with the watercolors, the most connected to my brushes and paints—and the water itself. The images flowed from me, from my fingers, and spread through the fibers of the rough paper. It seemed I could draw nothing but clouds. That hardly mattered to Six Thorson, whom I decided deserved a last name. It was my name, too, I figured. I'd no idea from where it popped into my head. Maybe it was my real name bubbling up.

Though we were told our cells were locked at night, mine was not. I'm not sure what prompted my trying the handle. The door swung open. No lights or sirens went off. I walked to the common room in my bathrobe and shower sandals, and stared with dismay at the closed shutters. Six put my thumb on the ID panel. We concentrated on sending it the mental signal to roll up, though I myself knew telekinesis was hogwash.

The metal shutters were heavy, containing, as I learned, lead shielding. They groaned and squeaked. The effort wore me out and Six got a banging headache. But the shutters, all four of them, were more than half-raised. A nearly full moon hung over the distant mountain range, illuminating the snow caps. I could not tell at first whether the moon was rising or setting, but the gradually diminishing shadows of the sagebrush suggested it was rising. It also told me the arc of mountains lay to the east.

I sat in the common room contentedly enjoying the moonlit scenery. When the moon had risen beyond the upper edge of the windows, I decided to return to my cell. Trying with all my might, I could not lower the steel shutters. Six was already asleep. I figured our keepers would simply think the shutters had malfunctioned. They seemed to like *malfunction* as an explanation, though it explained nothing. I fell asleep trying to understand how Six had raised the shutters without touching anything.

* * *

The next morning, after the customary breakfast of fruit, cheese, bread, and coffee, Dr. Mallow took me to the common room. None of my identity-challenged compatriots was present. The other three staff doctors stood there in their white lab coats holding clipboards.

“Six, how did you raise the security shutters last night?” Dr. Mallow asked. “It was a rather serious breach.”

She introduced me to Dr. Egad De Bockel, a Dutch/Israeli neuroscientist with a special interest in recovery from serious brain injury. He shook my hand weakly. Six thought of a dead flounder. I told him to pipe down.

“I beg your pardon,” Dr. De Bockel said.

“That’s all right, Doctor. You are forgiven,” I replied. “We are all forgiven.”

I had no idea from which cerebral fold that idea emanated, but it did not seem to concern the doctors. Perhaps forgiveness meant nothing to them. Dr. De Bockel continued with his questioning.

“We’d like to measure your brain activity, Six, while you raise the shutters again. With your permission, of course.”

“I haven’t a clue how I did it, Doctor. If I don’t agree, you’ll force me anyway, right?”

The four doctors looked back and forth and across at one another as though taking in a slow tennis match. The chair and its wired helmet bore a resemblance to a 1950s hair drying hood in a women’s beauty salon.

“Will my hair get curly?” Six asked.

This time the doctors seemed amused and their body language suggested they were more relaxed. I lowered myself into the chair and they strapped me in. The helmet was heavy. They put goggles over my eyes and asked if I were comfortable. Six was against my cooperating with them in this way, afraid they might probe for more than they admitted they were seeking.

Of course, I knew Six and I were the same person—and there were more of us in here. Or were they out there? Were they the other inmates here whose memories and identities were also lost? Or was I imagining them all? I didn’t know. I worked on that puzzle when I should have been trying futilely to raise the shutters by the power of thought alone.

Dr. Mallow recommended removing my goggles, suggesting that visual feedback might be a necessary component of telekinesis. The other doctors didn’t laugh, so I assumed they bought into her hooey. I wondered whether they knew there was no such thing as a self, either.

I felt less claustrophobic without the goggles and leaned back. I loved challenges, too. Nicolás, one of my other persons inside, suggested I might want to give my keepers a small demonstration just to remain on their good sides. It might procure me continued preferential treatment. Basim, a thoroughly logical and judicious fellow, also thought I should give them a little token until we had time to consider other options. Antonio and Hypatia opposed all cooperation—with *any* authority. They were quite adamant. It was up to me to break our tie.

Squinting and grunting, I turned slightly to one side and pictured the shutters going up. I heard and saw nothing budge. Then there was light-hearted chatter and laughter among the doctors standing behind me. They asked me to turn around.

The four doctors’ lab coats had been turned inside out and pulled up to their necks like funnels. They looked like unfortunate pets inside their plastic cones. I laughed, as did everyone

else in my head. The doctors were less amused. Antonio thought I should leave them like that and go back to our cell. I was inclined to put it to a vote, but thought, *What the hell? Who's the boss around here anyway?*

As I thought about it, the helmet, arm straps, and sensors lifted off of me. I walked to the doorway and touched my thumb to the entry ID panel and thought the door open—politely, as Nicolás urged. *It works better than being unpleasant.* I turned to the four doctors, struggling inside their inverted lab coats.

“Apparently, visual cues are indeed an important element of telekinesis,” I told them, though I did not believe a word of it.

The door slid shut behind me, and I returned to our cell.

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I was brought to the common room the next morning by two attendants in white, one at each elbow.

Dr. Juan de Crisco, the eminent Spanish psychiatrist, scowled at me and told me my little demonstration the day before had exhibited “extreme hostility to authority.”

“You betcha,” Antonio said, but, fortunately, he did not have the floor in my head, and nothing came out of my mouth but a silent grin.

“You think this is funny?” the fourth doctor asked. “I assure you we are deadly serious. I am not opposed to dissection—or vivisection, for that matter.”

General Warren Pease, surgeon general under two administrations, was no doubt likeable in a family situation. But I was not a member of his family, nor did I wish to be.

“For the record,” he went on, glancing up at one of the security cameras, “I opposed this experiment. What good can be derived from allowing even one individual to exist beyond the reach of surveillance?”

“This, General Pease,” Dr. Mallow said, gesturing, “is the first fully documented instance of telekinesis. Tell me you do not imagine military applications for such abilities.”

“Yeah, but how do you control somebody like him? He’s a loose cannon, a freak of nature.”

“Just for the record,” I interrupted. “I don’t believe in telekinesis.”

“That’s rich,” Dr. de Crisco said. “So what raised the shutters last night?”

“Um... an anti-gravity ray?” I offered. “Ask the General. That’s his department.”

They angrily slammed down their clipboards, except for Dr. Mallow. I expected them next to rend their lab coats. Instead they went to the sliding entrance door to the common room and took turns showing it their thumbs. Hypatia and Antonio decided it would be fun to frustrate them and held the doors for a while. The doctors looked to Dr. Mallow for help.

“Say *Please*,” I instructed them.

General Pease let out an insincere one-syllable laugh. When, finally, Dr. De Bockel said the magic word, Antonio and Hypatia released the doors. But then they would not let them close.

“Don’t forget the *Thank you*,” I recommended.

After some minutes passed, the General, growling, uttered the magic incantation. Before the doors closed, I reminded them that no one was too big or important to be polite.

“You are not making friends here, Six,” Dr. Mallow told me.

I wanted to tell her I wasn’t the one who had held the doors, but I wondered how much she understood of the unfettered mind—or even of the fettered kind.

* * *

It should have occurred to me I’d be under constant surveillance in a secret government facility. I don’t know what I could’ve done differently. I had no idea I could move things with my mind and had no idea how I did it, making it, in my opinion, useless for any practical effect. It could not be relied on.

I became aware of sitting in the common room facing the four raised shutters and looking at the night sky. I had no recollection of leaving my cell or raising the steel shutters. I stood transfixed by the mystically beautiful landscape

The moon was somewhere behind the facility. The sagebrush sparkled, as though from a recent rain, though there were no clouds I could see. The four illuminated rectangles from the windows trailed out into the night and melted in the shadows. I shut my eyes. Six longed to breathe in the aroma of the rain-freshened air and the sweet, smoky, camphory smell of the sagebrush. Was that another of my memories bubbling up?

Feeling a stir of air, I figured the party was over. I hoped it was Dr. Mallow who had entered. Opening my eyes, I was shocked to see I was no longer inside The Aspens facility.

I stood outside on the damp ground completely naked. The chilly breeze gave me a shiver. I shut my eyes and filled my lungs with the desert air, air washed by rain and lightning

and suffused with the masculine aroma—like antiseptic or gin—of the sagebrush. I'd become slightly aroused. The moon peered from behind an intricate mantilla of clouds.

Once Six breathed our fill, it was time to figure out how we were all going to get back inside the facility. I thought it might be important to face in the direction in which I wanted to transport myself. After turning around, I looked through the windows of the dimly-lit common room, so sterile and unimaginative after beholding the rain-drenched desert by moonlight.

I closed my eyes again and thought of the heated common room. It had no particular smell, not even of plastic. When the sagebrush aroma faded, I knew I was back inside the facility. My robe and sandals lay beneath the third window. I put them on, wondering how this would look on their security cameras. Hypatia, the only woman inside me, laughed wickedly.

* * *

The doctors pestered me about these “nocturnal egressions.” It was easy to claim ignorance. I truly did not know how any of this happened since it was clearly impossible. At last they convinced themselves that my teleportation was akin to somnambulism and that I would be expected to remember none of it.

Through trial-and-error I discovered several rules about my getting on the other side of things. I didn't want to let the doctors know what I was up to, so I projected myself outdoors from my cell. I made a dummy of blankets and sheets and pillows to disguise my absence. Going further into the desert, I escaped their cameras and motion and infrared sensors.

Teleportation did indeed require one to face in the direction of travel. You could bring objects with you, but you had to be in contact with them and remain aware of them throughout. I once brought my drawing pad with me, but it lodged halfway out of the wall when I forgot it for a second. I used my other impossible ability, telekinesis, to extract the sketch pad.

It was easiest to wear longjohns, a sweatshirt, and thick socks. They usually made the trip outside with me. For some reason I continually became unaware of one or the other of my shoes, and it fell wherever it was that I'd stopped concentrating on it.

Often I came back wearing less on purpose. Beneath a cluster of pine trees, I'd squirreled away a nylon bag, and filled it with extra clothing, purloined from the lockers of the maintenance workers. My pencils and hand-drawn maps made it outside on later excursions. My notebook and sketchbook would escape with me on the last night.

Antonio could not sleep for his excitement at “springing this joint.” Six and the teacher Nicolás were in his camp. Basim imagined only dire consequences—eating garbage or starving—for a vagrant without an identity chip. Phineas looked forward to an adventure, but he was quite aware things do not often go as intended. He dared Antonio to project himself outside in daylight, a gauntlet Antonio readily took up.

Yes, they were all me, and all of us were going to escape—as soon as we could.

* * *

Dr. Mallow detected my nervousness. It was the day Antonio planned to project himself outside in broad daylight. I'd be with Dr. Mallow and perhaps one or more of her colleagues. It meant adding another impossible ability, bilocation, to my resume. I did not believe in any of this, but I had faith Antonio and I could pull it off. He would be the distraction we needed in order for all of us to escape.

“Where are the others?” I asked the doctor.

“What others, Six? Do you mean my colleagues?”

I saw her puzzlement. I shrugged and smiled, realizing my fellow captives at the facility had, without doubt, been residing solely in my head all along.

“Just thinking of someone I knew,” I said. “Her name's Hypatia.”

“A memory?” the doctor postulated.

“In another lifetime, perhaps,” I replied to her.

“Fourth-century Alexandria?” she asked. “Do you time-travel, too?”

I shook my head. Traveling through time was even impossibler than my other supposed talents. Phineas, I knew, had been a railroad foreman before the Civil War. Hypatia lived a long time before that, before any of us. Basim was an Iranian refugee who became a New York State Supreme Court Judge. Nicolás was a teacher in pre-Communist Cuba. Antonio was a gay biker from New Mexico. We were pretty mixed company.

I turned so that Dr. Mallow would look past me and out the window at Antonio. Her expression registered her shock. I turned away from the Doctor and closed my eyes, picturing myself standing in the space occupied by Antonio. I let my government-issued jumpsuit fall to the floor before projecting myself outdoors.

Hypatia howled with delight at being free—and naked. She and Antonio danced around a scraggly piñon as though it were a maypole. Phineas and Basim consulted the maps and laid out our route. I reached my bag of stashed clothing and got dressed.

I would have liked to see what sort of notes Dr. Mallow wrote up about the incident, but none of us had any intention of returning to the lab merely to have a chuckle at her expense. Our freedom had its cost, but it was one we bore gladly. Besides, I liked Dr. Mallow. She had been the friendliest person at the laboratory.

No one at The Aspens heard from any of us again, though, no doubt, they are still peering beneath every clump of sagebrush and sweeping the shadows, looking for traces of those who might never have existed except in my head..

* * *

I stand at the edge of the highway in dusty Levi's, jean jacket, and cowboy boots that look as though they'd walked across the entire Southwest diagonally. There's a bedroll slung over my right shoulder. I've no idea where I am going or where I've been. It doesn't matter.

I cross the highway to the Sagebrush Diner, no traffic in either direction as far as eye can see. The two cars and three trucks bear New Mexico license tags. The newest vehicle is from the late 1940s. I am famished.

The five men at the counter are dressed similarly in dusty boots and blue jeans. I leave an empty seat and sit down on the next red leatherette stool.

"What'll it be, Six?" the red-headed waitress asks. She looks down over her glasses at me.

I wonder for a minute how she knows me. Is it because I am the sixth man at the counter? In the diamond-pattern quilted stainless steel wall behind her, I see my distorted reflection. On my faded blue T-shirt is a backward white number six.

"The usual, Fanny," I say, taking a chance I know her, too. Her name is sewn onto her white blouse.

"You got 'er."

Each of the other five men at the counter nods at me in the quilted wall.

"Mornin', Six," recites the male chorus.

I'm pleased to note I am not disliked in these parts. Fanny whisks past, leaving a welcome cup of black coffee. She has the handle turned towards my left hand. I pick it up and inhale the steam before swallowing. It clears my head. I feel as though I've awakened after sleeping for twenty years.