

## **Pluripotent**

When she opened her eyes, Claire thought she was still asleep.

Tiny figures danced before her on the blankets, aquamarine and shimmering; moving as if in a silent movie. She recognized them from somewhere, though she was sure she'd never seen pixies dancing on her bedclothes before.

“Do you remember that when it was on TV?”, a voice at her bedside asked.

Claire leaned forward, feeling the weight of pillows behind her lessen.

“Relax”, the voice said. “Technically, you’re still in the post-operative period. We thought we’d show you a hologram of something popular back in the day – a TV show, you’d call it.”

“Oh”, said Claire, her voice hoarse. She needed water and looked around. She felt delicately for the glass and carafe on her bedside table, slowly poured out a glass, sipped, then drank it down.

She looked through the bright light above her at the voice’s source.

“So where am I and what the hell’s going on?”

“You will recall – or perhaps you won’t – that you signed a permission form when you turned 21. When you were still an undergraduate, I mean.”

Claire located the voice. She turned to her left. It belonged to a tall, slim man with greying dark hair. He wore an open-necked shirt, sky blue, and dark trousers. As she looked at him he sat down at the foot of her bed, light from the thin bedside lamp revealing an expensive-looking gold watch on his lightly tanned wrist, high end brown loafers on his feet.

“I did?”

The man nodded and smiled. “You and six of your classmates from undergrad biochemistry. The idea, just to remind you, was to take a chemical snapshot of your synaptic activity when you were 21, and then reintroduce that pattern to your brain twenty-five years later. Using the same organic vehicle, of course.”

“You mean you’ve made me young again.”

“Well, that’s the idea. How do you feel, Dr. Hetman?”

“Dr. Hetman.”, Claire repeated dully.

“Right”, said the man. “Professor Hetman, in fact. You teach here. You’re a clinical neuro-psychologist. You wanted this. When we contacted the others who’d signed the permission forms, they all refused. Too busy with their careers and families and blah blah.”

“Blah blah.”, Claire parroted.

“Dr. Hetman? Are you there?”, asked the man, his face wrinkling in concern.

Claire was there all right. She just wasn’t sure if she knew where “there” was: she’d gone to sleep in her bed one night and awoken to find some middle-aged dweeb telling her she’d had her mind rinsed.

She smiled to herself. Middle-aged dweeb. Straight from the 1990s.

She looked down at her hands, their road-map of veins, the carefully-tended nails and thick platinum band studded heavily with diamonds. The hands of a middle-aged woman.

“I’m married?” she asked with faint surprise.

The man on her bed nodded, his eyes smiling. “Yes, you are. To me. Claire; it’s Dave. Your husband. Has your memory gone completely?”

Claire thought for an instant. Dave. She remembered Dave, of course. Long black hair. Sonic Youth records and hand-rolled cigarettes. Turning up at anti-poverty marches and promising to devote his medical skills to victims in war zones. They were both going to join *Medicins Sans Frontières*. And then –

Then what?

“Dave”, she repeated, adding quickly: “Darling. Get me a mirror, could you?”

Dave smiled and reached for a shaving mirror on the bedside table.

“I thought that might be one of the first things you’d ask for.”

Claire took the mirror and turned it towards herself. Her lustrous black hair was thinner now, expensively cut and dyed, the slightest hint of grey showing at the roots. Her face had aged most: eyes circled with black stains of fatigue, cheeks drawn, skin sagging a little under her jaw.

“Do we have children?”

Dave made a pained expression. “Really? You don’t remember anything, do you?”

Claire searched her memory. Nothing. She could remember her friends at College. She could remember her clothes: stonewashed jeans, big hair, garish makeup. Her studies in biochemistry and anatomy, the names of her Professors, her parents...

“What did I do? Where did the years go?” she asked him.

Dave chuckled wryly.

“OK. Here’s a brief history: we both graduated pre-med and went to medical school. We agreed to defer working for MSF until we’d paid off our loans because we decided it wasn’t fair on our parents, even though all were willing to help. We went in to hospital work, and damned near killed ourselves – so much so that after three years we moved out of the city and started working forty miles away. The pay wasn’t much, so losing our loans took longer than expected, even though we denied ourselves and saved over half of every paycheck.”

“And then what happened?”, Claire asked, putting the mirror down and looking at Dave more closely, noticing the deep lines etched in his forehead. Scrutinizing him, she saw the man she’d known long ago: older, yes; but grown. Grown how, and whether for good or bad, she couldn’t tell.

“Then... we got past thirty. And decided that we wanted children before it got too late. So we had Jane and Mike. One of each. A girl and a boy. Both healthy, good kids. They’re at school right now, but they’ll come by to see you later.”

“And my Dad? Mum?”

“Claire – I ...”

“Tell me.”

Dave looked away, the light from the bedside lamp cutting more deeply into his features. “You can’t remember anything, can you?”

“I remember you saying you were going to help the war victims, and I was going with you. I remember us smoking weed and listening to Nirvana and cursing George H. Bush. I remember anti-apartheid marches, and us making love in a doorway when Nelson Mandela got released.”

There was a silence between them as they were transported back twenty-five years to a time before social media and smart-phones. To when they'd walked the three miles between their undergraduate dorms just to see if they were in, and left scribbled notes on the door if they weren't there. A time when TV and radio ruled, CDs were king, and vinyl was a thing of the past.

“You still look kinda hot, you know, Dave,” Claire smiled, reaching for his hand.

Dave turned his face towards her, his eyes stone, sunk in their sockets. The same ringlets of fatigue as her, a few more crow's feet.

“Your father died ten years ago. Lymphoma. You were never the same after his death. For two years you used to burst out crying every time you saw your uncle. Your mother lives with us now: she can't get around much since she had her hips replaced. She tore a muscle in her shoulder last year. She gets forgetful sometimes, forgets to flush the toilet. Calls me by your Dad's name.”

“And what about our plans to practice medicine in war zones?”

“Never happened after the kids came along.”

“Do you still go on demos and stuff?”

“Get real. I'm a family doctor in a small town. Do you think I'd have any patients if I wore my politics on my sleeve?”

Dave's face lit up with something like anger, darkness written in the lines on his face.

“I carried on with General Practice because you'd had enough of hypertensive middle-aged men eating too many burgers and their wives who swore they only ate lettuce. I carried the can while

you were doing your PhD. Admittedly, you looked after the children until they were old enough to go to school by themselves.”

“And now?” Claire decided she didn’t like the way Dave looked – a man who’d kept too much in. A man smouldering with self-righteous indignation. A man whose life hadn’t worked out the way he’d planned.

“Now you are a widely-respected clinical researcher, distinguished for your practical approach to complex problems. An authority whose combination of clinical experience and academic rigour has brought you renown. Meanwhile, I’m still sticking a gloved finger up the assholes of men over fifty to check for prostate cancer.”

“Oh. Anything else?”

“We live where you’d expect us to live: in a beautiful Cape Cod-style house on a big lot with trees. Nine years left on the mortgage. All our loans are paid off, though, and the retirement plans and College funds are in good shape.”

Dave’s features softened a little. His gold watch gleamed in the reflected light from her bedside lamp. “Mike and Jane are good kids. Fourteen and eleven. And your mother adores them, of course. Looks after them after school if you’re here in the hospital or teaching and I’m on shift at the practice.”

Claire reached out and took Dave’s hand, feeling the rough skin that used to be soft and gentle.

“And your parents?” she asked gently.

“Live in Miami. Dad had a minor stroke two years ago, but he’s OK. My Mum is about the same as yours. Everyone is getting by.”

Claire leaned back on her pillows and picked up the mirror with her right hand, the fingers of her left hand still resting gently on Dave's palm. She looked again at her lined, drawn features.

“What happened to us, Dave? How did we get here?”

“We grew up is what happened. We got happy.”

“Are you happy, Dave? Happy with me? Happy with life?”

“We've had our moments, let's put it that way”, Dave answered, standing up. “This is weird. I mean, if the research team expected anything, then it would have been a change in your attitude, a change in your values from the cynicism of age to youthful idealism. But all it seems to have done is wipe every memory you've ever had from the age of 21 onwards.”

Dave put his hand to his mouth as if to stop himself talking. Claire looked at him from her hospital bed. The anguish in his features was vicious – this man who had been so carefree, so confident that life would bring him what he wanted. Now he looked like the stressed, middle-aged father of two he was: stuck in a job he didn't like, forced to continue by necessity, plagued by bills and demands on his time, unable to express himself.

In contrast, Claire felt brand new. She looked at her veined hands and lined face in the mirror as though they belonged to someone else. She examined her wedding ring as a curiosity, much as someone might look at an old ticket stub they found in their coat pocket. Everything in her longed to get on with life, to experience things, instead of worrying.

She held out her hands to him.

“Dave? Do you still want me?”

Dave's eyes shone with tears.

“It isn’t a question of that. It’s...”

“It’s what?”

She sat up in bed, oblivious to the IV in her arm until she felt its gentle tug. She glanced at the contents of the bag the line led to— saline, as she’d suspected, for hydration purposes. Teasing the line out of her arm, she leaned towards him, enveloping him in a hug. As she grasped him she felt his body release its emotions, the sobs heaving through his skinny frame. The Dave she remembered had been lean and powerful: now the years had caused him to harden on the inside as well as the outside. At least he hadn’t got fat, she thought – then cursed herself for being so crass.

But this wasn’t the Dave she remembered. The guy who used to drink and smoke weed up until two weeks before exams and still get by. The guy who’d been cautioned in surgical school for asking a patient with an electric toothbrush where one shouldn’t be whether he wanted it removed or the batteries changed. The guy she now held didn’t feel like her Dave. He was a scarecrow, a simulacrum of the man she’d been with when she was young.

Life. She remembered wondering what her “adult life” was going to be like when she was in her senior year at College, willfully ignoring the fact that at 21 she was already three years in to her adult life. What was that John Lennon quote? “Life is what happens when you’re busy making other plans.”

It was like she’d had her life – and now she got to rewind the tape and start again. Only she felt like she’d been put away in the wrong cassette box.

Dave pulled away from her and dried his eyes with his fingers, stood up from the bed and looked at her.

“Do you have any idea how much I hate General Practice? The freaks who present with Stage IIIb tumours, coming in only after they’ve exhausted every naturopathic, homeopathic and Christ-knows-what-a-pathetic cure. 300-pound lard-balls who claim they only drink consommé. Senior executives who “can’t” stop eating cookies. Claire, I did this for you. I did it so you could get your PhD. I did it so you could become the respected authority you are now.”

Claire looked at him, half in disgust, half in pity. Who knew idealistic Dave could become such a whiner? He was like a ship in a bottle with broken sails – interesting to look at, but of no use.

“There was another reason I wanted you to go through with this procedure”, Dave continued, his features granite. “I mean, apart from the fact you wanted to do it.”

“What?”

Dave looked away, then back at Claire. He sighed, then the words fell out like clothes from an overstuffed drawer: “I wanted to be with the woman I’d loved again. To try to find the beautiful, innocent person I’d married. Not the ball-breaking career woman you’d become. The Academic Director who missed her kids’ parties for meetings. Who fired research assistants for inconsequential errors. Who was going to the top, no matter what. Where did she come from, Claire? What happened to our lives?”

Claire bit her lip. She couldn't remember anything after age 21. Everything blurred for her around the time Soundgarden released their fifth LP and Clinton announced his candidacy. The time when she and Dave had borrowed a beach house on the Jersey Shore, and she'd woken early to listen to the surf, Dave's lean sunburned body lying beside her on the light blue cotton sheets.

Now she stood face to face with this man she barely recognised: her husband. The man who she'd go home with when she got out. And her children would be here soon – children she had no memory of, children who were only an aspiration for the woman she once was – and now found herself to be again. A young woman in a middle-aged body.

She slid off the bed and stood before Dave, taking his hands and leaning in to him.

“Then I have some good news for you, Doctor Richards”, she whispered in a low voice. “I’m back.”

(2495 words)