

## Jontu

When Jon first came into the ER he was at the edge, and no one thought he would last very long. The crash had severely mangled his body; his skin was torn and burnt, his bones were broken, his spine was snapped again and again down its length. The surgeons did what they could, setting all the pieces of the shattered man back in place. But they could not do much. After that we could do little more than monitor his vitals and wait for him to wake up, or pass away.

A young woman sat by his bed and held onto his hand the night after the crash. She had gold skin, dashed with every sort of exoticism, and a thick mane of hair that framed her wide oval eyes and full lips. For a moment I thought to introduce myself; it was standard practice for the staff psychologist to engage loved ones at a time like this, to let them know that if they needed anything . . . but I didn't speak to her. I'm not sure why, the way she was looking at him perhaps, absorbed, full of thought, making not a movement or a sound. Perhaps I was simply shy. In the morning she was gone, save a letter that she left on the bedside table, marked in blue with perfect small letters, "Jon". I would not see her again for some time.

A few weeks later his eyes were open. They were clear and alert, alone amongst the wreckage of his face, catching and holding you the moment you walked in the room, beckoning you forward, trying to speak through the sheer intensity of their gaze.

"Hello Jon, I'm Dr. Stevens." I stared down into the eyes. "I'm going ask you some 'yes-no' questions and I want you to blink once for yes and twice for no. Can you hear me?"

*Blink.*

"Are you in any pain?"

*Blink blink.*

"Very good. You're at UCSF medical center, you've been with us in comatose for about three weeks now. The auto-driver system on your car failed, it drove you off the road. I'm sorry, but your injuries are quite severe. We do not expect you to recover past your current state; full-body paralysis. That you've regained consciousness and eye-movement is itself something of a miracle. Do you understand all that?"

*Blink.*

"Now, there is one option available to you that I do not have the credentials to discuss at length. Dr. Wagner from the neurorobotics division has taken a great interest in you, and has been working on a project he thinks could give you something of your former life back. He's been

experimenting with various computer-brain interfaces for some time now; the technology has been around since the start of the century, monkeys moving cursors with their brains, controlling robotic arms, that sort of thing. What Dr. Wagner is suggesting is far more . . . comprehensive. It will be high risk, and very expensive, but if you would like to meet with him he can be here tomorrow morning. Shall I make the arrangements?"

*Blink.*

"Alright. It will be a while before all the papers clear and the preliminary testing is complete. In the meantime, we can equip you with an eye-tracker and letter board to communicate. You'll look at the letters and blink to type them out. Yes?"

*Blink.*

As soon as the system was in place Jon began to write. His eyes moved with calm deliberation, guided by a stubborn patience I had only ever known in much older men. The letters appeared on the display screen one by one in a steady stream, and I found myself hanging on his every word. It was then that I realized my role in all this; I was not the doctor, I could not help him, I could not console him, or set him on the right path. I was simply here to bear witness to the man, to receive his message from the void and make what sense of it I could.

"THANK YOU FOR YOUR FOWARD WORDS DOCTOR. I WILL NEED TO PASS THE TIME. I CAN STILL LISTEN. WOULD YOU PUT ON SOME MUSIC? CHOPIN."

"Yes, of course."

I went to his bedside media pad and put on a playlist of the "Nocturnes". There, next to the pad, was the note with the blue letters.

"A woman left this for you. I can leave it propped on the letter board for you to read."

He held my gaze for a moment. *Blink.*

As he read his eyes lost the composure that had so impressed me, they were desperate and dilated, pouring over the page. I left him, but the Chopin carried down the hall behind me.

From the moment they met Dr. Wagner was taken by Jon, just as I was. "This is our man." He told me, "I'm quite sure of it. He has a remarkable will, and that will be important." They started with the project right away, and for the next few weeks it was difficult for me to meet with him. He was the epicenter of a storm of activity; technicians and machinery pouring in and out, buzzing with scientific wizardry around his lifeless form. In the evening everything would die down and I could

hear the faint music start up in his room. It was my cue--I would poke my head through the door, not wanting to disturb him. He always received me the same way,

“COME IN DR. STEVENS.”

I never knew quite what to say, I had no real reason to meet with him, I just wanted some morsel of wisdom to chew on during my drive home. I would often bring up his compositions, like a typical star-struck fan after a concert or a book signing, with nothing significant to bring to the table but the work of the other. He was a prolific composer, and I listened to his music nearly everyday since we first spoke. It was the evening before his principle operation, and the music coming from his room was his own, slow, simple, solo piano, a piece called “Annie”. I told him it was one of my favorites.

“IT IS A FAVORITE OF MINE AS WELL.” He wrote.

“BUT IT IS JUST A TRICK, ONE WE ARE POWERLESS AGAINST. EVERY MOVING SONG TASTES THE SAME. BITTERSWEET.”

He stared at the wall, and I waited, in hopes he might say something about the girl. He took a long moment, as if he had forgotten I was there. Finally,

“I SHOULD REST DOCTOR.”

“Yes, of course. Good luck tomorrow. If all goes well we will talk again soon.”

After the operation Jon was transported back to his home, a beautiful estate tucked away in the Mill Valley hills. Dr. Wagner insisted that the calibration process take place there; the familiar environment would speed things along, present all the relevant day to day challenges, and allow for a natural transition into normal life. I stopped by the house after my shift at the hospital. I would make a habit of it. Everything was set up in the living room, which offered plenty of space. The room had old charm; exposed Oak rafters lined the ceiling, interspersed with warm lights that glowed like campfires. A floor to ceiling window at the end of the room let in the cool blue of the bay, which backlit Dr. Wagner and the mess of computers and gadgetry he manned at the long dining room table. A gorgeous Bosendorfer Grand Piano dominated the foreground to the right. To the left, in two red lounge chairs angled towards each other, sat Jon and Jontu.

They did not belong to the rest of the scene, they were aliens, insectile and repulsive. I could find nothing of my former friend between them. Jon's body was covered in a blanket, except for his head, which rested against the chair to support its weight. It was completely encased in a black metal skull, a faceless parasite that bit into the flesh around his neck. It was easy to imagine the swarm of sensors and wires burrowed into his brain beneath the shell. It was much more difficult to imagine his eyes, those eyes that I had come to know as his entire being, those eyes that grabbed hold of you and ensured the presence of a human spirit. I knew they were in there too, alive and active, looking out to the world as it was presented on the internal display of the helmet.

And then there was the robot. Jontu was a play on words—Jon 2—the second body. It was a joke the technicians started, but it stuck all the same. It convulsed and gurgled in its chair, like some giant, impaired infant. Great care had been put into the design of its hands, they were nearly human in their capabilities. But now they were claws, twitching and twisting and writhing. They were possessed.

“What is this? Has something gone wrong?” I did not hide the accusation in my voice.

“Nothing at all has gone wrong.” He said, amused, “It’s simply going to take some time for them to become familiar with each other’s patterns. At this point we’ve done little more than establish the right environment, like the primordial soup where life can take hold. Of course the machine has no idea what the neuron firings mean, and the neurons have no idea as to the effect their firing will have. But the connection is there and the systems are very flexible; soon each will get a hold of the other.”

Everyday there was improvement, starting in his neck, flowing down through his arms and hands, his torso, his legs. He could crawl before he could walk, and so he crawled over to the piano. Dr. Wagner realized his intent and positioned him at the bench. He spent the majority of his days practicing, very slowly, so as to never falter or play a sour note. As his music improved everything else seemed to come along with it, as if for free. The last skill to develop was the voice, which came from a little speaker in Jontu's head. He first learned to hum along with his playing, then to sing, and finally to speak.

Within a few months he was greeting me at the door.

“Come in Dr. Stevens.” The voice was not what one would expect, it was not rigid and monotonous. But it was a strange voice all the same, a patchwork of disparate sounds. Jon insisted it was not his own. “Would you like anything, some tea or coffee?”

“That’s alright, I’m not staying long.”

“Are you sure? Of course I’m never going to drink it.”

“Really I’m alright.”

“Doctor, I understand your impulse, but I’m over here.”

I turned back to Jontu. I had been speaking to the black skull in the lounge chair.

“Of course, I’m sorry. It’s just . . . I’ve never been around anything quite like you before. How do you do it? How do you move its arms? How do you make it speak?”

He twisted the neck, so the camera on Jontu’s face peered down at its hands, which he flexed. Then he snapped the camera back to my face.

“I could ask you the same thing. How do you do it? How do you move its arms? How do you make it speak?”

“So it feels the same then?”

“No, I wouldn’t say that. There are differences of course, although it grows harder for me to remember how things were with every day. After a while most of the quirks stop seeming so strange, and thus cease to be quirks. Others persist in ways I could not have expected. I’m always very cold, I can’t escape it.

That would be his peak, and to my great dismay it did not last long. He began to lose himself as quickly as he took the reins. Dr. Wagner thought perhaps it was a buildup of scar tissue in the brain, preventing what was once a clear connection. But no one was sure. He would speak less and less, and muttered like an old man with dementia. His movements became slow and jerky, rusty. He played the piano more than he ever did before, perhaps as a way to try and hold on. Unlike everything else, his piano skills never wavered. I was there when it finally happened. He had been sitting at the Bosendorfer since I arrived, bent over with his head hung low, moving only his forearms, wrists, and fingers. He had yet to acknowledge my presence. I don’t know what compelled me to move over to Jon’s body, to put my head close to the black metal helmet and speak to him. Perhaps it was because I was getting nowhere with Jontu, and I imagined those eyes wide open and scared behind the skull. I noticed his body was not moving with his breath as it normally did, if ever so slightly. I checked his pulse. There was no pulse. Dr. Wagner’s monitoring systems confirmed my suspicion; Jon had passed away. But Jontu kept playing. I went over to the robot and shook him by the shoulder. He turned his head.

“Come in Dr. Stevenson.” His fingers did not stop crawling across the keys.

We kept an eye on the robot over the next few days as it lingered on, mostly playing, sometimes pacing back and forth, muttering, sometimes engaging us outright, sometimes moving incoherently, sometimes sitting, still and silent.

Dr. Wagner said he was not entirely surprised by this, the machine had become tuned to the man, it could go on by itself, without explicit instructions.

“Nothing more than a sophisticated chicken with its head cut off.” He said with a feigned grin. There was something else. I pressed. “Well,” he scratched his bald scalp, “It’s just I’ve never been quite sure what makes us anything more than sophisticated chickens with our heads cut off.” I went to Jon’s funeral, but for me it was an empty ceremony. I did not know who or what was in the casket that they lowered into the ground. She was there, as lovely as I remembered her, with the same thoughtful, solemn expression she wore before in the hospital. I thought for a long time about what I would say, and whether or not I should say anything at all. When everyone else was gone I introduced myself, and told her that Jon had left something important for her. She followed me back to the estate in her car.

Inside Jontu was slumped over on the piano bench. I was too late; any trace of life left in him was gone. But then she spoke up, "What is it?" and at the sound of her voice his head rose and turned.

“Annie.” The camera was locked to her face.

But she was backing towards the door, wide-eyed and shaking. What had I done bringing her here? But it was all over quickly.

“Don't go.” He started to rise. And that was it, she turned to the door and she was gone.

He did not say another word, but simply sat back down at the bench and stared into empty space for a moment. He rested his hands on the keys and began to play her song, full of love and full of sadness. When it was finished, he rested his hands in his lap and bowed his head. And there was nothing left of him.