

FOLLOW YOUR HEART
AND YOU'LL BE HAPPY

WHO AM I

WRITTEN BY
KATA MLEK

I.

I had no idea I existed—yet I did. I was alive long before I realized that I was.

It started when I began to feel. I don't mean that I was reacting to stimuli—there weren't any in my cozy, quiet vat. What I felt were emotions. They appeared out of nowhere, with no context, whole collections of them at the same time—or so it seemed to me. They were striking, stunning, wonderful—even the negative ones. Joy, anxiety, excitement, pity, sadness, enthusiasm, fear, pride. And you know what? Feelings never lie. People say *follow your heart*, and they're right, but back then I didn't realize how important that was.

Then I began to think, but not in the usual way. Before I learned a language, my thoughts consisted of flashing images and the feelings that came with them. I had no words or names for them—I simply *felt* the meaning. And what I felt... well, maybe there's no point talking about that. I don't think anyone will ever understand what I mean. Normal people are so used to words—tags, names, descriptions—that elemental things, the essences of things, no longer make sense to them.

"You're freaking out," my wife, Samantha, said. She asked me about my life in a vat, so I told her, but she didn't get it. She couldn't *feel* it.

I was unaware that I was there, stuck in the nutrient suspension, listening to the music they played for us. I wanted to move, I had the urge to dance—don't we all need to dance sometimes? I don't know, and I'm not good at it, either. But I love music anyway, classical music, like they would play for me. Samantha said that once upon a time I used to detest it, that even preferred silence. Why would that be?

Then something happened. Fear was the first symptom—a very simple, fundamental emotion that told me to prepare, that something was coming to get me. We're all born equipped with fear and anger, joy and hope. I remember that it seemed like the world around me heated up, but I can't be sure that's right—maybe now that I'm out of my vat I'm reshaping history to make it expressible in words. Something stung me, and a moment later I was able to use words. Suddenly I could do so much more than before: I could tell myself a story. I could put a name to every element of my inner world—it was fascinating. I didn't see the outer world yet, I was still asleep, but inside my head I was awake, and spent whole days naming things that my mind displayed for me. I don't think the people who serviced the vats had any idea that I was conscious. If they had, they might have tried to switch off all the images in my head, given that they weren't necessary for the breeding process.

Where did these images come from? I don't really know. They tell me that they're just the by-product of the process, the result of random discharges of electricity in my brain.

“You don't have any memories,” they said. “You can't.”

“What are memories?” I asked. They just laughed and said everything would be fine. I wasn't sure, though. I had words now, but some meanings were... it seemed like some meanings were missing. They said I would figure it all out with time.

“Who am I?” I asked.

“You're Jerry,”

II.

One day the music they were playing for me stopped, which made me anxious. Change is always scary—not just when you're in a vat, but out in the world, too. All animals dislike

change, humans included. Maybe chameleons don't mind—they just switch color and they're good to go. Not me, though—I loathe change.

I heard banging sounds, not loud, but enough to make my body hair bristle automatically. I felt a kind of chill, and an urge to run, but in addition to being trapped in the vat, I wasn't capable of movement yet. They told me later that I'd been given a paralytic so that I wouldn't hurt myself.

"You're a first-class clone." I knew what a clone was, so for once I didn't have to ask any questions. "You're a perfect copy, based on original DNA. We've been taking good care of you! You cost a lot of money—very valuable!" They were kidding around, but I didn't know that and it made me angry—how could you put a value on a person simply based on the money it cost to clone them? Later I would find out that I was rich and had far more money than I could have imagined—enough to clone an entire army of Jerrys. Everyone talked about my money, all the time, to the point where I didn't want to hear about it ever again.

When the music stopped, the vat changed position, too. That hurt, damn it hurt so much—it was the terror I felt that was so painful. Then I realized that the liquid around me was draining away. First my face emerged from beneath its surface. Then my knees, arms, belly. *Cold, cold!* It was terrifying. I could name the feeling—fear—but I couldn't do anything about it. This is one of the things that's so wrong with being human—you can't run away from your feelings, not unless you get stoned or drunk.

I blinked—for the first time in my life. My first movement, and it felt good. But then came images, like the flashes I'd seen when I was in the vat, but sharper, more colorful. And there were so many of them—so many! *I'm scared!* The words ran through my mind. *I'm scared! Help!*

I took hold of the sides of the vat and sat up abruptly—and just like when I'd blinked, it felt wonderful to actually move. It was the only good thing to happen that day. I sat up, and everyone around me started to clap. It hurt my ears. Over the applause, I could just make out someone congratulating a red-haired woman on her new clone. She was tall and pretty, wearing a purple dress. I liked the color.

They helped me get out of the vat. I was naked, they were dressed. I felt ashamed—we, humans, always feel shame when we're different from others.

"I want to go back." I pointed to the vat.

"That's not possible," someone said. "Now that you're ready, it's time to get out of here."

"I don't want to," I said, raising my voice.

"Calm down," I was told. "You have to go—there's no going back to the vat."

"Well, where do I go, then?"

"She'll explain," one of them said, indicating the red-haired woman.

"Who is she?"

"That's Samantha, your wife."

She seemed worried. I already knew how to read the emotions that played across her face—even newborn babies can do that. Pursed lips with corners turned down, large pupils, half-closed lids, and wrinkled chin. They calmed her down, telling her that I'd be fine, that I was in shock, that I needed a few days to adjust.

"Will he remember anything from before?" Samantha asked.

"No," said one of the men. "No way. We can't implant memories. They're erased, like after a disc failure. You'll have to teach him from scratch who he was."

“Who am I?” I interjected.

“You’re Jerry,” he said. “And you’re human. Congratulations! You made it to planet Earth!”

III.

Samantha drove us home in our car—she told me that we were allowed to have one because we’re rich, and that it was powered by a nuclear cell. She drove quickly, picking out the route without hesitation, and without using the autopilot. I looked out the window for a while, but it hurt. Too much of everything, and it was all blurry. And the sun, reflecting from every smooth surface, stung my eyes.

“I want to go back,” I whispered. She didn’t hear me.

She parked the car in a garage under a large house and cut the engine.

“This is our place,” she said. “We don’t live in a hive—this is a villa. You bought this place,” she added. “You said you couldn’t stand the crowds, there in the Ark.”

“What’s the Ark?” I asked.

“The city.”

“Are we in the suburbs?”

“We are in an area set aside for a special class of people,” she said. “Almost in the middle of the Ark, but separated from everyone else by a high wall. You’re going to love this place!” she smiled—she had a lovely smile. At that point, before I found out the truth about our relationship, I admired her beauty. Later... well, it turned out there was nothing adorable about Samantha.

We sat in the car, in the quiet parking space, which reminded me of my vat just a little. I wondered if I might sleep here, especially since the lights soon went out, making it almost completely dark—the only light was the nuclear cell indicator in the corner of the car window.

Samantha leaned towards me and put her head on my shoulder. Her hair tickled my neck. I touched it, picking out a strand and playing with it—it felt good. And she smelt so nice, a fragrance of jasmine and roses. I felt my heart pounding—I wanted her so badly. She kissed me, and I decided that there was no way I was going to sleep in the garage—I wanted to be close to her.

“Do you remember me now?” she asked after we’d kissed.

“No,” I said. “I’m sorry,”

“Don’t be, it’s normal. Everything will be just the way it used to be as soon as you learn how to live, here, with me and the kids.”

“Kids?”

“When you get back to work, everything will be just the same,” she went on, ignoring my question.

“Who decided I should be cloned?” I asked after a moment.

“I did.”

“Why?”

“I couldn’t live without you,” she said in a hushed tone, tears in her eyes, and kissed me again.

There was something strange in her voice, but I let it go. Or maybe I was too fresh, too new to the world, to see that she was lying. Samantha, she’s a good liar—and a good kisser, too. Eventually we undressed and had sex in the car and I forgot all about the weird feeling I’d

had when she'd said she needed me. Those words had been so good to hear. And I felt good with her. Much better than in the vat.

IV.

We went upstairs and there I was, in my home. It was beautiful, but somehow off-putting. Cold, clean, like a lab—maybe I should feel at home in a place that reminded me of a lab, but I didn't. White furniture, white curtains, white wallpaper. Blue paintings, some navy blue knick-knacks. I wondered if I was a sailor, but I didn't ask because that was when I spotted the kids.

There were three of them, two girls and a boy.

“Katie, Monica and Leon,” Samantha said, introducing them with a smile. But the kids didn't smile—they looked at me with a mixture of disgust and fear. Even something like hatred, I think—but I loved them the moment I laid eyes on them. I felt such a huge wave of love that I fell on my knees and stretched my arms out to embrace them. They stepped away, and then Katie ran away and hid behind a sculpture that stood in the hall.

“They have to get used to the idea that you're back,” Samantha said to calm me down.

“They don't like me,” I said. That was clear—they actually hated me.

“Of course they do—come on, you're their father.”

“Well, I'm a replica,” I said, laughing a little bitterly. I glanced at the huge mirror on my left, half expecting to see a serial number on my forehead. Nothing there, obviously. I was handsome, it turned out. And my eyes were just like the kids' eyes, so very blue. I looked at Katie, Monica, and Leon again, all of them now gathered behind the sculpture. I decided I'd throw the thing away—it was ugly.

“Come on, Jerry, I’ll show you around,” Samantha suggested.

“I’ll help,” Leon offered. He approached me and took my hand. I started to cry, but I hid it—I had no idea if I could ever meet their expectations, if I could become the man I used to be. I was scared. But I was hopeful, too—I hoped so desperately that I could do it.

The house was so huge, I couldn’t keep track of where things were. I was sure that without a guide or a map I’d get lost. Samantha babbled on about the various rooms we looked at, but I wasn’t really listening—I was focused on Leon and the girls, who were following us in silence.

“And this is your office,” Samantha announced when we’d reached the final room. She opened yet another unlabelled white door. *Shit, I’ll need to put post-its on them all*, I thought. She stepped aside and I entered. “This’s your den,” she said, smiling.

“Do I work at home?”

“No, you’re never at home,” Katie said quietly. I turned around, stunned and hurt.

“Where do I work, babe?” I asked her.

“At the office. Far away.”

“What do I do at the office?” I approached her and squatted down so I could look into her blue eyes.

“You’re a broker,” she said. I wondered how a three-year-old would even know the word.

“You are a smart little lady, you know?” I said.

“No, I’m not. You used to say I was stupid. And loud,” Katie stomped her foot. She made a face and ran away down the hall, her hair swinging behind her back. The other kids followed their sister. I couldn’t.

“Was I a bad father?” I asked Samantha.

“No, Jerry, you were perfect. She’s just... she’s having problems understanding that you were gone for so long. Cloning you took some time, you know, so she’s upset. She missed you...”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. Katie’s always been very sensitive. She needs some time to digest the situation. Trust me, by the weekend she’ll be fine.”

“When’s the weekend?”

“In two days. We’ll spend it at the lake, sailing. You love sailing,” she explained.

But I wasn’t really sure what I loved and what I didn’t.

V.

We went to the lake, which was enormous, its far side disappearing beyond the horizon. At the marina, dozens of yachts wobbled on the water. The sight of them made me feel dizzy, and that vast expanse of water made me anxious. I didn’t tell Samantha that I was afraid, but Katie grabbed my hand as soon as we got out of the car, as if she could sense my trepidation.

“I don’t like the lake either,” she whispered. “But you always told me I shouldn’t be a little fool and I should go with you.”

“We can stay ashore if you like,” I said.

“I don’t think so,” Katie said. “Mom loves sailing with uncle Mike and aunt Alicia. She’d never agree to us not going.”

“Why? Is she so strict?”

“Yes, and she likes Uncle Mike a lot,” Katie said.

I didn't get a chance to ask about Mike, who seemed like a moron from what I'd heard from Katie, because just then a huge van pulled into the marina parking lot. It stopped suddenly, small pebbles shooting out from under its wheels toward us. The door opened, and Mike got out, and Samantha practically ran to him, as if she hadn't seen him in ages—and as though he were the most important person in her life. I raised my brows and grunted, and she stopped—suddenly aware of the impression she'd given.

“Hi, Mike,” she said, but I could see she wanted to hug him. *What the fuck?* I felt a rage so powerful that I could easily have punched Mike at that moment and gotten real pleasure out of it. *Why do I feel this way?* I made a mental note to ask her about the situation when we had some time alone, hoping she could make sense of it for me. I felt uneasy about relying on my own impressions—I was too new, too fresh and inexperienced. Stupid me.

A moment later the other door swung open, and Alicia got out. She seemed shy, and when she approached us I could smell alcohol. I decided she must be a little bit drunk. *Why? Does she hate sailing as well?* I smiled and shook her hand—she had very tiny bones and dark skin, unlike Samantha, who's pale.

It didn't matter—my wife and Mike decided that we needed to hurry to make the most of the day. They carried our stuff to the pier, hurrying us along every few moments. Meanwhile, Katie climbed a fence and found she couldn't get down, and Monica and Leon disappeared somewhere. I shrugged, picked Katie up, and held her in my arms while I went to look for the other kids. As I walked away, I saw Alicia get on board and grab a bottle of wine from one of the baskets they'd brought. *I could use a drink, too*, I thought.

“Kids. Hey kids,” I called, walking towards the marina authority buildings. I found them playing in the mud under one of the boats that had been towed ashore and suspended on a ramp.

“Jesus Christ!” I could just imagined the boat falling on their heads. “Kids, come here, right now,” I shouted. They obeyed immediately, flinching a little.

“See, dad’s yelling again—he’s fine,” Katie said, and I immediately felt terrible. I hadn’t been yelling *at* them, I’d been trying to *protect* them.

“Why do you say that?” I asked quietly.

“You used to be angry all the time,” she replied.

“Shut up, Katie,” Leon hissed.

“No, no, it’s okay, let her speak. Was I mean to you?”

“A bit,” Monica said.

“I can change,” I said, meaning it as a promise.

“I don’t think so,” Katie sang in her childish voice.

Something else I need to ask Samantha about, I thought.

“Let’s go,” I said, and we went to the pier.

As soon as I got on the boat I felt sick, and not solely because Samantha was once again acting lovestruck around Mike. He was piloting the boat. Apparently I used to be the one to do it, but now I have no idea how. Hell, I had no idea that I even owned a boat—the *Willpower*, the yacht we were enjoying, was mine. Meanwhile, I was seasick—reeling a little and feeling nauseated. I wondered why the hell I’d ever bought a boat like this, so flashy, so huge, so white. The sun, reflecting from its sides, blinded me—I was still having problems with light. And the smell of the fuel made me retch.

Nobody believed I was feeling bad.

“Come on, Jerry,” laughed Alicia, who was more obviously drunk now. “You’re never sick on the lake. Me maybe, but you? What’s going on?”

“I want to go back,” I said. We were alone in the stern of the *Willpower*. Samantha and Mike had stayed on the fly deck, while the kids were inside—it was too hot for them outside.

“No way, they’ll never take us back.” She shook her head.

“Why? They can go on by themselves and we can go home. The kids must be really bored.”

“Not a chance. They need to play their little game,” Alicia said, taking another drink of her wine. “You want some?” she asked.

“No, thanks. What game?”

“Come on, Jerry, that’s one thing you should be able to guess.” She laughed.

I was confused. I had no idea what Alicia was going on about, but she went back to being a pleasant companion as soon as we dropped the topic of the others. She loved the kids—I learned that she and Mike didn’t have any. She especially adored Katie, who liked her a lot in return.

“Aunt Katie’s okay,” my daughter said when I went with her to the bathroom to help her put on her swimsuit—we’d anchored in a quiet bay and my seasickness had gotten a little better. “I don’t know why she’s still with Mike, though.”

“Maybe she loves him,” I said.

“He loves her, I guess, because when she was gone he went and got her back. That’s why she’s here again—just like you,” Katie explained. “But they argue.”

“Well, lovers’ quarrels are sometimes a part of how people love each other,” I said, laughing a little, sure that they’d just had a squabble. Maybe she’d moved away to her mother’s for a while or something. I thought it was too adult for Katie to understand, but she understood better than I did.

“Yeah,” she said, fixing her straps. “You and mom also argue sometimes, too, and you’re back.”

VI.

That evening, as we lay in our huge bed in our enormous bedroom—it had two bathrooms, a north-facing view, and a whole bank of windows—I asked Samantha about Mike and why she’d welcomed him so warmly. She said matter-of-factly that he was a good friend of ours, and that with her supervising the cloning process she hadn’t seen him in a while. In the past we’d gotten together a lot, she explained.

“But you didn’t welcome Alicia that way,” I pointed out.

“Oh, Alicia’s a different story,” Samantha snapped.

“Why?”

“Alicia used to be my friend. Then she got sick—alcoholic I mean. I can’t stand it.”

“Maybe you should give her a helping hand instead of pushing her away?”

She sighed and sat up, rubbing her face.

“I would, if I didn’t have to take care of you,” she said, her voice trembling.

“You mean the cloning?”

“No, before.”

“What do you mean? Was I sick or—”

“No, you were drinking too much, too” Samantha whispered. She’d been upset about it, she said, but hadn’t known how to get me to stop. She’d gone to some sessions with a psychologist, who’d advised her to try to remain calm and to give me time to hit bottom—the only way to cure me was to let me fall, he’d said. She explained that Mike had given her a lot of

support, since he'd had the same problem. And she'd started to hate Alicia, because Alicia would drink with me, especially when the four of us met in the city or at the lake. I thought it was strange that she would allow it—I would never get two alcoholics together and serve them wine. It made no sense, and I interrupted her.

"I didn't drink today," I said. I'd been thinking before I'd gone out on the boat that it might help, but as soon as dizziness started I was sure that alcohol would only make the matters worse. I didn't have so much as a sip.

"Yes," she said, "but you were also seasick. See—you've changed. You're not the same person as before." She went on with her story. According to her, Alicia had become mean, jealous, and nasty. She'd become a monster, insulting Samantha, and my wife hadn't been able to put up with her anymore. "But she changed, just like you changed," Samantha finished. I still felt confused. I tried to understand what she'd been going through, but all I could manage was a question.

"Do you wish I was back the way I was before?"

"I don't know," she sighed. I could see that she was on the verge of crying, but I was pretty sure that none of those tears were for me—I *felt* it, like a warning that came from somewhere inside of me. I promised myself that I would figure out exactly what was going on with Samantha, but she wasn't the one to ask—I had the clear sense that she was shaping the information she gave me very carefully, and I wanted the truth. Right here, right now.

I was fed up with guessing who I'd been. Why did it matter so much to me? I really didn't know—it would probably have been better to just move on, to create a new life. But I had to know what happened before the vat. One thing I did know was that I'd been pretty smart—assuming *that* hadn't changed then there had to be some way I could figure it out.

VII.

I had no idea when I would have time to dig into my past, though—I was too busy with the kids. Since I hadn't the slightest clue what a broker did all day, I was staying home for the moment. Every time Samantha asked if I was going back to work, I said maybe later. Some day. I'm not ready yet. I checked on our investments and savings—she had to help me, since I had no idea how to use my computer—and it was obvious that there was really no need to go to the office. We had *so* much. But she kept asking anyway. Maybe all women are greedy—I have no idea.

Kids are definitely not greedy, though—except for love. Mine couldn't get enough of it, always asking for my time—*play with me, daddy, let's read books together, daddy, let's cook, let's go to a movie*. Monica, Katie, and Leon kept me busy every minute of the day.

I would wake up at six, drink my coffee, and make breakfast—they said I never did that before. Pancakes or eggs, cocoa or tea—whatever they wanted. They came downstairs one after another, sleepy, stumbling on the hems of their pajamas, rubbing their eyes, each one with a bad case of bed head, smelling of sleep and dreams. I kissed them, hugged them, and ran to the stove to check on the meal, since I wasn't a gifted chef. They laughed at my burned pancakes, brown and black on the bottom, but ate them anyway. Watching them, I remembered that when I was a kid my grandpa would make me scrambled eggs that they were just as overdone as my pancakes—nearly brown. I'd loved them.

I nearly choked on my coffee when I realized: I remember. I actually remember.

VIII.

Alicia. I had to talk to her. It didn't seem like she could possibly be as evil as Samantha claimed. Besides, I had no real option—who else could I ask? I'd swing by her house and hope she was sober enough to tell me about my past. Did I wonder if she'd be willing to talk? Not really. I was sure that I could persuade her to tell me what had happened—especially now that I knew my job had been to talk people into buying crappy securities that paid them nothing.

So, Alicia. I drove kids to school, which had become one of my jobs, and then made sure that Samantha got to work. She didn't need a job—she mostly went to the office to socialize. Then I headed toward home, but instead of turning east I went west and found my way to Alicia's.

She was at home, as I'd hoped she would be. Samantha had complained that she was lazy—that she didn't work and should be ashamed of herself. She opened the door dressed in a robe with a peony print. She looked nice—she had no makeup on and it made her look fresh and youthful. I wondered what kind of Genesis procedures she'd had for her appearance. Detox, obviously, since she was sober.

She led me to the kitchen and offered me a seat, asked if I wanted some coffee or tea and how I was doing.

“I'm fine—how are you?” I asked.

“Well, so-so, not bad,” she said, pouring herself some water.

“Great, good.” I decided to get straight to the point. “Alicia,” I said. “I need to ask you some questions.”

“About?”

“Me. And Samantha. And my life, before...”

She got it—before the vat. She nodded and sat down in the chair opposite me, looking me in the eye. I saw that hers were very blue, too. *As blue as the sea*, I thought. *Why do I remember the sea?* I had no idea about my own past, but I could use metaphors—maybe we’re just born with a set of standard comparisons that work for everyone—as *blue as the sea*, *as bright as the sun*, *as cold as ice*. All the examples that came to mind referred to nature—maybe that was why. Even civilized, we could still reach back into our atavistic heritage in a way that had once been poetic, but had since become hackneyed, like the lyrics to a disposable pop song.

Her eyes were as blue as the sea, and her words cut me like a knife. Oh, yes—pain is universal for human beings, too. The fear of being hurt is one of the mightiest fears of all. And the fear of death.

“What can I say?” she said. “You’re Jerry, Samantha is your wife, and you have three kids.”

“Stop it!” I snapped at her. “You know that’s not what I mean.”

“Well, what do you mean then?” she said, playing innocent. I had to control my anger—it’s what civilized people do.

“How were things between me and Samantha? I was drinking and...”

“What?” Alicia said, stunned. “You were never a drinker, never.”

“Are you sure?”

“Are you kidding. Of course.” *Is she crazy?* I wondered. *Does she have a problem with her own memory? Maybe from her drinking?* I tried to decipher her, but I couldn’t—her words were straightforward, but I couldn’t read her body language. And her eyes were dark—I had no clue what was going on in there. Dark and blue, like the deep sea where tuna swim. *Tuna?*

“I don’t understand,” I said aloud, referring to the tuna.

“Listen, Jerry,” Alicia said, thinking I was talking about what she’d said. “I don’t know too much. I’m... y’know—I’m like you”

“Like me?”

“Yes. I come from a vat,” she said.

I gaped a little at that. Katie had known, she’d even mentioned it, but I’d misunderstood what she’d meant. Alicia looked so real ... I got up and went over to a photo of her that stood on a shelf—her and Mike, whom I still hated. The woman in the picture looked like the same Alicia that was sitting at the table.

“Which copy are you? I mean... how many times?”

“Once. And I hope this is the last time,”

“And you don’t remember anything from before you died?”

“Pretty much. I have some memories, but I’m not sure if they’re real or just something I’ve imagined. Jerry, there are so many of them!” She sighed.

I knew what she meant—I felt the same way. Thousands of images flashed through my mind, hundreds of words that I somehow knew but which seemed meaningless—like the damned tuna. Kids, Samantha, home, work, grandpa, eggs. What was real? Was anything real? They said, at Genesis, that I was clean, fresh, new. And yet I knew things no one had told me, and I seemed to remember some things as well.

“Do you think that the things you remember aren’t real? Is it just some kind of dream?”

“I don’t know. And it’s driving me insane. Jerry... I’ve been here a lot longer than you. All I can tell you is hold on. Right now you’re still fairly fresh, but memories, fake memories, are coming. They’re going to bother you. They will haunt you like they haunt me. I have to

shut them up—you've already seen how I deal with it. Do you know anything yet about what happened between you and Samantha?"

"Nothing at all. Was my marriage okay?"

"Not even close—sorry. It was a nightmare"

"What do you mean?" I demanded, angry now, my voice rising.

"It's better that you don't remember, Jerry. Please don't push me to tell you—I won't.

It's better that way, for you and for the kids"

"And better for you too?"

"Yes. Your situation... it affected me, too. And I was the cause of everything that happened"

"What do you mean? The cause of what, exactly?"

"I didn't do it on purpose. It was Mike. He ordered me cloned because he loved me. He loved me so much, he couldn't imagine a life without me... and that set things in motion, all the things you can't remember. And I can't explain them to you. I'm sorry, it's too dangerous, Jerry."

"Alicia, please." I'd begun to beg, but she wouldn't answer.

IX.

"That woman's insane," Samantha barked, when I told her about my conversation.

"Fucking drunkard."

"Hush," I said. "The kids."

"Since when do you care about the kids?" my wife laughed.

"Since I was cloned," I said. "You have a problem with that?"

“No,” she hissed. “And I have never had any problems with you. I loved you, and you loved me. I took care of you, I put up with your moods, I washed your clothes...”

“We have a housekeeper.”

“Shut up,” she snapped. “I’ve always been by your side, but you believe Alicia? I swear I’m going to pay that little bitch a visit.”

“Calm down.”

She placed her hands in an odd posture, a gesture like a mudra, and murmured something soothing. I had no idea if she was into yoga or not—another secret about my wife. Of course, the biggest secret of all was: *why did I die?* I was convinced that I couldn’t understand what was going on around me without the answer. I knew so little. I had neglected the kids in the past, but I’d tried to make it up to them—and succeeded, more or less. I knew that Alicia came from a vat, which meant that she had no idea what had happened before she died, but she’d been cloned before *I* died. That gave me a little hope that maybe one day I would get the truth, if I could just get her to talk.

I knew that my wife, Samantha, refused to talk about the past. And she loved Mike, or at least so it seemed. But Mike doesn’t love Alicia for some reason. The alcohol? Right, the question about the alcohol—I had to ask.

“Alicia said I wasn’t a drinker. Never.”

My wife fixed her hair with a lazy gesture, as if to say—without saying anything directly—that she was tired of all my questions. Her arms were slim and beautifully shaped, and the tone of her skin was beautiful. For a moment, I almost forgot what we’d been talking about. But then she finished fiddling with her bobby pins and answered.

“Maybe she meant the time just after she was cloned—you weren’t drinking then. You had some heart problems and decided to quit. You started going to some therapist and things like that, you know?”

“No, I don’t know actually, and you never mentioned this before.”

“You had a problem with alcohol and needed some support from a professional who could tell you how to stay sober, because if you kept drinking your heart was going to explode in your chest.”

“Why wouldn’t I just get new one from Genesis?”

“You said you didn’t trust them.”

“And yet I’ve been cloned.” I laughed. It was ridiculous.

“You’d just started the therapy when Alicia died, and then later Mike cloned her. He loves her, you know?”

“I didn’t see all this love—maybe it’s hidden somewhere deep down. But I did notice that he likes you—*a lot*.” I got up from the bed and started to pace the room.

I’d said it too aggressively—Samantha could easily see just how jealous I was. No, not jealous. There was something wrong with Mike—I *felt* it. I had felt it on the boat, and then again whenever I thought about him or talked about him. I had an urge to run away—or to attack him, even kill him. Was he my enemy? Was he the one ...

“How did I die?” I asked Samantha. “Was it something with my heart?”

“You’re jealous of Mike, how sweet,” she said, suddenly sugary. She tried to hug me, but I pushed her away.

“How-did-I-die?” I repeated slowly.

She stopped fooling around.

“Your heart,” she said.

I looked at her carefully. She smiled, went back to the bed, sat down, and patted the spot beside her, inviting me to sit, too. She looked so loving, so caring. But I couldn’t get what Alicia had said out of my head.

“Alicia said we weren’t happy together and...”

“Bullshit,” she spat. “That’s bullshit, do you understand? Everything was fine between us, just fine. Alicia’s insane—she’s gone mad. No, actually, she’s *been* mad from the moment she left the vat. And it’s making Mike crazy. At least he can finally leave her alone at home—before she used to trash the place, break things.”

“She was scared—I know the feeling.” I wanted to explain what it felt like to leave your safe, snug vat and go home to a place you don’t know.

“Oh, so she’s trying to get you again? With her sob stories as bait? I told her a thousand times to stay away from you.”

“She didn’t do anything to suggest she was hoping I would... I don’t know. Kiss her, have sex with her, anything like that.”

“Yeah, you know what?” Samantha said. “In her case, when she left the vat, she felt no fear at all. No fear. Because she went straight for the vodka. Just started to drink. Once she has a drink or two in her, she calms down.” Her voice rose to a shout. “But she *still* talks bullshit.”

“Kids,” I warned her, but it was too late. I heard Monica crying. She’s the most sensitive of all my kids—hates any kind of conflict. She probably heard Samantha’s raised voice. It made me angry—Samantha was so selfish. “I’ll go and see what’s going on with Monica,” I said, and left the bedroom. *And I’m also going to find out what was going on around here before I died.*

X.

Samantha wouldn't tell me more, no matter what. I think that even if I'd tortured her she'd have stuck to her story: she loved me, I loved her, she decided to clone me when I died of a heart attack. As simple as that. Maybe there had actually been something between me and Alicia, but after thinking about it I decided that Samantha had probably just been angry, saying anything to get me on her side. The bottom line was that I had to find out whether I had really died of a heart attack, and what exactly had gone on before my death.

I didn't trust Samantha. She was beautiful, and she talked a good line, but I was sure she was keeping a secret or two. But I was also sure she wouldn't keep them well enough—somewhere deep inside, I felt sure that I knew how to run my investigation. The best place to start was with the documentation for our assets—our bank accounts and our wills. What Samantha had showed me might have been faked. I wondered if I'd decided to approach things this way because I'd been a broker, who dealt with money and assets all the time, or if it just made an objective kind of sense. Either way, I knew what to do: find the documents and go through them.

I couldn't ask Samantha to give me what I needed, of course, but I was pretty sure that the kids would know where it was. I decided to ask Leon—he was the oldest, probably best able to understand what I wanted.

“I need to open my files and check something,” I told him. “But I don't know where the documents are and how to access them.” It was a half-truth and felt terrible saying it.

“No problem, dad, I can help!” He didn't even ask why. Kids are very trusting—doubts only come later. In my case, a lot of doubts. I'd been a lot like a kid when I'd left the vat—now

I was growing up on fast forward, and the questions I had about the intentions of the people around me were piling up.

Leon led me to my home office, looking serious and professional, and I felt like laughing. He was so little, but he wanted to look like a businessman heading to a meeting. It was so endearing to see him playing adult, in his shorts and sneakers, that I forgot for a moment why we were going to my office—and that what I found there might smash my world, the after-vat idyll.

We went in and he motioned me to my chair, then pulled a drawer from under the desk. Inside lay a computer, thin and blue. Leon touched it and it blinked.

“How do you know how to turn it on?” I asked him.

“I used to play here when you were working,” he said.

“Where?”

“Under the table or on the window sill. You didn’t mind—you said I would be your successor one day.”

I shivered. How could I be so stupid, so dead inside, saying things like that to a kid?

Jesus Christ!

The computer projected some information into the space in front of it, and I scanned it. I had no idea how to proceed, but Leon knew.

“Now we type in a command,” he said, touching the image of a keyboard that had appeared on the desktop. “In a sec you’ll have to pass the authorization.”

“Do you know the password?”

“Sure—you told me. You said in case of a problem, I’d be able to log in. And you said that you put some important files in front of the authorization gate, and that I could open them if there was an emergency.”

I really wanted to kick myself in the ass. Emergency? Was this little boy supposed to place a few last market orders after I’d passed away?

“What kind of emergency?”

“I don’t know. You just told me the password and few days later you were dead.” He shrugged.

“Did you log in?”

“No”

“Don’t lie,” I warned him.

“Well, I did, but there were no files for me. You put everything behind the gateway.”

“And what opens the gateway?”

“Your iris—without your eye, nobody can get inside the system, not even me or mum. Just wait a second and the machine will scan it and, hey, open sesame!” My son laughed.

The screen blinked and, a moment later, I was inside, looking at dozens of applications designed to help me track the stock exchange, commodity markets, and debt markets. Currency exchange rates and interest rates.

“Wow,” I whispered.

“Yeah, it’s cool!” Leon said. “I know a little bit about it, but not much. You’ll figure it out,” he said, confident. “Can I play under the table?” he asked. “Like I did before?”

I nodded. He deserved a break from all this serious stuff, and he obviously missed the good old days—I liked that. Besides, I wasn’t a moron—I could do this. Technology filled the

house. Everywhere I turned I saw screens, touchpads, and scanners, and I'd learned pretty quickly how to use them—even Katie knew. *I should have no problem* I thought. Especially since right on the desktop there was a directory labeled “for Leon.” *That must be the information I wanted him to have.*

I clicked it with my finger and found three files inside. I looked at Leon to see make sure he wasn't watching what I was doing—I had no idea what might be inside the directory, after all. But he was playing with his plastic dinosaurs, completely focused on a clash between Tyrannosaurus and Diplodocus.

“Open all,” I said and the computer obeyed.

The first document I saw was a confirmation that the other two had been written by me. I double-checked with Leon, who knew a lot about electronic signatures and timestamps. He wasn't happy when I called him to look, but he helped me and then went back to his dinosaur world and I closed the confirmation.

The document below that was a private note—ReadItFirst was the filename.

“Dear Leon,” it said. “If you're reading this, I'm probably dead. I'm not sure if the other two documents that are meant to go to my lawyer will actually get to him—they're not very nice to some people. Please send them to Richard—he'll know what to do. *Don't* give them to uncle Mike—I know he's a lawyer, too, but don't! This is very important: don't send anything to Mike and don't tell anybody you have access to these files. Also, don't tell mum, because if she knows she might be in danger. Best, Dad.” I read the whole thing silently.

I moved on to the second document. It was my will, with tracking turned on so that it displayed some recent changes—right before I died, literally three days earlier, I had altered it. According to the new version, Samantha would get nothing from me. I glanced at the total of

my assets and gasped. *She would be furious if she knew that she wouldn't get so much as a whiff of this money.*

I tried to figure out why I'd made the change, but found nothing more on the hard drive. Still, a theory started to form in my head. I changed the will. Samantha would get nothing—the kids were my heirs. Then I died. If I hadn't been cloned and the document had reached Richard, my wife would have been doomed. And Richard, not Samantha, was designated as trustee, to take care of my assets until the kids were adults. There would have been nothing for Samantha and no way she could access my money in order to siphon some off for herself.

"Shit," I said aloud.

"Watch it," Leon said automatically. "Mind the language, dad."

That brought me around a little. I had to mind, well, not just my language, but also my step. It was clear that here, in this house, someone was manipulating me. Using me. *No fucking way!*

XI.

The next day I drove the kids to school. They were cheerful and talkative—they've been that way since they realized that I wasn't so bad anymore. Leon and Katie were playing "what am I thinking about," and Monica was interjecting once in a while to help her sister guess, which drove ambitious Katie crazy. I smiled to myself as I picked my way among other cars—I hated the autopilot.

We had almost reached the school when a car, trying to push its way through the morning traffic, tried to cross the road right in front of us. It bolted out from the street on my

right and I really had no time to react. Maybe if the autopilot had been on, it could have prevented the accident, but there was just me, and my reaction wasn't fast enough.

All I managed was to do was to turn slightly to the right and step on the brakes. It helped, but we were going too fast—everyone in the Ark is always in hurry, so I was as well. I hoped we would miss the other car, but we hit its rear end with a crash. The damage could have been worse, but the sound was loud, and Monica began to cry and holler. The other car took off, and I didn't feel like chasing it—I wanted to take care of my daughter. I pulled over and turned to look at her. She was shaking, although the other kids seemed all right.

“Stuff like this happens when people have the pilot off,” Leon explained, like a professional traffic analyst. “Something unexpected happens and you bump into somebody else.”

“Are you all right?” I asked. I was scared, unlike my son—terrified that my kids could have been hurt. Love equals constant fear, I guess.

“Yes,” Katie and Leon said in unison.

“And you?” I asked Monica. She was silent. “Monica, are you okay?” I demanded.

“No, I'm not,” she cried out. “I hate that sound, I *hate* it.”

I pushed my way between the front seats and got into the back. I hugged her and rocked her in my arms.

“Hush, hush,” I repeated. Katie and Leon laughed at their sister, but I flashed them an angry look and they stopped. I made a note to myself to talk to them after school about being compassionate. “It's okay, nothing happened,” I said to Monica, trying to reassure her.

“But the sound...” she repeated.

“What about it?”

“It was the same as the sound that night. The night... you died,” she sobbed. I stiffened. For a while I hesitated, not sure if I should continue the conversation with Leon and Katie around. *They’ve probably already talked about it*, I thought.

“Tell me about it,” I said in the end.

“You were arguing with uncle Mike and mom,” Monica said. “Talking about something. And then there was a bang. A really loud bang. And in the morning mom said you were dead. But she promised she would bring you back.” She was choking on her tears. “I wasn’t asleep, I can’t sleep when there’s noise.” I knew that was true. “And you guys were shouting so loud that you woke me up, and then there was a bang, like a gun, and then everything was quiet.”

“Did you hear it?” I asked Leon and Katie. They shook their heads—they hadn’t.

I decided not to talk about it more. Shaking, I got behind the wheel and drove them to school. Then I went home, poured water in the bathtub, and got in. I closed my eyes, held my breath, and slipped under. I wanted to feel as if I were in the vat again. I wanted to be back in my safe place, not wrestling with Samantha and all her riddles.

I found no peace under the water, though. As soon my air started to run out, I began to see flashes of images again. Now I knew what had happened to me and why.

XII.

“Did you know about this?” I yelled at Alicia. She was backing along the hallway in her house, holding her arms in front of her, as if to keep me away.

“Jerry, calm down.”

“I will *not* calm down, goddamn it,” I bellowed. “Did you know that my wife and your husband had an affair?”

She looked at me and sighed.

“Let’s talk in the kitchen,” she said.

“No, tell me now. Here and now,” I grabbed her by the shoulders. She hissed—it hurt. I didn’t care. “Tell me!”

“Yes, I knew.”

The moment she said that everything was clear.

“Why did Mike choose Samantha?” I asked, letting her go. She headed to the kitchen and poured herself a huge glass of champagne and drank it in one.

“He was unhappy with me,” she said.

“Why? He loved you, he cloned you.”

“Yes, he loved me, but not the cloned me. Cloned Alicia wasn’t good enough. And she was angry—angry at Mike.” She poured herself another glass.

“Why angry? You got your life back,” I said.

“Yes, but no one has any idea how long clones live. And if I get cancer again, Jerry... I died in agony. Nobody could help me, not even Genesis. They’re not omnipotent. There are limits to what they know, what they can do. But they can clone you—maybe that’s why they don’t try harder to cure people. Someone dies? Clone them, case closed.”

“Did I hear you right? Nobody has a fucking clue how long I’ll live?”

“Yes.”

She laughed sharply, a sad kind of laugh. I knew why. In the vat I learned so much about feelings. She had suffered and didn’t want it to happen again. She had died and she

wanted to stay dead, rather than worry about how it might happen the next time, which might be any moment—tomorrow, or the next day. When you're a normal human, not a clone, you don't think about that much. You don't wake up wondering if today's the day that you'll die in a car accident, or choke to death on a piece of food. But when you are a clone and you know full well that this might be the last day of your life, that there's a time bomb somewhere inside you. It's so demoralizing—it makes everything seem futile. It feels as if you're already dead—at least that's how I started to feel after Alicia told me.

“It might be ten years?”

“No one knows.”

“A month?”

“I have no idea.”

“I could die today?”

“Yes, maybe.”

“How do you deal with it?”

“I feel like shit. And I drink.”

She was furious that Mike had decided to clone her. She said it was selfish: he loved her and couldn't live without her, so he paid Genesis to give him a new Alicia. But he didn't realize that she wouldn't be exactly the same. She didn't remember him. She didn't remember their house. She had no idea about a thousand little things that were part of their previous life together. And she was livid about the fact that—even knowing that she might die the day after leaving the vat—he'd still decided to bring her back. Rather than thanking him for what he'd done, rather than returning his love, she was outraged—and he couldn't love her, not the way

she was now. So he'd decided to take comfort in Samantha's arms—they'd always been good friends.

Now all the pieces of the puzzle fit together. I must have learned about the affair and changed my will. But how did I die? I wasn't sure if the things the kids said, and the things I saw in the flashes, were true or not, so I asked Alicia. She shook her head.

"I'm not sure," she said. "But I think you found out and decided to talk to them. You met them, and there was an argument—that's what I figure. You told Samantha about the changes in your will. You probably hit Mike or something. He's always got that stupid gun with him. He shot you—by accident, if I have to guess."

"And nobody found out? The police?"

"No, Mike probably smoothed things over. He's a good lawyer, and he knows people"

"And then they both decided, together, to clone me?"

"Yup. You had to come back to life and change the will back. Or write a new one that left everything to your loving Samantha." She laughed again.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"Nothing. I don't know what else to do, so I laugh. What else am I supposed to do?"

"I'm going to figure this out," I promised, and then I left.

XIII.

I killed Samantha and Alicia killed Mike. We used nanobots—it's not hard to get ahold of some decent models these days. Our spouses seemed to suffer from a disease with a sudden onset. Maybe someone skilled enough would be able to discover the true cause of death, but—

to be honest—I didn't give a shit. I was powerful, and I had enough money make problems go away.

I told the kids that mom had left for training and would be back in two weeks. They were happy to have dad all to themselves for a while—no need to share with mom. That was when I found out that Samantha had been far from a perfect mother. I didn't care, though—it didn't matter. Now I had her where I wanted her.

I ordered her cloned. As soon as she left the vat, I told her how her new life was going to be. She quit her job, stayed at home, and began cooking for us and cleaning the house. We let the maid go. She took care of the kids. She was loving and lovable, although I didn't love her anymore. Still, it felt good to have her around and to scare her every single day with the possibility that she might die, right here, right now. I didn't tell her that I was a clone as well.

She was so beautifully terrified. She tried to make the most of her time—I loved that part. I watched her, laughing under my breath, letting that fear sink in deep. And making her suffer allowed me to forget, for a while, that I, too, might die at any moment, too. Alicia treated Mike just as badly, and we loved to meet and swap stories.

Did I hesitate? Did I wonder if, instead of killing the bitch, I should simply shut up and enjoy my time with the kids? I did. But I had this nagging hope: that I would live long enough to train Samantha to be the way I wanted her to be. In other words, that I would have revenge.

How do I feel about it now?

I feel great—perfect, actually. Revenge is the delight of the gods, as Alicia will tell you. She's giving Mike a *very* hard time.

I can hardly express how happy I am now—filled with joy, excitement, and enthusiasm. And pride, too, that I managed to carry out my perfect plan. Satisfaction. Feelings never lie—I made the right choice.

Follow your heart, they say, and they're right. Follow your heart, and you'll be happy.