

# SURROGATE

Total recall.

BY GRIFFIN AYAZ TYREE

My body was at the dining table where I'd left it. Postured differently now: bolt upright, one hand clenched around the stem of a wine glass with the fingers going numb — it was a wonder I hadn't snapped the thing in half.

It hadn't been this tense before.

Nick squirmed in his seat, started to say something but then thought better of it. He was a paying client; no need to explain the aborted session. I pushed back my chair and stood.

"Can ... can you tell her I'm sorry?" he stammered.

I felt it then, the knot in my stomach, the lingering heat on my cheeks where I'd flushed in anger.

"Argument?" I asked.

A nod.

"It's common. There's a lot to rehash the first time."

I ejected his wife's loop-drive from my cranial rig and laid it on the table.

"Same time next week?" His voice was hopeful and a little strained.

I smiled. Of course. How else would I pay the bills?

On the train home, a sudden craving for noodle soup. Shoyu broth, sliced pork, soft-boiled egg — nothing I'd ever liked.

Is that you, Lana?

Only the steady hum of the train in reply. I leant my head against the window and dozed off while rain battered the plexiglass. When I came to, the weather had cleared and Lana was ready to talk.

What am I?

She knew the answer to that; everyone did. Neural connections from a dying brain, stored in binary and back-translated into another body. Next question.

Why am I here?

Because running someone's persona through a cranial rig leaves traces behind — electric patterns worn like footprints in snow.

Huh.

She was taking it well, relatively. Most would have filled my blood with stress hormones by now.

My stomach growled and my thoughts — our thoughts, I guess — drifted back to food.

Lana loved ramen but Nick was never in the mood, wouldn't even humour her. When she got sick he'd bring it home everyday, in big Styrofoam containers, but by then the chemo had her doubled-over and throwing up most of the time.



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

So what happens now?

Right. The question I'd hoped to put off as long as I could. At least I could misdirect.

Now we eat.

Tyler never asked existential questions. He was six when he died; freak accident, drowned in a pool. Never wondered what it meant to be 'reset' with the cranial rig. Too young to know that was standard procedure.

He was a brat, though: he'd throw a fit every time he saw a toy (dinosaurs were his favourite) and he wouldn't let up unless I bought it for him. There was a toy store across from the ramen bar; I tried not to look at it for too long.

That's classic Nick, Lana said between big gulps of savoury broth, as if it was her doing the eating and not me. *I'm not even cold in the ground and he's out looking for someone younger.*

Tyler's parents would hire me for six hours at a time, whole days spent at the park or the zoo or the state fair. When the session was over I'd find myself holding a new action figure or oversized soft toy — the kid was true to form.

He was a brat, like I said. He was tiring.

And once the parents realized they had a choice — when to meet, *whether* to meet — they called less often. Eventually, they stopped altogether.

As gently, as inconspicuously as I could, I slid my left hand up my neck to feel for

the small oval button on the side of the cranial rig ...

*He expects me to be fine. Like we just 'separated'. Like I'm not even dead.*

It was the perfect arrangement for the bereaved, really: to them, their son was still alive on a loop drive somewhere — nothing lost, nothing to mourn. And they could see him again whenever they wanted.

To the other party, though, it was ... Lana put it best: *The worst parts of being alive, none of the perks of being dead. It sucks.*

I was sweating then — I think it was the soup, the heat. I don't think it was nerves.

Then why were my hands shaking?

*Look, whatever you have to do, just do it quickly.*

It always came to this: finger over the button, poised to erase an afterthought of someone else's refusal to grieve.

It always came to this, and I always made the same choice.

We bought a housekeeping unit when I was a kid, one of those low-end models with a hacked-together AI. It had a real problem with steps; it would fall to the side and give off a strange synthetic groan.

Naturally I sent it up and down stairs every chance I got.

My mother would chide me for it: "Don't be cruel, child."

But it isn't real, I'd say, it wouldn't even matter if I knocked it over.

"It would matter a great deal to *you*. To the person you are."

Mom died without a loop drive. *Gone and lost forever*, some would say. But there are parts of her I'll carry to my grave.

After dinner I emerged into the cold air and made a bee-line for the toy shop. Lana helped me pick out a stuffed dinosaur from the display, a little blue Stegosaurus.

*He'll love it.*

Yeah, if he hasn't already seen.

It was a ten-minute walk to the train station through empty streets. I used to hate that kind of thing, the solitude, the fear — but I haven't felt alone in a very long time. ■

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