

Futures

The reunion

Original sin. By Emily Fox

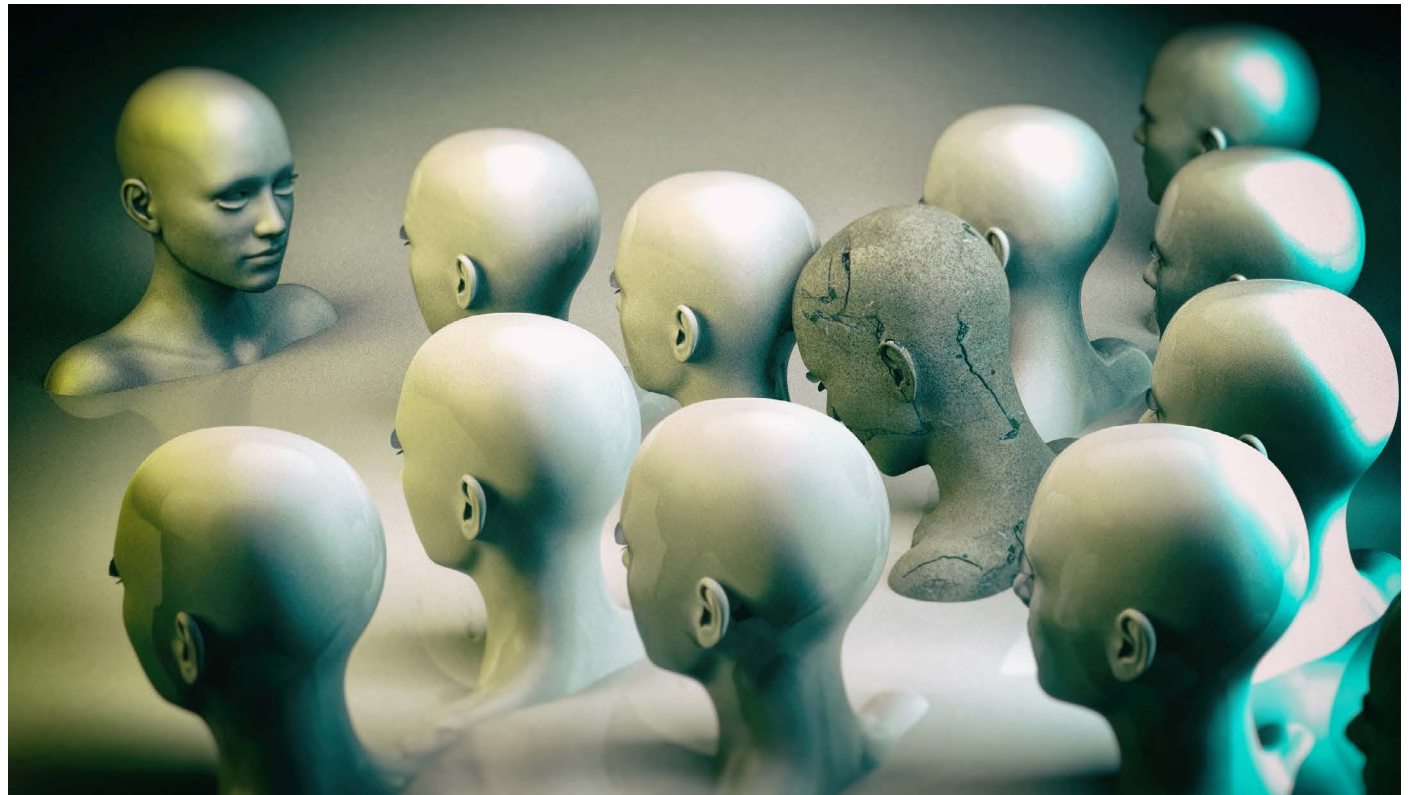


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

I waited for myself in the diner. The coffee was synthetic crap that looked like tar and tasted worse, but there was little else to occupy myself with as my netlink was malfunctioning again. Well, there was the view: cargo ships nudged into dock, the glittering expanse of space stretching out behind them. The blinking lights and slow-crawl movement of the station's docking bay looked far more inviting than this retro diner with its faux-vinyl upholstery and chequered flooring.

The dock marshals and their illuminated beacons had so fully captured my attention that I didn't notice my other self arrive; she slid into the booth across from me as if she'd always been there, on my periphery, and had only now come into focus.

We stared at each other for a moment. She looked tired, almost gaunt under the brilliant fluorescent lights of the diner. A wax-like quality to her skin. Grey bruising under her eyes. Her mouth was pinched, as if she held all her

tension behind closed lips. The familiar face I saw in the mirror each morning had been worn down by a life I hadn't lived.

"You got my message," she said.

I nodded and set down my coffee. "It's been a few years."

"Sure has."

She folded and unfolded her hands on the laminated table-top. Rubbed a calloused thumb along her knuckles. I resisted the urge to look down at my own hands, to compare our scars and picked-clean cuticles. "Well," she said finally, reaching inside her coveralls and withdrawing a white envelope.

"Well," she said again. "I need a favour." Then she slid the envelope across the table towards me.

I picked it up slowly. Thoughts rattled around my head but I couldn't figure out what type of favour this might be. Money? No – she'd been working the rigs for years and had to be rolling in dough. Unless she'd gambled it all away. I flicked a glance at her

haggard face, noting the yellow undertone of her skin. Drugs?

When I finally got the letter out and began to read, I recoiled at my previous unkind speculation even as disbelief pinned me in place. Skimming to the bottom of the page, my attention came to rest on the two signature lines. One had already been filled in.

I looked up at her in shock.

She shrugged. "Just as you brought me into this world, seems that I need your permission to leave it."

A sour lump rose in my throat. I looked down at the letter again. The printed words blurred, then sharpened into focus once more as I blinked, my eyes suddenly hot with burgeoning emotion. "Physician aid-in-dying?"

"I'm sick. Don't tell me it's not obvious," she said, gesturing at herself. "Apparently organ failure's common in clones."

I vaguely recalled a mention of side effects when I'd filled out the paperwork 30-odd years ago. How eager I'd been to create a new life who

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could help me work off my debt. How young and naive.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "I should've ..."

When I couldn't produce the words, she smiled, sad and fleeting. "It's OK."

It wasn't. But it was the closest thing to forgiveness I would ever get. Maybe, in the years to come, it would be enough to assuage some of the guilt I knew I'd carry with me.

Taking the pen from my shirt pocket, I signed on the line where it said ORIGIN DNA. Our signatures, I noticed, were completely unlike.

"Thank you," she said, slipping the letter back inside her coveralls.

We sat in silence. All the things I thought to say were trivial in comparison with what I had just signed, so I said nothing. We hadn't needed

to meet in person for this; she could have easily sent me the file and had my digital signature in minutes. She had her reasons, though. I could see it in the set of her jaw. Around us, life continued: the door to the diner opened, admitting a group of people whose conversation and laughter filled the room like expanding foam sealant; beyond the pressure-glass window, the blackness of space waited at our fingertips, the dock marshals directing ships into bay with calm precision. Finally, my other self nodded and rose from her seat.

"I won't see you again, will I?" I said, looking up at her.

"Probably not."

Part of me wanted to ask about her family – if she had one, if they had the means to survive once she was gone. But I could tell from the

cool look in her eyes that it wasn't my place to ask. I'd brought her into the world for selfish reasons. She owed me nothing at all.

Would I see it any differently, if it were me?

The door to the diner slid closed behind her, leaving me with a cold cup of coffee and a hollow feeling in my chest. If I'd been a braver woman, I might have asked if she'd been happy, if she'd had a good life. If it had been worth it.

And if I'd been braver still, I might have asked that question of myself.

Emily Fox writes from Queensland, Australia. When not writing, she works in a university library and reads submissions for *Aurealis* magazine. Find her on Twitter @byemilyfox or at byemilyfox.com.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Emily Fox reveals the inspiration behind *The reunion*

This story began with the idea of meeting another version of yourself — someone who looks identical, right down to your genetic material, and has perhaps inherited a similar personality, mannerisms and so on, but who has lived a very different life from the one you've experienced. I think many of us relate to that mystery, that 'what if' when looking back at the decisions we've made in our personal lives and careers. How have our choices changed us?



The other elements of the story fell into place fairly easily: the constriction of debt, legislation allowing the creation of another human being for what's effectively slave labour, and that same legislation requiring permission from the 'original' for serious medical decisions such as euthanasia. Euthanasia is still a divisive topic all around the world today, so this type of practice in a futuristic setting seemed plausible. This story is essentially about identity and personhood, and the rights we have to make decisions about our own bodies, how we present ourselves, and the freedom we have to live our own lives.