

The Transfer

by Scott Gamble

John was not an ambitious man. He worked his regular shift at a declining distribution warehouse, then went home to his one-hundred square foot studio apartment where he ate his pre-packaged meals and caught up on whatever happened to be streaming online that evening. He had no family, few friends and no discernible hobbies. He made just barely enough to afford the essentials, so he was resigned to his minimal lifestyle. It was easier than confronting the fact that most of the people that once held significance in his life had moved on without him. He

thought about little else other than his next shift, but even that had become increasingly problematic for him. Though John didn't dare voice it, he felt his purpose at the warehouse receding deeper and deeper into obsolescence. John worked at a place called Metcalf Logistics. They were responsible for supplying most of the grocery stores and markets in the area. At one point it was a pretty steady job with a lot of activity. Now, most of the people he worked with were being supplanted by automated workers. Automated workers never got tired, never complained, and never needed breaks. He was one of the few people the union could keep on after Occam's Distributed Intelligence Networks--ODIN for short--began supplying their automata. He wasn't the most skilled or dedicated worker, but his seniority kept his name off of the list whenever layoffs would hit. They would argue he was insurance for handling the more delicate orders that came through. The engineers programming the robots hadn't quite figured out how to get them to pick up fragile items without compromising at least one percent of the product, which was apparently a big

enough margin for the unions to argue in John's favor. It was only a matter of time before they would tweak the AI to fall below that threshold.

Of the thousands of workers the warehouse used to employ, only seventeen remained. Most would be assigned bullshit busywork like sweeping, replacing the air filters, or reordering the pallets used by the robots. The higher seniority workers, like John, would be put "on reserve" as they called it, just in case one of those fabled fragile jobs came through. John would go in, day after day, only to be told there were no orders for him to fill. Most of the workers resented John for getting the easy jobs simply because he had been there longer than they had. The other people on reserve didn't seem keen to talk to John either. The feeling was mutual. The only person who seemed willing to associate with John was Samantha. In terms of seniority, she was number fourteen of seventeen. No matter the day, Sam always seemed to be in good spirits. While everyone else did their best to blend in to the background, Sam was always bright and bubbly. Despite himself, John enjoyed her company. It

reminded him of what it was like for someone to take pride in their work.

"Morning fellas! Wonder what shit job I'll get today! Maybe if I'm lucky I'll get to clear out the recycling chutes. That's always good for killing a few hours. Not to mention a couple hours of extra shuteye am I right?" Sam looked around the room. Most people refused to make eye contact. When she looked in John's direction, he forced a wan smile and nodded to her. Sam beamed back at him. She walked over and elbowed John in the side.

"Think we'll get one of them *special* orders today John?"

John shrugged noncommittally. "Maybe."

"That's the spirit." Sam gave him a wink and carried on, as she did, ribbing the others about what prospects the day held for them.

Like most other days, no special orders came and John clocked out after his ten hour shift without so much as lifting a hand to scratch his own ass. He returned to his apartment, somehow tired and drained. He ate a poorly microwaved meal of meatloaf and mashed

potatoes, with the usual scorched edges and tepid centre. He flicked on his monitor and idly swiped through the various streams. As usual, there were the gamers, the reality TV stars just "living their normal life", fancy cooking shows, and the vast, vast array of amateur porn. John almost always chose one of the cooking streams. He tried to imagine himself eating the hot kobe beef sliders with horseradish aioli and frites rather than his sad, lukewarm meatloaf and mush. After his unappetizing dinner John, feeling particularly self-effacing, found himself opening a new tab to browse through the online job boards:

SENIOR AUTOMATION EXPERT

Requires advanced degree in--

No chance.

WATER RECLAMATION SPECIALIST

Largely automated treatment plant looking for--

Another meaningless job with no hope of fulfillment.

SANITATION WORKER

Automated plant looking for machine cleaners--

John closed the tab. Every posting either required too much expertise, or was a variation of the same meaningless job he was already working--or worse. He continued to meander his way through the internet with no particular goal in mind. It had become a familiar rhythm at this point. He just needed to kill time until his eyes were heavy and he got tired enough to fall asleep.

Every now and then a very small advert for ODIN, the company that ran automation at his warehouse, would appear on one of the sites, his entire existence diligently mined for relevant metrics by ad network AIs. On a whim, he decided to click one of them.

The ad brought him to a sleek, polished site with the usual tropes you would expect: images of brains superimposed over complicated-looking motherboards and circuitry, calculatedly diverse, affluent-looking groups of people smiling at nothing in particular. A

video played quietly on loop of robots much like the ones at his warehouse, albeit much nicer looking, gliding along a large aisle, busily plucking stock for some arbitrary purpose. Plenty of polished chrome and gleaming white; the very image of the future John had been promised as a young boy. The future he was now living in, but from the other side of the idyllic utopia depicted by ODIN's site. He read on through their promotional material:

ODIN is the leading provider of workforce automation, saving companies TRILLIONS of dollars per year in lost product and wages.

John continued to let the words on screen flood into his retinas, a completely deadpan expression affixed to his face. Below the surface he could feel his emotions welling up to greet him, but as usual, he promptly ignored them. He continued scouring their site without really absorbing much information as he went. It was more about the act of scrolling through each page; just another thing to pass the time.

Something in the LABS section of the site managed to catch John's eye:

ODIN Labs is embarking on a brand new voyage into the unknown of hyper-intelligent AI systems, and we need YOUR help! We are looking for individuals from all walks of life. Anyone is welcome to apply, no experience needed. Compensation will be provided for your time. Send your name, age, address and occupation through the form below and we will respond within forty-eight hours with additional information.

Help make a real difference in the world: Join the BABEL project.

John pondered the thoroughly opaque message for a moment. It didn't really explain what participating in this project entailed, but the low bar of entry and guaranteed pay appealed to some capitalist sensibility in John's brain. Before he could commit, laziness and low self esteem got the better of him and he went back to the safer confines of his usual evening streams.

Through the monotonous drudgery came Friday, the last day of his work shifts before his government mandated corporate weekends. Though the factory kept operating, companies were required to give normal weekends off to any human employees. Something about maintaining the traditions of old industry, and keeping the few remaining human workers sane. Sam greeted John in the prep room as she usually did. They exchanged pleasantries.

"Hey John, a few of us were thinking of going to the pub after work for a few drinks. You in?"

"I don't know..." John felt a pang of anxiety. He started to politely but firmly refuse the offer, but Sam stopped him before he had the chance: "Come on John, don't wuss out on me. I know you've got nothing going on. No excuses." Sam pointed an accusatorial finger at him. John sighed, throwing his hands up in defeat.

"Ok, sure," he said.

"There we go! We're meeting at ten. See you then!"

John's shift came and went like any other, without incident or special orders. He went home, another mind-numbing work day over. He paced his apartment, warring with himself about whether or not to meet Sam and the others for drinks while scarfing down a low grade, pre-packaged bean and cheese burrito. He knew he had nothing else to do, no other friends or hobbies to attend to. Yet for some reason, the thought of being in a social setting made him feel sick. He'd grown accustomed to his safe, small world. Going out reminded him of how shallow his life had become, how little he had to say to others. He decided to take a shower to clear his mind. He sat on the floor of the tub, letting the water hit his back while he tried to convince himself to go. The image of Sam's expectant face kept creeping back, and ultimately the shame of disappointing her outweighed the potential embarrassment of going. By the time he was finally dressed he was already half an hour late.

John arrived at the dingy bar just past eleven o'clock. The place was sparsely dappled with little clusters of people either standing around the bar or

seated at one of the cushioned booths or tables. The lighting was dim and it took John a moment to spot Sam and the others. She waved him over and he went to join them.

"Sorry I'm late," John said.

"No worries! Here." Sam handed John a shot of whiskey and a pint of pale lager. He hesitated for a moment. He didn't usually drink hard liquor, but he didn't want to be rude less than thirty seconds after already showing up late. He downed it with one quick toss and chased the burning back with a large swig of beer. John could feel his mouth coating with a thick saliva, the kind you felt from impending vomit. He swallowed hard and Sam slapped him on the back. He took another large swig of his lager and coughed.

"There we go! Better late than never. Next one's on you."

John managed a smile and nodded, though the prospect of another whiskey didn't sit well with him, or his stomach. The night proceeded as expected, with John mostly observing from the periphery of the group, just barely present enough to not be rude. Every once

in a while someone would mention something about work and John would commiserate accordingly. He could almost convince himself he was having a good time if not for the roiling in his stomach. As the night began to wind down, the group shrank until it was just John and Sam. Sam leaned over and rested her hand on John's forearm.

"I'm going out for a smoke, wanna come?"

"Oh no thanks, I don't--" John began, but Sam cut him off.

"You don't have to smoke with me you idiot, just come and keep me company." She headed towards the door without another look. John, red in the face, followed suit. He stood outside with her in amiable silence for a while. Eventually Sam spoke up:

"What's on your mind John?"

"Nothing really," he replied dismissively.

"You don't say much do you? There's gotta be something rattling around up in that noggin of yours."

Sam rapped John on the forehead a few times for good measure. "Sure doesn't sound hollow up there." John blushed, batting her hand away. Sam chuckled.

"I guess... I guess I don't think about it much."

"About what?" Sam replied, perplexed.

"Anything." Sam took a long drag from her cigarette and eyed John inquisitively, like he was a lab specimen. John swallowed hard and continued. "You ever feel like... Like if you didn't exist, nothing about the world would change?"

Sam blew out a cloud of smoke. "Shit John, that's deep. But no: I'm thankful just to be working at all! Thankful I'm not in prison to be honest. We might not be living the high life, but we've got it good, relatively speaking. You especially."

John tensed up. He didn't feel particularly blessed by his lot in life.

"I don't know about that. Warehouse work is all I know. I've lived in the same tiny apartment for over a decade now. There's no promotion, no opportunity for growth. And I'm not exactly young anymore. I work, if you can call it that. I eat, I sleep, rinse, repeat. What's so great about that?"

Sam let out a dramatic groan. "Damn John, doesn't your back feel sore, carrying around all that

emotional baggage? So what if we're just a couple of yucks, hauling garbage around or scraping dust out of a robot's ass? At least we're breathing. At least we can enjoy some beers together, right?"

"I guess you're right..."

"Speaking of," Sam continued, "I think you owe me one before the bar closes."

The following weeks were much like the ones that preceded it. John would sit around at work, stream his shows in the evening, and wonder whether the monotonous nothingness he felt was what purgatory might be like, if he were the sort of person to believe in such a thing. Finally, one arbitrary Thursday, the fog parted and the impossible happened:

"We got ourselves a special order today."

Exclaimed their shift manager. "Two high sensitivity orders have come down the pipeline. Looks like we're finally going to put some of your sorry asses to work." The group laughed, and John actually joined in. He felt his chest tighten as a glimmer of hope took hold of his brain. It was just as menial a job as any

other, but finally, he might actually get to feel useful.

"John, you and Mickie are going to take one each. Hope your hands haven't gone too soft from all the mani pedis you've been getting with your free time on reserve." That got a good chuckle out of the group, and even John found amusement in the comment, even if it was at his expense. It had been months since the last time they'd gotten an order like this, and John was going to savour it.

Around an hour into the job however, John noticed his supervisor, talking rather excitedly into his radio. He was too far away to hear, but John could see him pointing and motioning towards the skid staging area; the area where John and Mickie happened to be working. The supervisor kept shaking his head and grew increasingly irritated by whatever was being said on the other side of the conversation. John tried not to feel anxious, tried not to let his worry sour his moment of rewarding work, but it happened anyways. The supervisor came over, followed by Mickie, who was fuming.

"Well, I've got some bad news, and some shitty news." The supervisor pretended to look down at his clipboard as if reading some notes. The pause dragged on a lot longer in John's mind than in reality. He stood there silently awaiting what he could safely assume was coming.

"Seems the folks upstairs think this'd be a good opportunity to, uh, 'test some new algorithms' or some shit. So, uh, that means you and Mickie are going to be splitting this order, and one of the newer robots is going to be completing the other one." The supervisor cleared his throat and leaned in to speak more quietly: "I don't mean for this to look like a competition or nothing but... well, just get this one done right, and quickly, yeah? Hopefully with two of you we can at least beat em' on speed." John stood, wide eyed and dumbfounded. He didn't quite know what to do or say. He just felt numb. After a moment he noticed Mickie and his supervisor still staring at him. He shook his head and said, "Sure." With that, Mickie and John set to their now diminished task. Mickie cursed under his breath the whole time, about

having a kid to feed, how this was all bullshit. He didn't bother to say anything to John directly, and John was too stunned to add any comments of his own. They both felt it. If they didn't pull their weight, that was it. No need for reserves when the robot workers could handle the job.

When they finished, the supervisor came back to look over their work.

"Looks good guys," said the supervisor half heartedly. He went through his usual inspection, saying nothing. As he finished, he took a long look at the pallet and the two men flanking it. "Looks good," he said again. He made another small mark on his clipboard and went back into his office.

That night John felt a huge, painful sadness creep through him. He tried to push it down, tried to retreat to the safety of his numbness, but it failed. What could have been a bright spot in his week felt more like his undoing. He couldn't concentrate. He just sat on his bed with the lights off, contemplating everything and nothing. Without even really noticing, he drifted off to sleep, his mind still racing. He

spent the rest of the night tossing and turning, plagued by fitful dreams, waking up drenched in a cold, clammy sweat. By morning he was thoroughly exhausted and numb once again. At least he didn't feel as bad as he had the night before. He shuffled into work that day like a zombie. Even Sam didn't try and talk to him. She'd probably heard all about what happened, as gossip tended to travel pretty quickly amongst the small group of human employees. There was an unspoken weight that permeated the entire mood of the room, causing the entire day to drag on twice as long. John had never been so thankful to punch out as he had at the end of that shift. He'd never usually cared much, but today he was thankful it was Friday.

That night, while John was flipping through his usual streams, trying desperately to cling to his numbness, he noticed another advertisement for ODIN. He closed the tab out of some deep, illogical sense of loathing and defiance. Feeling stupid for trying to run from an ad, he reopened the stream. The ad was still there. He chose another stream, and the ad followed him. After another half hour or so, John

caved and clicked on it, worn down by the cosmic powers forcing it into his view. It brought him back to that same pristine, gleaming white website he'd perused weeks ago. The LABS page still had the same call for participants. The same enticing hook dangled in front of John's face:

Help make a real difference in the world. Join the BABEL project.

With his spirits at an all-time low, and his prospects feeling even smaller than usual, he decided to click through to the submission form.

NAME: JOHN HAMPTON

ADDRESS: 480 Valiant Ave. #1044

OCCUPATION: METCALF LOGISTICS, LABOR RESERVE

The form was full of the usual questions you could expect: name, age, location, gender identity,

etcetera. He answered them without much thought until he got to the last one:

TELL US ABOUT YOURSELF:

The cursor flickered on the first line, impatient for his reply. He sat there for a long while, thinking about what he should put in that space. What about me? he thought. After much deliberation, he simply wrote "I work in a factory". Not like they were going to contact him anyways. He submitted his application, closed the tab and went back to his streams.

It came as a great surprise when, a few weeks later, he received a letter. A real, paper and ink letter addressed to him from ODIN Labs.

Mr. HAMPTON,

Congratulations! You have been selected to attend a preliminary screening at the ODIN Labs Research Headquarters for the revolutionary, life-changing BABEL project. You are invited to join us this coming

THURSDAY, MAY 25TH at 9AM. No additional supplies or materials will be required, other than this letter and the bar code provided for verification of your participation.

We look forward to meeting you,

Mary Forsythe

Head of Research and Test Recruiting,

BABEL Project, ODIN Labs

John must have re-read the letter one hundred times before finally allowing himself to believe it was real. He called up the warehouse to get the necessary time off. He decided not to tell anyone at work where he was going. Nothing would probably come of it anyways.

That Thursday, John caught the 4M bus across town, jumped on the L train and rode it through to the end of the line. From there, he took a cab the rest of the way. ODIN had mentioned something about compensation in the ad, so he was hoping they would at

least cover the cost of the trip. If not he'd probably have to walk part of the way back. The cab driver dropped him off at the entrance of a rather imposing looking gate. Mounted on a pillar to the left was a small touch pad, scanner and a camera. A pleasant, electronic voice greeted him as he approached the gate. "Please present identification or visitor barcode for verification." He pulled out the letter with the barcode on it and pushed it under the red laser of the scanner. It pinged cheerfully and turned a vibrant shade of blue. A moment later, the serene robotic voice came over the nearby intercom.

"Welcome to ODIN Labs, John. A representative will be out to greet you at the gate shortly." After a few moments, the massive steel doors parted and a small, slick looking cart glided through. It wasn't the type of carts John was used to seeing from watching golf. This cart barely made any noise, oozing futuristic design and elegance from every facet of its perfectly crafted body. An equally slick looking man in a powder blue shirt and khakis stepped out to greet John.

"Mr. Hampton. Welcome to ODIN. I hope it wasn't too much trouble getting out here?"

John shook his head, "No problem."

The man smiled politely, waiting for more from John. When it didn't come, he nodded and said, "Great! Right this way then." The attendant gestured to the passenger seat and sat back down. John took up the seat next to him. They proceeded back through the gates towards a large, very modern looking building. John stared for a long while, trying to take in all the intricate facets and materials of the imposing structure. Huge panels of glass and perforated steel, immaculate white plaster and military grade plastics. It was a building befitting of a company living in the future. John couldn't help but feel a little self conscious. He wondered if he should he have worn his suit for this, or at least his tie. The man, who had introduced himself as Ivan, tried his best to keep the small talk going during their ride to the facility.

John chipped in with a few niceties here and there so as to not seem impolite, but he was

distracted by his anxiety. He worried he was out of his depth.

"I saw from your file you're a factory worker. Really selfless work. I can appreciate the dedication people like you have to the industry, helping keep those places running smoothly. Who runs automation at your warehouse?"

John clammed up. "ODIN, actually." Ivan perked up at the comment.

"ODIN! Really! What a coincidence. I've always wanted to know what it was like to work alongside our robots. Even working as an attendant here, I rarely see how our they're put to use, aside from the occasional tech demos we get here at the lab. Seems like it would be really cool."

John squirmed in his seat. He felt deeply uncomfortable, but there was nowhere to go, sitting in their tiny cart as they drove up the path. Ivan didn't seem to notice John's discomfort. He swallowed and tried to seem nonchalant. "They're fine, I guess."

"Ah man, that's awesome. I would love to be able to work on some of our models. That's why I took the

job here in the first place. Thought I'd eventually get into the maintenance side of things. Maybe one day. How do you find it?"

John refused to make eye contact. He could feel his face getting hot with embarrassment. "I don't actually... work on the robots."

Ivan didn't seem to pick up on John's apprehension. "Oh. Sorry, I shouldn't have assumed. So what team are you on then?"

John could feel his face burning now. He was starting to sweat. "I'm... on reserve. Manual labor."

Ivan fell silent, the weight of his previous comments finally dawning on him. "Oh. I see... Huh..." Ivan fell silent for the remainder of their drive up the pathway. John was trying his best not to move, or look up, or breathe. He immediately regretted coming.

After what felt like an eternity, they reached the entrance. They exited the cart and Ivan keyed them in without a word. He kept stealing glances back at John while continuing to make small placating niceties. Past the opulent lobby was a series of fairly minimalist white halls. Some were adorned with

the copious accolades the Lab had attained, doors and hallways marked with names of what John assumed were famous Doctors and Scientists. People who were clearly very important; important enough to warrant an entire research lab or wing to themselves. John couldn't help but notice the subtle touches of humanity as well, placed at crucial junctures. Potted plants, wide open congregation areas intersecting the various wings, small public work alcoves dotting the outer perimeter so as to provide the illusion of privacy while still allowing people to be seen working. John stared past all of it, still absorbed in the previous conversation with Ivan. Finally they reached a door marked *BABEL*. Ivan cleared his throat and began to recite the preamble he was probably required to say to every participant.

"This is the entrance to the BABEL labs. It's not like anything else you will see here today. We will spend approximately eight hours going through your assessment. First stop will be a brief informational session with our head of product to introduce you to what we're doing here. We'll explain more as we go

along." In one smooth motion Ivan opened the doors. He gestured for John to enter.

"Right this way, Mr. Hampton"

The room immediately inside the doors reflected the same immaculate futurism displayed on the exterior of the building. There were a number of comfortable looking chairs arrayed before a large floor-to-ceiling monitor. A few of the other seats were occupied by what John could only guess were other participants. Most of them sat quietly perusing their phones or tablets. To John they all looked normal enough. An ODIN employee in the most perfectly tailored navy suit stood at the front, backlit by the soft glow of the BABEL logo currently on the screen.

"Good morning everyone and welcome to ODIN. My name is Allen Montague, VP of product here on the BABEL project. Now, I know we've been fairly tight lipped about what you'll be doing here today, and I assure you all your questions will be answered in a timely fashion. Before we start, there is a non-disclosure agreement I'll have to ask you all to sign. I will let you know that some of our tests today

will touch on sensitive topics, so now is the time to opt out from the rest of the screening. If at any point you feel uncomfortable and wish to end the screening early, simply let us know. You'll be compensated for your time regardless." Mr. Montague waited patiently while John and the other participants mulled over their NDA's. Despite his embarrassing encounter with Ivan, John stayed. Every bit of his animalistic brain told him to leave and avoid further embarrassment, but stubborn pride kept him in his seat. There was a lot of very technical and legal jargon that John didn't entirely understand. There were a lot of lines about waiving the right to legal action for any "duress experienced during the screening process". There were also portions about being prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law for any breach of the contract. It might as well have been written in another language for all John could understand it. John skimmed the rest of the pages and signed his copy.

"Great, now that we have that settled, I can finally congratulate all of you for taking the first

steps to becoming lifetime members of the BABEL project. To start, let's watch a brief video we've prepared to explain what BABEL is and a little bit about your involvement."

The screen behind Mr. Montague went black for a few moments. When it came back they were greeted by a statuesque woman, haloed in a glowing light in a big white void that stretched into infinity. She smiled and John felt an uncanny maternal comfort. He didn't know exactly why, but he wanted to trust her, and he felt a small knot in between his shoulders loosen.

"Welcome to the BABEL Project. Here at ODIN Labs we are constantly striving to create the most advanced intelligence systems known to humankind. Through breakthrough after breakthrough, we've helped transform the way humans and artificial intelligences interact in every facet of their lives. We are constantly pushing the boundary and capabilities of our technology. We desire to improve the lives of every living individual on the planet, from every walk of life. We want to change the very meaning of human existence.

The BABEL project is the culmination of centuries of human-machine symbiosis. We are building a veritable utopia within which everyone can coexist; free from conflict, struggle, poverty, and even death. We are on the cusp of redefining the nature of what it means to exist.

You are the first lucky few who will help usher in this new era of human life. Though it may seem like a small step right now, you are the pioneers of a new era of life on this planet. You are the first transhumanists. We welcome you with open arms."

With that, the video ended and the BABEL logo returned to the screen. Mr. Montague returned to the centre of the room and picked up where the video left off.

"This really is an exciting time. Your participation today, and your continued participation in the weeks, months and years to come will create the seeds with which we re-sow our destinies." Montague paused for dramatic effect while the gravity of his words sunk in.

"As the video stated, we'll be starting small. The BABEL project is still very much in its infancy, and we must tread carefully while taking these first few steps. There is comfort in knowing that we will all be taking them together. Your actions today will be remembered for the rest of human history." Montague paused again, a grin cracking across his face. "That doesn't sound so bad, does it?"

There were nervous, excited whispers across the room. Montague let the energy of the moment wash over everyone a bit before continuing.

"Today, you will meet with each of our senior analysts to evaluate your physical and mental fitness for the program. As we said, we want to ensure that those who come with us on this journey are well prepared." Montague placed his key card by a door at the rear of the room. The door made a soft chime as Montague slid it open and motioned the group through. "Now, if you'll all follow me this way, we'll get started.

The next few hours were unlike anything John had ever experienced. They were each fitted with a series

of diodes, cranial EMG meshes, a heart monitor, a blood pressure monitor, and various other strange devices that John could not even begin to guess their function. Somehow, the people facilitating the screenings managed to make the whole outfitting process feel normal, even mundane. They didn't look twice at the devices, or John's rather unimpressive middle-aged body protruding around them either. John felt silly worrying about what they might think of his sub-par physique.

After a series of physical examinations, dexterity challenges and acuity tests it came time for John's psychiatric evaluation. It took place in three stages. The first thing they did was ask him absolutely everything about his life: the first word he could remember, earliest memory, favourite school subject, favourite animal, first crush, first time he got drunk, got sick, got fired, had sex, had Chinese food. Then, they asked him about what he thought: whether he was religious, atheist, supported abortion, believed people should own guns, whether a person had a soul, whether he cared about politics, whether he

believed in donating to charity, whether you should eat carbs. The deluge of questions made John's head spin. The final part was about how John felt. This portion of the exam was conducted by an austere looking woman named Doctor Amelia Espanosa.

"What do you do Mr. Hampton?" She asked.

"I work in manual labour."

"I understand you work in one of ODIN's automated warehouses. What specifically do you do there?"

"Well. It depends on the day," he replied.

"Typically, what do you do?"

"Um. Well... I'm usually on reserve."

Doctor Espanosa raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

"Reserve?"

"Yeah. Well, I've been there so long. They keep us for delicate orders that the robots can't handle."

"How often do those orders come in?"

John paused. "Not--not often these days."

"How often would you guess?"

John thought for a moment. "Maybe... maybe one a month?"

"Hmmm." Doctor Espanosa shifted, writing calmly on her tablet as John squirmed. "When on reserve, how do you typically pass the time?" she asked.

"Well, people usually just talk about whatever. I don't know."

"That sounds like what the other people you work with do. What do you typically do on reserve, Mr. Hampton?"

John furrowed his brow. This should have been an easy question to answer, but John found himself at a loss of words. A faint ping came from one of the devices attached to him.

"I... I, uh, I don't know. I just think, mostly... I guess." John felt his gut tighten up.

"What do you usually think about?"

"Anything, I guess. Nothing. I don't know." John was now fully flushed. For whatever reason, he felt very uncomfortable all of a sudden. His mind rifled through a flurry of thoughts and emotions without any coherence. He couldn't focus on any one particular thought. His mouth felt dry. He tried very hard to

stare a hole through the floor. Doctor Espanosa jotted a few more notes down.

"Does it ever bother you to see our automata working while you're not?"

He looked up. "What?"

"Do the robots that work in your warehouse ever make you mad, or upset?"

"I... I mean, it's just how it is these days right?"

"Do you wish it wasn't?"

"Not all the time, but sometimes... maybe.."

"Do you ever talk with your co-workers about it?"

John felt the nervous heat rising up from under his collar. He rubbed awkwardly at his neck. "We all get it. I mean, we don't... I don't..." John trailed off.

"Would you say you are liked at work, John?" John looked at Doctor Espanosa. Her gaze seemed to peer straight through John's psyche.

"I... I don't know." He fell silent. Doctor Espanosa scrawled more notes.

"Let's leave that for the time being. What do you do outside of work?"

John tried to compose himself. "Well, I mostly just watch streams online."

"What sorts of things do you watch?"

"You know, whatever's trending. Mostly the reality channels. I like the food channels."

"Oh, do you like to cook?"

"I'm no good at it. I just like how it looks."

"Do you have a partner? Any pets?"

Another ping went off on the machine on his wrist. He wished he knew if that sound meant good or bad. "Used to have someone. And the apartment doesn't allow pets. Too small anyways."

"What happened?"

"Happened?"

"Your 'someone'. What happened?" Doctor Espanosa leaned in.

"Oh. Uh, you know. Married young. Didn't stick. We hit hard times. Then we... drifted."

"How long has it been?" Doctor Espanosa asked.

"Oh. Um, maybe twenty-five, twenty-six years ago now? Long time."

"And there hasn't been anyone else significant in your life since?"

John felt a tightness in his chest welling up. He let out an exasperated breath. He'd avoided thinking about his younger years.

"Not really, no. Sorta became married to the job."

"I see." Doctor Espanosa looked over her notes. John's head swam as his thoughts went in every direction. He snapped back to attention with Doctor Espanosa's next question.

"Would you say you're depressed, John?"

"What--no!" Doctor Espanosa looked at him as if he were made of glass. "It is what it is..."

"Would you say that you're happy?"

John met Doctor Espanosa's gaze. He could feel the tears welling up, betraying him.

"I mean... is anyone? It is what it is... It is what it is..." John hung his head and let out a ragged breath. Doctor Espanosa placed her hand lightly on his knee and handed him a tissue. After a momentary silence set her tablet aside.

"Why did you apply to the BABEL project?"

"It--it seemed like an interesting project."

Espanosa persisted: "Why did you apply to the BABEL project Really? Why get more deeply involved with a company that could ruin your livelihood?"

"I just... I just wanted to feel helpful again."

The tightness in John's chest persisted.

"Do you feel helpless right now?"

"Sometimes."

"Have you ever considered suicide, John?"

John snapped back and stared at Doctor Espanosa. For all the pity he'd felt for himself, he'd never gotten that low. He thought back to his conversation with Sam.

"No. No, I would never..." He wondered, at that moment, whether anyone would miss him if he did. His mind raced, and for a second he felt another pang of hopelessness. Sam's face flashed in his mind. Surely she would miss him. "No." He said with more certainty.

"Okay. Okay." Said Doctor Espanosa. "Do you think being here will help you feel useful again?"

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

"Do you think it could make your life better?"

"Maybe..." John replied, mulling it over.

By the end of his session, John was *truly* exhausted. The attendants thanked him for his time, gave him two hundred dollars for his participation (more than enough to cover both his trips) and he was on his way. By the time he was home the whole experience felt like a hallucination. His head still swam with questions while at work the next day. It wasn't until he felt a sharp jab in his side that he finally snapped out of it.

"Hey! Earth to Johnny! You in there, bud?"

Samantha jabbed him again and he rubbed his side, pretending to be hurt. He nodded.

"We're going out again to the bar tonight. You in?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I am." He replied.

That night he felt freer than he'd felt in a long while. He drank more than usual, strangely content just to be in the company of his co-workers. He was quiet, as usual, but for different reasons. He saw his life and everything that surrounded it in a new light.

As the night wound down, it was just him and Sam again. She raised two fingers to her lips, the universal hand signal for "cigarette" and John nodded. The air was crisp and made John's skin tingle. He was definitely going to regret those extra whiskey shots Sam had talked him into.

"You look like you're a million miles away. You've been in outer space all day today. And that's saying a lot, even by your standards. What's up?"

John shifted his one good eye lazily towards Sam.

"You ever wonder about all this?" He gestured vaguely around himself.

"What, this bar?" Sam asked, looking perplexed.

"No, this. Life. What we're doing. Don't you ever... I don't know, don't you ever wish we could do more? Be more?"

Sam took a long, thoughtful drag from her cigarette. "Sure, I'd take a nicer lot if I could. But we can't just change our lives like that." Sam snapped her fingers. "Not you and me. We're the bottom feeders, Johnny boy. Scum. Eventually you just get used to it. S'not so bad after that. Is what it is,

you know?" She pulled out her pack and lit another cigarette with the butt of the other. John, feeling emboldened, motioned for one of his own. Sam's eyebrows looked like they were going to shoot off of her head.

"Fuck, how drunk are you, Johnny?"

John chuckled. "Not drunk enough." He took the cigarette, lit it, and inhaled deeply. It had been decades since he last smoked. He had to fight every urge to cough and sputter. His lungs were immediately on fire. He took another swig of his beer for cover.

"I don't know what you did with Johnny, but whoever you are, I'm cool with it." Sam smiled despite her obvious dig. John smiled back. He felt his face turn flush, an increasingly common occurrence lately. At least this time it wasn't out of shame.

"I just... What if you had a chance to make a big change in your life? Would you take it?"

Sam assumed a mock-pensive face. "I mean, sure. Who wouldn't. I'm not about to waste my days wondering what if, though. Life's too short to spend it worrying

it's not good enough. Get it in your head, Johnny:
there's no grand plan for people like you and me."

John shook his head, more to himself than to her comment. "I feel like, if I could just make even the smallest difference, to even just one person... Ah, I don't know, maybe all these years in the warehouse wouldn't feel like such a waste."

Sam scoffed. She actually looked resentful at that comment. "Just because we sit around sometimes, or scrub shit off of machines that do our job a million times better than we do, doesn't make us worthless. Spending time with each other, solidarity; that's not a waste of fucking time. I'm sure as hell thankful for it at least."

John felt the full force of her words. He'd crossed a line he didn't intend to. "That's not--I didn't mean--ah fuck." John took another pull from the cigarette and finished off his beer. He suddenly felt very small. Sam stood next to him, smoking her cigarette in silence, watching him contemplatively.

"Do you think if I just... disappeared... that anyone would care?" He wanted to ask her if she cared, but

stopped short. Sam grabbed John firmly by the shoulders and spun him so that they were face to face, eye to eye. Her eyebrows were deeply furrowed, her eyes glistening.

"I would care." He could see the concern in her eyes. He could feel the heat coming off of her, her breath a mix of beer and nicotine. She continued to stare into his eyes, into his soul with a fierceness he hadn't expected from her. Some far off part of his brain felt like kissing her. He thought about pulling her in and holding her, if not for some weird version of affection then for comfort. He did none of those things.

"Okay. Okay."

"Okay," Sam mirrored. She let out a sigh and let go of his shoulders. Her eyes lingered just a little longer. "Okay. Fuck me. Well, maybe all this deep talk is a sign we should call it quits for the night, huh?"

"Yeah... yeah."

A few days later at work, the inevitable happened. As John and everyone else piled into the prep room for Monday's shift, they were greeted by a

man in a very plain, no-nonsense suit. John knew what was coming before the man even bothered saying anything. All of the employees did. Their shift supervisor looked like he'd swallowed poison. The man in the suit cleared his throat and began reading from his pre-approved script.

"As you all know, Metcalf greatly appreciates the hard work its human labour force provides here. We have been fortunate enough to be one of the top logistics plants in the county thanks to your hard work. You have all contributed to--"

"Just fucking spit it out," someone shouted. The man paused for a moment, chewing on his next words.

"In light of the most recent progress on fragile order handling, we will be reducing the on-site staff from seventeen to ten." He paused again, the words he'd be forced to say next like pure molten lead in his mouth. "This change is effective immediately. HR will be handling the severance prior to the start of today's shift. If you are seniority number eleven to seventeen, please follow me. The rest of you, we'll figure out work allocations when I return."

John gave a panicked look towards Sam. She was leaning back against the far wall, a bemused look on her face. When their gazes met, she just shrugged to him and shoved off the wall.

"Well, it's been a pleasure fellas. Try not to work too hard today huh?" She glanced at John and followed the convoy of other workers off to professional death row. John felt like he should do something. He should run after them, offer to trade spots with Sam, something. He knew it would never work. The union would never allow him to quit like that, let alone choose who'd get to stay. He felt helpless. He was always helpless.

The remaining ten workers they kept were all given reserve for the day. Most of the workers either cursed the company for firing their friends or blessing the superstitious deity of their choosing that they'd had enough seniority to survive another layoff. John mostly stewed in silence. His mind raced. Sam was the last thing in the warehouse that kept him sane. If she was gone, what was left for him here? He thought of quitting numerous times throughout the day,

rifling through the vitriol he could throw at upper management as he stormed out of the building for the last time ever. He thought about running out onto the warehouse floor and smashing through the robots with one of the forklifts. By the end of his shift he'd thought of all the perfect ways he could go out in a blaze of glory to do Sam proud and definitely end up in jail. Instead he hung up his equipment and punched out.

John returned home more defeated than ever, his grandiose plans of sabotage unfulfilled. He ran through his usual routine, making a sad microwaved meal, and watching his streams. Then, a strange thing happened. He got another letter, from ODIN Labs. He had put ODIN out of mind after the day's ordeal. At first he didn't want to open it, assuming it would be some softly worded rejection letter about how unfit he was for their project, how he was too stupid, or lazy, or broken, or all of the above. He opened it anyways:

Dear Mr. Hampton,

Thank you for attending the preliminary screening of the BABEL project. We are pleased to inform you that you have been selected for advanced screening. We will require two weeks of your time, at your earliest convenience. Please reach out to us with a time that would work within your schedule. This is a very exciting time and we look forward to your continued involvement with BABEL.

Sincerely,

Mary Forsythe

Head of Research and Test Recruiting,

BABEL Project, ODIN Labs

John read the letter again, and then a third time for good measure. By some strange seemingly one-in-a-billion chance he had been chosen for their project. This was his out. This was his chance to regain some sense of purpose he had lost along the way. If he could get this far, he could go the distance. John went in to the warehouse the next day

and gave his final notice. He didn't tell them where he was going or why, just that he was done, in not quite so many words. He handed in his badge without saying goodbye to any of the other workers and left the warehouse for the last time. He didn't even give so much as a second glance on the way out. He was free of all obligation to them. For the first time in a long time, John had done something to disrupt his simple, safe pattern of a life. What that meant scared him, but he didn't care. He responded to the letter stating he could start immediately. A few hours later and it was all squared up: starting the next day, John would begin advanced screening for the BABEL project.

That night, John could barely sleep. He tossed and turned, this time out of anticipation. He felt like a child, anxious before a big family trip. He tried to imagine what exactly "advanced screening" would be like. He was determined to stay strong, to show them they didn't make a mistake in choosing him. He was also determined never to return to his life of menial labour. John was ready for whatever tests they threw at him and wondered how much more intense it

would be than the initial screening. He also thought a lot about Sam. He hoped that she would be alright. He knew she was strong and capable of taking care of herself, but he worried just the same. At some point he passed out, only to wake up an hour earlier than he'd planned. Figuring any attempt to fall back to sleep would be futile, he got up and began to get ready.

A few hours later he was back outside the main gate of ODIN Labs, half-dead from the lack of sleep, half on edge from the three coffees he'd downed to stay awake. He was let in without much fanfare. It seemed like he was the only one there today. Mr. Montague greeted him with a firm handshake in the front lobby.

"Mr. Hampton, thank you for such a prompt reply. You're the first of our current pool to respond. Can I call you John?"

"Uh, sure," said John.

"Great. Today we'll be easing you into the next phase of the BABEL project and more thoroughly explain how your involvement will help us, and what it will

mean for you."

"Okay." Mr. Montague waited, expecting more words from John, but when they didn't come, he motioned to one of the lab doors nearby.

"I take it you're the strong silent type. I can appreciate that. Follow me and we'll get started,"

Following Mr. Montague's lead, John stepped through the doors and into a small waiting area.

"We have one final tour and I will explain in full detail how your contribution will help the BABEL project."

Montague led John through a series of corridors into a large control center. Large computer screens flooded John's vision with complicated looking charts, graphs and numbers, and indecipherable diagnostics and graphics.

"When we said we were building a utopia, we meant it. This is the main hub of the BABEL project. This project represents a new era of life as we know it. If you look over here," Montague pointed to one of the bigger monitors on the left. It looked like a shot of a galaxy. "You can see the entirety of our network.

Each one of the nodes in that image represents a person, like you, who has completed the process. Have you ever heard of posthumanism John?" John shook his head 'no'. He continued to stare at the screens in front of him, baffled.

"Well, it means to go beyond the natural order of humanity. The participants transcend this plane of existence. Through our efforts they evolve into a new organism. They are no longer encumbered by the traditional constraints of life that you and I must suffer."

John's head skewed at a slight angle and he squinted, as if it would somehow make the images coalesce in his brain more easily. "I--I don't."

Montague rested his hand on John's shoulder. "It's okay, John. I know this is a lot, and it's going to get weirder before it gets better. Over the next few months we'll prepare you in full for what's to come. You'll learn what it means to become a part of that network. I know this can seem terrifying, it usually is for the first little while, but you'll come to understand. There's no pressure here. I'm sure you

already have plenty of questions, so let's go somewhere more comfortable and we can discuss in more detail what we'll be doing." Mr. Montague led John back to another very official looking room. This one was more laid back, with plush couches, softer lighting and a pleasant aroma.

"Now, John, let me give you a bit more background. Roughly twenty years ago we began doing what we now call a psycho-neural transfer. The first people we tested this procedure with were the terminally ill, people well into the twilight years of their lives, people in comas, or those with debilitating diseases. People who were either near death or dying, with no options otherwise. Rather than opt for End of Life support, they chose to donate their consciousness to science. We developed a system that could keep their core neural pathways perfectly intact, in the hopes that it could one day be transferred back into a viable host. Over time we realized that this just wasn't possible. Our bodies are imperfect, still susceptible to breakdown and decomposition. What we discovered is that, though the

body will always eventually fail, the psycho-neural transfer holds strong, with no decay. We've hypothesized that, with time, we could even regenerate broken parts of the mind within our network. Thus, the BABEL project was born. Through massive distributed computation, and the exponential brain power of each mind we assimilate, we have built a simulated *universe* for our transfers to live in. We've been able to provide a world for people that this one never could."

John was floored. "How. How is this--"

"Legal?" Montague finished. "We've been through some of the most rigorous ethical boards in the world, gotten support from over one hundred nations who want to see this succeed, with hopes of bringing every other nation on board. It's no different, and in some ways better, than assisted suicide."

"So, my body... my life... would be over..."

"In a way, yes, but in another it would be the beginning of a brand new one. It's a big decision, the biggest you'll probably ever make. There is no right or wrong answer, and it's entirely voluntary. But we

wouldn't be having this conversation right now if we didn't think you were a good fit."

"But, why? Why me?" John felt drunk. He couldn't comprehend how someone as pathetically mundane as himself could become involved in something as other-worldly as the BABEL project.

"It became clear over the years that in order to sustain our vision we need to push the boundaries of the project. We needed to prove that this could be for anyone, not just people in dire need. We know about your work situation, your life situation. You deserve better John. We all do."

John filled with anger. "What about the others? What about the people you fucked over building machines that could do their job a thousand times better than them? Do those people not deserve better?"

Mr. Montague maintained his composure. "Of course they do John, and in time, my hope is that we can provide for everyone. We're not oblivious to how ODIN's robotics and AI work has severely harmed some individuals. It's hard to believe, but we do care about the people we've displaced. But the model has to

be proven first. This is brand new territory. We need to make absolutely certain that when we open our doors to everyone, we're ready for it. We've spent the last twenty years refining this process. We're pioneering new life, and you're that pioneer John. In twenty, thirty years time, you will be the reason *all* life could be better."

"This is so fucked up..."

"I know, I know it looks that way. We don't expect you to decide anything today. This is only the first step in a series of steps we will take together. We need to be one thousand percent in line with each other, right? This all goes at your pace."

"Why do this? Why do it at all?"

Montague's face softened. "I know it sounds impossible, but we genuinely want to make life better for everyone, *and* help restore the imbalance caused by our other ventures. We're not the only company with robotics and artificial intelligence divisions. We're trying to get ahead of where we see that curve going. Automation is an inevitable change the world must

undergo. We as a species need to find a new way through it."

"What if I say no? What if this is all too much?"

"You can, if you want. Like I said, this has to be voluntary, and regardless of what happens here, we will see that you are well supported. But I think there's more to you than you let on. You've shown it in our conversation today. You hide behind your meek self. You act like you're okay with the hand life dealt you, but you're not. So many people we interview have tried to convince themselves to *settle* for little to nothing. Decisions outside our control convince us we're not special, or not deserving of anything more. I hope to convince you that you do deserve better, like you so rightly believe; that the people you know deserve better. I truly don't think you'd still be sitting here talking with me if you didn't believe it yourself."

John stared at his hands. Deep down he knew there was no going back. He was fully committed.

"Will I die?"

Montague shifted in his seat. "That's a deeply philosophical question. In a way, yes, but you'll also become more than your current self. Your body will wither away, as it would anyways. The current you will cease to be, but your mind will persist and even grow. Your life will become a part of the BABEL network and become something even greater than it already is."

John fell silent for a long while. Montague sat, politely giving John some time to process.

"Don't feel like you need to figure this all out or decide now. You have as much time as you require to make the final decision and can back out at any time before the transfer. Some of our participants took years before they decided. We're learning as much as you are. Your contribution during this preparatory phase will help us just as much as the Transfer itself."

"I still don't see how someone like me could ever deserve this. It feels so selfish," John finally replied.

"Of course you deserve this. Everyone deserves this. Look--" Montague adjusted in head seat, leaning

in closer to John. "Somewhere along the lines we, as a society, decided that technology meant more than our own lives. The things meant to free us from traditional burdens, to bring us closer--robots, AI, the internet-- only drove a wedge between us. We're more alone now than we have ever been. We convinced ourselves that we are less than the technologies that surround us. Just because I was someone who helped usher in this change, doesn't mean I haven't experienced its effects firsthand. It doesn't mean I don't care about the people I had always intended to help." John was taken aback. He felt like he was seeing Montague in a completely different light. Montague continued: "All bullshit aside: we're trying to build a world where our technology can bring us back together. That is at the core of the BABEL project. When we say you matter, we mean it. Everyone involved wants what you and I want: connection. You're family now John."

Tears welled up in John's eyes. Something in Montague's speech struck a chord deep down in John. All of the monotony, the loneliness, the feelings of

worthlessness that drove him to apply in the first place – it was a desire to be wanted. To find belonging. Montague softly placed a hand on John's shoulder.

“This has obviously been a lot for only the first day. I'll give you some time to think everything over and then we can go from there. Sound good?”

John nodded without looking up.

Eventually, John decided to go through with the Transfer. It was ultimately Montague's words on that first day that had cemented his decision. It had been four months since that day. John had been rigorously tested and scanned, asked a lot of hard questions, but overall it was the nicest anyone had ever treated him. Montague had not been exaggerating when he said that everyone in the BABEL project was like family. Today he would finally be initiating the Transfer. It was a day of excitement and nerves more than anxiety or trepidation. Everyone in the project treated it more

like a birthday than a funeral. John still didn't know exactly what to expect once on the other side, but he was okay with that. He would know soon enough. In some strange sense, knowing that he'd be going through with it filled him with a sense of longing to be finished already. He'd be a part of something far greater than himself. Mr. Montague came to greet him.

"Morning Mr. Hampton. Ready for your big day?"

John smiled. A small flutter ran through his stomach. "As ready as I can be."

Mr. Montague returned the smile. "Fantastic. Time for you to make history!" Mr. Montague gave him an amiable slap on the back and directed him to the door. "Right this way."

John walked down the now-familiar hallways of ODIN Labs, towards the Transfer chamber. There was a wide array of staff busy at work preparing for the procedure. John had been able to witness two other Transfers, so he did have some idea of what to expect. Lots of eager scientists, paramedics, and sometimes, friends and family. John would be going it alone. He considered trying to get in touch with Sam, but

thought better of it. He wasn't really sure what he would've said if he had. He wasn't even sure where she'd gotten to after being laid off. She may not even be in the state anymore. He found, in these final days, he thought a lot about her. He thought about the last time they had spoken at the bar. He didn't appreciate it at the time, but looking back he was fond of that moment. He hoped she was okay. She was one of the only people that seemed to get him, the only person in his tiny existence that seemed willing to push him out of his comfort zone. If only she knew how far outside of that comfort zone he was now.

The Transfer room was a very clean, circular room, full of stark white and high gloss paneling. It had the faintest scent of hand sanitizer and lemon. It reminded him vaguely of high school science class. There was a large, complex machine near the center of the room with innumerable smaller machines, wires and monitors hooked up to it. John hadn't the faintest idea of what even *one* of those machines did, despite having it all explained to him numerous times. The only thing he knew, is that it was all necessary for

the procedure. Every device was tailored to a very specific role to ensure the Transfer went smoothly.

As he entered the room a sense of calm washed over him. He recalled the other patients who'd completed the Transfer looking so peaceful, even happy. He tried his best to focus on that and not on the butterflies he felt in his stomach. The woman who'd conducted his initial psychiatric evaluation, Doctor Espanosa, stood near the main machine conversing with one of the other doctors on hand. Doctor Espanosa, making a few small notes on that tablet she carried with her, looked up and smiled as John approached.

"John."

"Doctor Espanosa" John replied.

"Oh please, after all our sessions together, you would think, on today of all days, you could call me Amy."

John chuckled, "Sorry, nerves and all that I guess. Er, Amy."

Amy smirked, shifted the papers on her clipboard and handed a small card over to John.

"Here," she said. "It's something we give to all our Transfers. Something to mark the occasion." John unfolded it. Inside was a small illustration of a baby wearing an old VR headset, carrying balloons, floating in space. Across the top it read 'Happy First Transferrance Day!'. All around the illustration were signatures from various members of the ODIN team, including Doctor Espanosa and Mr. Montague.

"We know it's cheesy, but it does sort of feel like a birthday, doesn't it?"

John beamed. He'd not received a birthday card in decades. He felt overcome with happiness. "I love it. Thank you." He reached his hand out in gratitude. Amy swatted it aside and hugged John forcefully. He hugged back and relished every second. She released him and gripped his forearm.

"I'll be watching from the gallery. I know everything is going to go just great. Goodbye for now, John." Amy gave one final squeeze and left for the gallery. John tucked his card away in his pants pocket and continued towards the center of the room where Mr. Montague was waiting.

"Alright John, this is the last time I'll get in your hair. Last chance to change your mind..." Mr. Montague stood looking expectantly at John. John took a deep breath and looked Mr. Montague straight in the eyes.

"I'm ready."

A legal assistant came with one final form for John to sign. With one final swoop of his pen, John was finally ready to begin the Transfer.

"Okay. I know we've been over a lot of this before, but for your sake, and for the record, I will now tell you how the rest of the day will go and then we'll get started. The entire process should only take a few minutes. In that time you should feel no pain. Other Tranferees have described a zen-like sense of calm, drowsiness, and occasionally, a little flicker in their perception of reality, but so far we've had no incidents involving pain or struggle. Think of it more as falling into a dreamlike sleep. Should anything happen we will terminate the procedure immediately before you encounter any bodily harm. Medical professionals are on hand to oversee the

entire procedure. All there is for you to do now is sit back, relax, and become a part of history."

With his spiel complete, Mr. Montague shook John's hand and left him with the primary attendants that would be in the main chamber with him. He was guided to the central machine and instructed to lie on the gel-padded bed. There would be three phases, after which the Transfer would be complete. They injected an IV, connected various electrodes to his chest and extremities, and with a whir of beeps and strobes on the monitors, the whole room came to life. A woman with a pleasant voice narrated the process to John as they went.

"Initial monitoring procedure is complete. Moving on to preliminary signal tuning and calibration."

John heard a few more of the machines pick up as they initiated the next phase. He could faintly feel the hum of a few of them through the base of the bed.

"Calibration complete. All vitals within optimal range. Beginning initial Transfer protocol link."

John felt a tingling through a few of his fingers, but for the most part it felt like nothing at

all. The room did seem somewhat brighter, and in his periphery he would have sworn he could feel a presence. It was like a little glimmer that, when he tried to look at it, moved just outside of his line of sight. His mind kept wandering, ever so slightly, like he was distracted by something he couldn't quite recall. The gel padding of the bed gave him the sensation that he was floating. He felt like he wanted to say something, but he wasn't sure what, or to whom. He tried to bring himself to attention. He wanted to be present while the Transfer occurred. This was his big moment after all. He tried reciting his name to himself, but even that felt arduous. He could feel his breathing becoming slow and steady. No matter what he tried he couldn't focus. Instead, his mind only drifted to Sam. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine her, looking at him from the gallery, smiling; proud. His eyelids felt very heavy, and when he tried to open them again, he found he was more content to just keep them closed.

“Primary transfer complete. Entering Secondary Phase now.”

John felt like he was in a lucid dream. He was suddenly back in the warehouse, but it was empty. "Hello?" he called out. The sound echoed across the warehouse floor, like a massive cave. From the depths of the warehouse came a familiar voice.

"About time! What took you so long?" John turned around and he was suddenly standing on the patio of the bar he'd gone to with Sam.

"I, I don't know, I tried to call you I just —" John looked down at his feet.

"Hey, don't sweat it," Sam placed her hand gently on John's shoulder. When he looked up she was gone.

"Secondary Phase complete. Vital signs all still looking great. Now entering final stages of the Transfer." John was floating in a bright white room, with Sam suspended overhead.

"Hey there Johnny boy. Won't be long now," she winked at him, like she always did, and John smiled. John slid through the white void that now surrounded him, in no particular direction, simply content to have Sam near. The other voices grew to a dull murmur. It was just John, Sam, and the infinite expanse around

him. The void kept growing brighter and brighter, and John felt wave after wave of euphoria. For the first time in a long time John felt utterly at peace. The presence he felt earlier was growing stronger, calling out to him. He accepted it with open arms. And then--

END