

DIVIDING LINE

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3rd Place

Adult Division

Saul had the nearly indescribable feeling that he was watching himself-from inside himself. He was aware of that feeling long before he became aware of his surroundings. He seemed to remember an alarm going off on the factory floor. He had not even had time to think about what the alarm meant. Then, fire. Fire, and the silence of deafening noise. It seemed there was some sort of divide in his memory after that. That sickening feeling of watching himself was emanating from that divide.

It was somewhat, he concluded, like seeing oneself in a mirror when one did not expect to. It was an unsettling experience. It was like having to get used to his reflection, but there was something deeper about it that defied any good metaphors he could come up with. He didn't know why it was so hard to think.

Then, he remembered his body (*how could he have forgotten about it?*), and it hurt everywhere. He instantly regretted remembering it. But, by

remembering his body, (*or was it reconnecting with it?*) he regained his senses as well. He could feel a cold metal sheet on his bare back (*why wasn't he wearing a shirt?*). He could smell clinically sterile air. He could hear someone speaking.

“Booting up well within parameters. This might be the time!” The voice, a young woman’s, said excitedly.

“Let’s not get too optimistic.” Another voice, an older voice, a man’s, chided the first voice. “We may have to try this quite a number of times more.”

“I understand, I just...” The first voice trailed off as if in expectation of a greater reprimand for arguing the point. “Nothing. You’re right, Doctor.”

“But, let’s hope.” The older voice reassured.

It was at this point that sight began to return. Saul remembered that his eyes needed to be open, and this process seemed harder than he thought it ought to be. And, everything still hurt.

He saw harsh white fluorescent lights. They made him want to close his eyes. But, Saul began to think that it might be a good idea to know where he was. He was starting to be frightened by the idea that he didn’t know where he was (*Shouldn't he have thought of that earlier?*).

“Doctor, the vitals are good. Neural activity is normal, well, considering.”

The younger voice said. “Look, he’s opening his eyes.” The younger voice seemed to have no intention of hiding its excitement now.

“I can’t believe it. We’ve never gotten this far. The halves are interfacing. Neural connections are going strong in both.” The older voice seemed pleased.

Saul tried to turn his head to look at the older voice, but his head turned very slowly. The pain was unbearable. The older voice belonged to a tall man, with dark skin and short cut gray hair.

A thousand things to say, to ask, shot through his head, but in the rush all that came out was a moan.

“Can you hear me? Can you understand me?” The doctor asked, speaking like one would to a child.

Saul, annoyed, muttered “Yes”. Muttering was apparently the only thing he was capable of. The pain again. Stronger now. It was almost like for moments he forgot it, but it would come back to keep him from thinking.

“Do you know where you are? Do you know what happened to you?” The doctor probed.

Everything was so heavy. Saul fought to keep his eyelids open and to speak. He faded off with the half-word “Nuh” escaping before silence and blackness came back.

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“It’s been seven months, Saul. Hard to believe. It’s gone fast.” The doctor, whose name Saul had since discovered was Alan Freedman, remarked as they settled into their chairs. The room was an unimaginative shade of medical white and the chairs were uncomfortable, but were familiar after the countless times they occupied them together.

“Yeah, pretty crazy.” Saul agreed, though hundreds of other possible responses flooded his brain. They were shouted one by one at lightning speed by the reflection, the other self, the one he had felt before he woke up. This happened any time Saul went to open his mouth. But, of all the possibilities, he almost always said the one that seemed least interesting.

“I’m sorry we have to go through this again.” Dr. Freedman began. “I know you’ve done it a million times, but before we release you, we have to do one last run through of all of our normal tests.”

“I understand, Doctor. It’s not an issue.” Saul decided on politeness before had computed all the other options, and felt a twinge of annoyance that he had

decided rashly. Before the accident Saul had never contemplated how many options there really were. Now, he couldn't stop himself from doing it.

"Okay, fine. Let's test memory then. What is the farthest back thing you remember?"

"My sister's eighth birthday party," Saul lied, "When I blew out her candles before she could and she slapped me for it." Saul had regained so many earlier memories, but had kept them secret. They seemed like an aberration or a malfunction (or maybe just a fantasy), and Saul could not let that keep him from being released from his hospital/prison.

"Good," Dr. Freedman said quickly without thinking, having received the answer he expected and never questioned. "And what can you tell me about the accident?"

"All I remember is the alarm sounding on the factory floor, and then..."

"Which factory?" The doctor interrupted.

"The Hansen Robotics factory where I was employed at the time." Saul added, quickly replacing the missing part of their well-practiced exchange.

"Very good." The doctor nodded, his momentary fear of something wrong now allayed. He shifted to a more comfortable position in his chair. "What was done to keep you alive?"

“Due to a previous agreement with my employer, in the event of catastrophic injury outside the ability of standard medical science to treat, I became a test subject for bio-robotic medical technology.” The legalese rolled off his tongue as if he had memorized them straight out of the passionless speech he had received from a company lawyer after he woke up.

“As part of the process, my left leg was replaced with a robotic prosthesis, along with my left arm from the elbow down,” Saul droned, he got sick of reciting all of this, especially to the man who headed the project. “Also, four toes on my right foot, a significant length of intestine, one eye and forty percent of my brain were replaced with synthetic equivalents.”

“You hate rattling off that speech, don’t you?” The doctor asked, looking almost ashamed, or pained by this.

“Now, Doc, don’t be like that. You know I’m grateful to be alive. I just don’t care to give an itemized list of everything I lost to still be here.”

“I know. I feel bad it happened to you.” He paused. Saul believed that Freedman meant it. “Well, your memory seems to be fine. I’m clearing you for release, Saul. You’ll still need to come back every few days for the next couple of weeks to make sure that all the synthetic systems stay integrated, but I think you

deserve the chance to go get your life back.” The doctor said, standing from his chair.

Saul stood, stopped a moment, and then embraced the doctor. “Thanks for everything, Doc.” Saul thought, for just a moment about telling Freedman about the other self. He almost wanted to tell him that there were two versions of himself in his head now, an organic self and a synthetic self. This, Saul figured out, produced the strange feeling that he had felt when he first woke up from the accident. Mentally, he really was looking at a reflection, or even a copy of himself, almost perfectly similar, but different on a fundamental level, the full nature of which still eluded him. Saul decided the same thing that he decided every time he had thought about explaining it. He couldn’t tell the doctor. This certainly could not be normal, not expected, and would not get him out of the hospital any sooner.

“It’s been a pleasure, Saul.”

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It was so hard to think sometimes. More accurately, it was so hard to think just one thing sometimes. Saul’s two selves both seemed equally assured that they were in control (or should be), but, somehow, neither of them ever were. They both thought of something to say, but some other, different thing would

come out. They each decided on a place to go, however, Saul would end up at neither, but at some entirely different place. And then there was the power struggle. More and more frequently, Saul felt his selves openly fighting each other.

He felt it coming on, another battle between his two selves. Saul found that going out walking alone could sometimes help. He got up from his half-eaten dinner, left his small apartment, and started down his usual path. Over the last year since he was released he must have walked this path a hundred times trying to understand what was happening to him, trying to make peace between his selves.

The path was exactly 2.43 miles long. Saul was pretty sure that his synthetic self had figured that out. It wound through a neighborhood of old houses, past some shops, and across a bridge to a park. If the conflict had not been resolved by the end of the path, Saul would sit in the park and wait it out.

Saul's selves hurled thoughts, emotions, memories, calculations, decisions, and instincts back and forth through his brain (or brains, Saul had never quite decided whether he thought he had one brain or two half-brains).

The strain was immense this time, Saul winced as he tried to keep himself focused on walking. He was walking faster than normal, trying not to give in to

either side attempting to show its dominance by forcing him from the path to some other place it had decided on.

As he passed each pastel-colored house, a new memory, or possibility, or regret flashed through his mind.

...The cute girl in sales that he never asked out...

...A map with red pinpoints appearing for all the places in town he had thought about taking her for dinner...

...A feeling of exhausting hunger...

...A precision replay of breaking his leg playing football in high school...

...The song his sister sang at their mother's funeral...

...The last paragraph of his favorite book...

The houses disappeared as he turned on to the street with the little shops. An antique store, a hair salon, a photography studio, and a rib joint lined the avenue. The smell of barbeque from the restaurant soaked the air. The flashes of battle became stronger. They had never quite gone this far, or this hard before.

...Sunshine on his face in the forest...

...Exactly what tree bark felt like to the touch...

...Almost drowning as a kid on vacation at the lake...

...Touching an electric fence...

The bridge was approaching. If he could get across it to the park, he might be able to wait this out. This was bad. His head burned behind his eyes. He was sweating hard though it was cool outside. The muscles in his fingers, hands, and arms were tensed as if they might break from the strain. He struggled forward on to the bridge. He knew it perfectly. It spanned a shallow river, shallower this year than normal, exposing some of the larger water-worn rocks. The bridge didn't have to be near as high as it was, but looked more imposing that way, and Saul had always liked it. The pain was blurring his vision, and he was only halfway across the bridge. His legs were turning to stone as he lurched forward.

...His first fight...

...His first kiss...

...Every broken promise...

...A perfect recollection of the factory blast tearing into him...

...The feeling of falling. Wait! This isn't a flashback!

Saul realized that though it was only seconds, his racing mind made it seem much longer. He regretted not telling Dr. Freedman about what was happening to him. He wondered what would be different about his coming collision if the river hadn't been quite so shallow this year. He thought about the poor soul who would find him first. He felt bad about blowing out his sister's birthday candles.

His two arms had different plans for breaking his fall. One eye closed. The other sprang wildly open. His tired legs flailed out. His neck contorted, and he felt bones shatter as his back struck a rock. The pain from his head surged through his whole body.

But, it was quiet now. For a moment. The air smelled sweet with autumn (*Why hadn't he noticed that before?*). And, the sudden, oncoming darkness seemed comforting. He welcomed it.