

The Old Soul

By JC Wurtenbaugh

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Thirty seconds after the death of Charles Filippini, the being which comprised the core of his identity was in full flight. Attuned to the slightest alteration in its host's metabolism, the merest slowing of circulatory flow to the cranium had alerted it to the host's demise. After first gathering its long molecular tendrils into its center, it began its withdrawal from the brain it had inhabited, departing from its central nest deep in the parietal lobes of the cerebrum, unwinding, detaching, compressing, readying itself for serious travel. Rapidly it made its way through the ventricles of the brain towards the medulla and the spinal column, moving past the Fissure of Silvius, past the dying cells of the frontal lobes, through the cerebellum, the beginning of the long trek to the epidermis.

Cut off from the great cranial memory banks, That-Which-Had-Been-Charles-Filippini lost its specific awareness of that identity almost at once. For a few microseconds, fluttering memories - a long and distinguished career as a chemist and industrialist, a wife named Laura, the taste of fresh strawberries, children (what were their names ?), candlelight, weeping, a blurry, fading sensation that his left foot itched, the hiss (of steam ? of water ?) heard ten minutes before - or perhaps 70 years before, or perhaps 700 years, or 70,000. Death had destroyed all temporal benchmarks. Death had destroyed time itself.

In its compressed form, it seemed a mere aggregate of molecules, a small, uninteresting glob of hydrocarbon. Yet its fully extended length, including all tendrils and branches, would have been several feet - and it was anything but a mere speck of protoplasm. Now, by a process that a chemist would have identified as a peculiar, largely unknown type of osmosis, a biologist as a bizarre, largely undefined reflexive instinct, that-which-had been

made its way through the densely packed osteocytes and bone collagen of the minor cervical vertebrae. The first step in the thousand mile journey to the skin lay through the capillary system that had serviced the muscles of Charles Filippini's lower neck. The only problem was that That-Which-Had-Been in its compressed form was considerably denser than protein molecules, which even in a living organism are not normally able to pierce the capillary wall and return to the blood stream. Reacting to the dilemma in a manner that was partly conscious, mostly not, That-Which-Had-Been-Charles Filippini elongated itself to the extent necessary to reduce its density to one slightly lower than that of the surrounding interstitial fluid. The fortress fell immediately; the once formidable capillary wall became permeable. In the next instant, That-Which-Had-Been had slipped into the bloodstream and began the movement up and through the endless canals of blood, towards the next muscle, the next system of capillaries, the systems beyond that, and whatever ultimately lay beyond it all.

In these microscopic archipelagoes lay its foreordained route. But there, too, lurked its most ancient enemies - the apostles of change and destruction known as viruses. The proximate cause of the death of Charles Filippini was a malignant melanoma that had metastasized from his colon to his liver and pancreas. Viral in origin, in the process of taking his life the disease had also destroyed all his resistance systems. Now, too insensate to realize that the long battle was over, viruses in a profusion of shapes and sizes, myxoviruses, rhinoviruses, icornaviruses, and all the rest, swarmed over the dying cells of the blood stream in preparation for purposeless invasions of those tissues that had so far remained undamaged. Not much larger than they, but infinitely more complex, That-Which-Had-Been recognized at once its eternal foes. It traveled cautiously among them, very much like the hero of a florid melodrama making his way through a snake pit.

Suddenly, without warning, the attack began. A particularly aggressive arbovirus, the product of one of the last mosquito bites Charles Filippini had ever suffered, attached itself to a thread of ribonucleic acid that trailed behind

That-Which-Had-Been and instantaneously began the savage replication that, if left unchecked, would first weaken, then enfeeble, and ultimately kill.

That-Which-Had-Been reacted at once. *Change is inevitable*, it might have thought (had it been capable of thought), *death is not*. Before the arbovirus could complete the first of the replications, it compressed itself slightly, rotated ninety degrees, then extended itself forward. The motion vaguely resembled the fluid rhythm of an octopus undersea. Its purpose, however, was not self-propulsion, but the presentation to the arbovirus of a biochemical complexity with which the primitive quasi-organism was not equipped to cope. The tactic succeeded; confused and completely unprepared for such an incredibly sophisticated response, the arbovirus fell away in search of easier prey.

This was only the first of the viral attacks That-Which-Had-Been would endure. As it clambered through layer after layer of cell and tissue before it reached its first goal, the outer epidermis, or skin, it would endure thousands more. Its journey would have been considerably simpler and far less adventurous if there had been any substantial bacterial infestation in the thoracic region of Charles Filippini. Bacteria are mobile; it could have hitched a ride. There is no organism, large and small, that does not prefer free transportation when available. But the primitive barricades of skin and muscle that surrounded the neck and shoulders still functioned as they were meant to function in these first few post-mortem moments, and bacterium were few and far between. The processes that would ultimately render the dust that had been Charles Fillippini into common dust again had barely commenced.

So the war of a thousand battles was fought, and refought, and fought again. The eternal viral enemy had the advantage of constant mutation; the principal weapon of That-Which-Had-Been was what, for want of a better word, might be called experience, though there is no word in any human language that would capture or convey the mixture of historical sense, reflexive reaction, and chemical reaction that comprised its behavior. A microbiologist who had the spectacular good fortune to witness its progress

would have immediately wondered whether its behavior was intelligent, and might - or might not - have concluded one way - or the other. The only certainty is that he would have booked his reservation for Stockholm at once.

At last, at last, That-Which-Had-Been emerged from the density of the corpse, onto back of the body's neck, and experienced light for the first time in 83 years. It had not escaped from the travails of its passage unscathed. The molecular content of its biochemistry had been significantly modified; much that was valuable had been lost forever. But it had survived, and it had made good progress. The corpse from which it had fled had been pronounced dead a bare seventeen minutes earlier.

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Approximately 200 feet away, in another part of the hospital, Laura Filippini, a wife for fifty-one years, a widow now for fifteen minutes, reserved her tears for a more private moment as she began the first of a series of telephone calls to her sons and daughter.

"I have to tell you, I feel relieved," she said. "Or perhaps I'm just numb. Anyway, it was very peaceful. As difficult as the last weeks have been."

"Did Dad say anything?" her oldest asked gently. "Anything at all?"

"Nothing that meant anything. The coma never broke. I thought I heard him ask for strawberries." She smiled suddenly. "Almost like *Citizen Kane*. To end on a note so trivial. But he always loved strawberries." Laura Filippini stopped then, conscious that the moment for tears would come too soon if she continued.

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Even as she began the first choked announcement of his death, the essence of her late husband, That-Which-Had-Been-Charles-Filippini, gathered itself for the next stage on its journey, up, into, and beyond the

microbiological food chain.

In the eyes of the large world, the corpse's neck was a moderately clean area of pale epidermal tissue, disfigured by the scab of a small bed sore, dampened now by sweat and exhaustion. But this was as much the domain of the Procraryotes as the were cavities of the body, another one of the innumerable arenas in which the small, ferocious warriors fight their perpetual wars. Here grew odd, irregular clustered globules of staphylococci epidermis, ancient, dread disease carriers, in colonies of terrible, spreading vineyards. Here, too, flourishing now in the aftermath of the collapse of the immune systems, were found the ovoid streptococci, their equally dangerous cousins. Other stranger, creatures prowled through the minuscule forests - rod shaped or circular, some moving with the aid of flagelli, tail-like filaments which, extrapolated to organisms a billion fold, would become arms, legs, and spinal columns.

The viruses that preyed here were bacteriophages, viral bacteria, not the terrible animal viruses of the blood stream. That-Which-Had-Been was far too small itself to be a competitor with the larger beasts of prey; to the fearsome beasts that roamed here, it seemed no more than a tiny, tasty bit of protoplasm. Not a microsecond had passed before That-Which-Had-Been was engulfed by a pseudomonad.

But ingestion held no terrors for it; ingestion was its primary means to its end. Before the assimilative processes of the pseudomonad had had any effect, before they could even begin, That-Which-Had-Been had expanded through the entire unicellular length of the creature, unwrapping and twisting itself through and around the ribbons of deoxyribonucleic acid, expertly mimicking the action of a bacterial virus. The metabolism of the pseudomonad was far too primitive to withstand trauma of this magnitude. With a shuddering, involuntary spasm, with what in the macroscopic world would have been a howling, terrified shriek, it died. Almost immediately, it was devoured by a spirochete - which, almost in the same instant, suffered the same fate as its prey.

Creatures attacked, creatures conquered, creatures died; That-Which-Had-Been killed, endured and waited, with the patience and relentlessness of the unconscious. Little by little, progress was made. An entamoeba hystolica, a gift from a hospital orderly who had not washed his hands in the bathroom quite as carefully as he should have, engulfed the dying bacterium in which That-Which-Had-Been was resident, along with a fair portion of the bacterial colony in which the bacterium had lived. The amoeba was exposed to the same risk as the others, and nearly as defenseless. Yet it did not suffer their same fate. Sensing at once that this was an animal with far more biochemical potential than any of the predecessors, far more useful alive than dead, on this occasion That-Which-Had-Been contented itself with neutrality, and blended unobtrusively into the cytoplasm that lay outside the nucleus of the amoeba.

The presence of the amoeba was a stroke of good luck for That-Which-Had-Been, and its good luck continued. As the ceaselessly hungry beast moved among the flaking areas of dying skin cells, the amoeba found itself pinioned against a tiny speck of dandruff by a spore of trichophyton rubrum, the most common parasitic fungus on the planet, considered more a nuisance than a disease, except to those whose toes itch endlessly in the dark hours of the morning. (No autopsy would be performed upon the corpse of Charles Filippini. Even if one had been, no pathologist, not even the most gifted, would have observed the embryonic case of athlete's foot that had developed between the third and fourth toes of his left foot, the source of the last sensation of his life.) All unknowing, the amoeba had found its way to almost the only spot on the body of interest to the few parasites that lurk in the antiseptic corridors of hospitals

Abruptly, then, the scale of events changed as a monster made its presence felt. Skin, spore, amoeba, and a few bits of blood for good measure, were all vacuumed up into the mighty gullet of a dermatophagoid, a dust mite, prospecting for a few morsels of loose dandruff around the scab of the bed sore. Infinitely larger and more complex than any of the organisms That-Which-Had-Been had so far encountered, it was still microscopic in size,

measuring less than a hundredth of an inch in length. The amoeba died at once in the shock of encounter with the digestive enzymes in the thorax of the mite, as did the spore, as did those viruses that arrived with the blood. That-Which-Had-Been assimilated itself easily into the new environment and made its way through the primitive nervous system of the tiny arachnid towards what little there was of its brain.

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"Is the stiff ready?" demanded the orderly, not entirely coincidentally the one who had contributed the entamoeba hystolica to hospital bed earlier that day.

The head nurse half-closed her eyes. "The stiff, as you call him, Mr. O'Hara, is the late Dr. Charles Filippini," she said primly. "Who, though you may not be aware of it, donated a substantial amount of the money to found this institution. Have you ever looked closely at the portrait in the main lobby? This is the man in it."

"Hmmmph," said the orderly, bending down and peering more closely. "So please show some respect. Just a mite of discretion? His widow is still in the building. His family is going to be here any minute. I even think there's going to be a press announcement." As if to underline the thought, she reached towards the corpse and smoothed its hair, then straightened the collar of the gown under its neck. "Mr. O'Hara, you are going to *have to improve* in these areas." Head erect, she marched out of the room.

"Still a stiff," muttered the orderly under his breath, once she was safely gone.

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Normally, a dust mite would not react to thermal differentials as minute as that between the nurse's hand and the still warm body of Charles Filippini.

Normally, too, it would not possess not the strength to manage the prodigious leap between the body's neck and the nurse's forearm. But to this particular mite, the living warmth of the nurse's body had suddenly become irresistibly attractive. Using all its strength, it hurdled the huge distance between neck and forearm, and died almost instantly from its exertions. That-Which-Had-Been had parted company with its companion of more than eighty years, the late Charles Filippini, forever - without regret, without misgiving, without any sentiment whatsoever.

The dead mite and the head nurse strode down the corridor, the latter completely oblivious to the presence of the former. Her day was almost finished. One of the few privileges of seniority was working hours that had a distant resemblance to a 9-to-5 work day. She stopped to express her condolences to Laura Filippini, then briefly reviewed the charts of the patients on her floor, and the medications scheduled for that evening. Fifteen minutes later she was home, to the one bedroom apartment she shared with a cat, a television set, and the considerable amount of bric-a-brac she had acquired in a lifetime of inconclusive sentimental journeys. In a moment, the starched dress was gone, dinner was heating in the microwave, the television set was on. *Only one, Helen*, she told herself sternly as she poured a glass of wine. *This really is getting out of hand.* Shortly she was engrossed in the evening news, the principal feature of which was an obituary on the man who had died in her hospital an hour and a half before.

"Good kitty," the head nurse clucked in baby talk, as her pet leapt into her lap. "Did you miss your mommy today?" The large tom, no kitten, purred loudly as her hand gently stroked his back. Luxuriously, he stretched himself out across her dress for a few moments - then, idly, he scratched himself behind his left ear. "Poor Billy," the head nurse nodded sympathetically. "We're going to have to put some powder on you. You just love that, don't you?"

However uncomfortable to Billy, to That-Which-Had-Been, which had been biding its time on the nurse's forearm, the various members of *Ctenocephalides canis*, the fleas that played and cavorted amidst and beneath

the hair of her cat were a godsend, its second stroke of major good luck that day. Neither nurse nor cat could serve as a means to its ultimate end. Their immune systems were too well strong, too active for invasion through the epidermis, their neurological systems were too mature, too well developed, (and in the case of the cat, too primitive) to make either a suitable host. But the parasites were a different matter. Misnamed 'dog fleas', they are as fond of cats and head nurses as they are of dogs. As she petted her cat, the nurse suffered a small, but significant number of flea bites, of which she remained as ignorant as she had been of the mite's presence earlier. Along with a tiny quantum of blood and hair, one of the fleas ingested That-Which-Had-Been. With the next stroke of the hand, the flea returned to the cat.

A few hours and a full bottle of wine later, Helen and Billy retired to their respective boudoirs, the first tottering, the second steady on his feet. With a contented grunt, the cat defecated in a familiar corner of its sand box. As it did, the warmth, the odor, became irresistibly attractive to the flea that was host to That-Which-Had-Been. Somehow it disentangled itself from the cat's hair; straining, exhausting all its energy, partly it flew, partly it leapt, from the cat's back onto the sand. As had been the case with the mite, the strain placed simultaneously on its primitive neural system and its musculature was lethal. As it lay dying, That-Which-Had-Been began the exploration of the new environment.

It found itself in the liveliest biological arena yet, a place of sand and offal, in the midst of the carrion eaters and the cat's enterobacteria. But it did not remain there long; the luck that had been with it all day long had not yet run out. In a matter of moments, the sliver of excrement in which it resided was consumed by a member of the species *musca domestica*, the most common of common house flies. There, for the moment, the journey halted - for in the dead of night, no responses existed which even it could exploit. That-Which-Had-Been, for which neither dead of night nor heat of day would exist until its travels were complete, was forced to wait until dawn.

Seven hours later, the head nurse, hovering in the zone between REM

sleep and hazy morning after dreams, was roused to semi-consciousness by the persistent, frantic buzzing of a fly. She could hear it beating against the window pane, over and over as if it could make its way through the glass by sheer force. With a groggy association of the irritating fly with the irritating orderly, the head nurse turned her head into her pillow and willed herself back to sleep.

The luck that had stayed with That-Which-Had-Been the previous day now deserted it entirely. There were gaps in the screens that guarded the windows of the apartment, but the fly did not find any of them. Instead, as heat began to fill the chambers on a cold March morning, it was caught in an air convection and swept into a flue that led straight through the major bearing wall of the structure to the basement. The fly fought frantically to escape the vent, to return to the light, but in vain - the air current was too strong, the sides of the flue too slick. Down, down, down it went, struggling hopelessly. Then, where the vent opened out into the basement, it found itself struggling again - this time, with the sticky threads of the web of a house spider, spun in the remotest corner of the basement. The fly's impulse towards the light had ended in the darkest way imaginable.

The spider moved slowly, waiting until its prey had exhausted itself before the feast began. The moment it had access to the central nervous system of the arachnid, That-Which-Had-Been recognized the turn in its fortunes. This was a creature of obscurity, and its methods of survival, silence and cunning, were in no way suited to the needs of That-Which-Had-Been. Left to its own devices it would die, in the same obscurity in which it had lived, and the ultimate goal would have receded rather than advanced. That could not be.

Shortly after the spider ingested the living juices of the fly, to its primitive amazement it found its two posterior legs jiggling uncontrollably. The entire web shook. A pure, elemental panic swept over the spider; its primary defense from predators lay in hiding, in stillness, and now it knew without knowing that it had become visible, audible. Something had to be done, and yet still its legs moved, jerkily, uncontrollably, and now the web moved in larger and large vibrations.

The spider knew without knowing that something had to be done, and yet it did not know what. It still did not know what when the swift, strong jaws of a shrew crunched web and spider both.

This was success. Access to the to the neuromotor system of a fully developed mammal, however small, should have been the decisive moment for That-Which-Had-Been, the beginning of the end of its long, long journey. Yet the moment of highest triumph was in reality one of greatest disappointment. The shrew was old and moribund, cut off from the shrew colony by age and disease, too feeble for use. Understanding of this sort was beyond That-Which-Had-Been; its biochemical sensitivity was the only sensitivity it possessed. Moreover, to abandon a mammalian host was to abandon the most ancient of its wisdoms - and so it stayed where it was.

Two days later the shrew died, in an isolated burrow it had made out of a tiny defect in the loose mortarboard, far from its own kind, far from anything except random microorganisms. The first stage of the journey of That-Which-Had-Been had ended after eighteen hours.

It was marooned.

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"Ashes to ashes," the minister intoned. "Dust to dust. In the sure and certain hope. . ."

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The raw March evolved into a mild April, then into a surprisingly wet May. June bust out all over, but with unseasonably low temperatures. In a dark corner of a dark basement, generation after generation of cluster flies were born and died. Only a very few found their way into the crevasse where the body of the shrew slowly decayed. None chanced to feed on the portion of the body on which a tiny being stayed and waited. Pollen and mycospores were

blown into the burrow, elements of the perpetual, endless reseeding of the earth that occurs even in the barren wastes of steel and concrete. But flora beings were useless to That-Which-Had-Been; it was a creature of the flesh, its marvelous biochemical reactivity adapted to animal proteins only. So from day to day, week to week, nothing changed. The natural order of existence in the dusty basement had reached a dull, sterile stasis.

Heat returned to the city in the first week of July, and with it the ambition of various *muscae domestica*. On a warm July afternoon, while illegal firecrackers exploded not far away, a housefly wandered by chance into the shrew's burrow and discovered the feast that awaited there. Within the hour the news had spread throughout the basement. One fly no different than any of the others alit on what had been the ventral region of the shrew. But as it fed, all of a sudden it was possessed by a vision, a passion - a need to find light, to be bathed in light, to be one with light. It abandoned the meal at once; maniacally, beserkly, it flew directly towards the dim luminosity at the west end of the basement. After only a few tries, it found one of the innumerable flaws in the mesh of the screen that guarded the cracked windows of the basement. In a moment, it was free.

As lucky as its escape had been, however, this fly was no more free from the watch of predators than any other. One of the innumerable starlings that had nested under the eaves of the apartment building was on temporary leave from her brood when the erratic pattern of the insect's flight brought it to her attention. Instantly, the starling swooped towards the target; an instant later, the fly and its vision had both vanished into the gullet of the bird. Then the bird began the return to its nest.

The stagnation of That-Which-Had-Been had ended; having rejoined the air, either earth or water were not far off, and with either one, the fire of change and renewal. As it happened, the city in which Charles Filippini had died was a seaport. The scent of salt air pervaded it. As it came within a yard or two of its nest, all at once that familiar tang of salt became the most irresistible sensation in the world to the starling. Instead of alighting, the bird

turned and fled in the opposite direction. The outraged squawk of its mate meant nothing to it; even the cries of its offspring, a few, short moments before the most compelling sound on earth, did not alter its course. With urgent, desperate wingbeats, it took flight towards the sea. The knowledge that it was never going to return, even assuming its birdbrain had been able to grasp that enormity, would not have deterred it for an instant

On and on the bird flew, over large boulevards and between towering office buildings, above rusting railroads that once connected trains to ships, past docks and piers and wharves, past the remnants of mudflat and estuary, over the nascent sandbars that defined the river's mouth, out, out, out, into the air above the sea, to the verge of the continental shelf. It flew until it reached the limits of its strength and beyond, until strength and will had entirely vanished, until at last it dropped towards the ocean, more stone than bird, without the slightest understanding of the fate that had overtaken it.

The dying bird struck the surface of the sea. Straightaway the processes of assimilation into the ocean began. The salinity and the mild acidity of seawater attacked the corpse, which immediately commenced to decay. Plankton and neuston, copepoda and protozoa, cladocera and small insects, swarmed over it, eating and gorging. Within a few moments, nektons - adult fish, arrow worms, and other free-swimming creatures - had come to join the jamboree. Within a few moments more, the food chain had become a tangled skein of concentric and cotangential circles, plankivore devoured by piscivore, besieged in turn by bacterioplankton, a teeming cycle of life endlessly raveling and unraveling, a confusion, a chaos, totally unlike than the calm linearity of larger-eats-smaller of children's science books.

The behavior patterns of the various competitors were too diverse, too complex to be readily identified or categorized. And yet even a casual observer of the scene, had there been any such, would have observed some puzzling occurrences. Why, for example, on occasion did a creature that had every reason to flee from a predator swim toward it? And why did some individual specimens that were typically more at home in the open sea avoid the deep,

pelagial waters and keep resolutely to the estuarial zone ?

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A tall, middle-aged man standing on the deck of a two-masted schooner raised a megaphone to his mouth. "You are a murderer!" he shouted to the short, swarthy man standing on the bridge of a fishing trawler. A purse seine net several thousand yards in length trailed behind the craft.

"You are murdering an entire planet!" the middle-aged man shouted again, lacking the insight that the fundamental exosphere of the earth is microbiological, that its passing manifestations in macroscopic forms have the same relation to the underlying reality as the falling leaves of autumn do to the root of the tree.

The captain, also lacking that insight but not lacking the knowledge that he was being insulted, spat into the ocean by way of reply.

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Fishmeal is an essential element to a well-managed poultry farm. An abundant and relatively inexpensive source of protein, a sensible poulterer does well to enrich his feed with it, although not to the extent that it constitutes more than ten percent of the whole - more than that, and the flesh will acquire a vague, fishy flavor unpleasant to the discriminating palate. Not long ago, articles in the trade journals earnestly debated and compared the cost-benefit ratios of herring meal with mackerel based meal, and discussed various methods by which the chicken diet could be unobtrusively supplemented by one type or the other. But in these modern days of area net fishing, the precise constituents of fish meal have long since become indeterminable - and the poulterer need not concern himself any longer about the method by which the meal is integrated into the feed, since that process is handled for him by the manufacturers of the feed boxes in which the contemporary chicken is hatched,

matures, comes to age, and dies.

The captain of the fishing trawler delivered his catch per contract to one such manufacturer. The fish were transported directly from the dock to a processing plant, where, without more formality, they were systematically reduced, flesh, scales, bones, and all, to a thick emulsified oil. From there the oil was transported by rail in huge tanker cars to a different plant, where it would be combined with grain meal, soy oil, and other items into small, square feed boxes. The combined boiling grinding, sifting, and baking process seemed more than adequate to destroy all of the microorganisms to which the ocean fish is host.

All but one.

That-Which-Had-Been traveled with the fish, then the oil, then the feed box, unaffected by any of the conversion processes that the substance had undergone. In the beginning, when its host had been netted, it had had little alternative. But as the feed box had taken form, as the grain and salt been added, its primordial instincts kept it where it was. For the first time since the death of Charles Filippini, it recognized the content of familiar foodstuffs. The end of the journey might possibly be at hand.

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The newly hatched chick pecked away ceaselessly at the sides of the feed box; its foodstuff was absolute delicious and ultimately nourishing. Rapidly it grew larger. In a few weeks, the walls of the box had thinned from the unending feeding. Soon the chicken sensed a vague glimmering outside, and with that sense came a vague notion that there might be more in the universe than the ultimate darkness in which it had spent all its life. It pecked vigorously, even frantically, towards the light.

*

". . . ten thousand pound pickup," the foreman said. "Due Friday. I think Loft C's about ready. Take 'em from there."

"Gotcha," the hired hand said. As he spoke, one of the feed boxes stacked to his right rocked, and jerked, and then fell to the barn floor.

"Well," the foreman laughed, picking up the box, "what *do* we have here?" Both men could hear the chicken inside, scratching and scuffling, far more active than any fowl the hired hand could remember. "You ain't supposed to be along for another two weeks." The box rocked and creaked again.

"Here," the foreman said, giving the other the box. "This good ol' boy wants out that bad, you better take him with you." He laughed again, and walked out towards the second barn. He had a million things to do that day.

"You poor little thing," the hired hand whispered, with genuine sympathy, putting the box under his arm. He had long since eliminated chicken entirely from his own diet.

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Within seconds after ingestion, That-Which-Had-Been detected promising signs. The saliva was pregnant with the signs of hormonal activity; the enzymes were rich with anticipation; the body was preparing itself. Down it went, into the esophagus, merging into the blood stream with the other nutrients, a method of entry that did not arouse the ferocious defenses of the immune system. Now the initial promise became a certainty, and direction and the destination became apparent, inevitable. The oldest and best responses of That-Which-Had-Been began to reassert themselves. It traveled farther and faster, through the intestine and the internal organs, beyond the ovaries and the fallopian tubes, into the uterus, to where its journey's end awaited

The tiny organism that lay there, a bare five weeks in existence, was too unfinished, too new, too innocent, to offer any real defense to the invader. The little being felt the presence of the intruder as it entered. In wild embryonic terror, it somersaulted crazily. In an instant, alarm gave way to

surprise, and then . . .to delight – for this relationship was not merely symbiotic, but the ultimate symbiosis. The oneness that had come to be from that second on seemed always to have existed. The moment passed without notice, no different than any other, and yet this was the hour of the Phoenix, for in that moment That-Which-Had-Been became That-Which-Would-Become.

Four months had passed since the death of Charles Filippini. That period of time was about the average length of transit between identities for That-Which-Had-Been. (The shortest, incurred during a time and in a culture where everyone lived and slept together, was twelve hours. The longest had been approximately 870 years.) That-Which-Had-Been had endured several thousand changes of state. Substantial portions of the thought, memories, capabilities imbedded throughout its long, serpentine, molecular tendrils had been altered or destroyed. Yet withal it had come through. It had survived again.

Now it wove itself slowly and patiently into the developing cortex of the being it had joined, until the task was complete. The task accomplished, they slept, one and together, the one awaiting birth, the other rebirth, these events now simultaneous and indistinguishable.

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The girl put her chicken down. "This shit's too damn greasy," she said. "Gets greasier all the time."

"Ain't grease is done for you, gal," her friend snorted. "Too damn much Robert is what's done for you. You better get wise."

The girl stiffened with worry, did not reply.

*

The child that would emerge from the womb seven-and-one-half

months was destined to lead an interesting life. Christened Jasmin Lee Radford, she would keep the name until her public stature rose to the point where she was forced to change it to the more prosaic (but dignified) Janet. She could not possibly have been brought into the world on more different terms than Charles Filippini had left it; she could not possibly have succeeded at more different or varied goals; and yet beneath these superficialities the two lives would have much in common. Just as he had, she would experience the sensation of *deja vu* frequently, sometimes in forms that were awesome and terrifying. As he had been, she would be haunted at times by memories of past lives and out-of-body experiences for which there were no rational explanations. She, like he, would wonder alternately all her life whether she had been blessed or cursed, before ultimately deciding (as he had) that she had been blessed and blessed richly.

Observers attempted from time to time to account for the source of abilities that on occasion seemed to border on the prodigious, that had arisen in the bleakest possible urban environment and from a genetic background apparently almost as barren. She always cooperated as best she could with investigations into these mysteries, though none came remotely close to providing an explanation. She was curious herself. She could have done with an explanation herself.

The mystery that caused Janet Radford the greatest puzzlement, however, remained a private matter all her life. It seemed too trivial, and at the same time too intimate, even vaguely embarrassing, to mention to anyone, let alone a trained investigator. Until the day she died, she always wondered why the richest of her gifts should in some mysterious way be inextricably linked at the core of her being with a keen, almost unnatural, delight in the taste of fresh, red, ripe strawberries.

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