

ASHES FROM APPLE SEEDS

The scientific discovery of the soul was a revolution.

That's what I was told the day I was born. Well, not '*born*' say the scientists, 're-embodied' or 'reincorporated'. Not '*born*' say the advocates, 'sown' or 'delivered'. Not '*born*' say the sceptics, 're-potted' or 'snatched'. Is there a difference? I'm actually asking; I don't remember anything from before, not my life nor the lapse between my 'reaping' and 'sowing'. Enough people ask after it.

"What are you thinking about?" Rushope is asking.

He asks that question a lot. Is that an inquisitive look he's giving me, or a concerned one? I can never tell.

Obviously what I'm thinking about is this phantasmal conversation I'm having with you. This silent monologue that I can conjure in my head, give voice, play any series of sounds and pictures from memory and imagination alike. This mental diary I'm writing for you, my fictive friend. Just what on Earth *is* it?

"I'm thinking about you," I offer.

That sometimes satisfies Rushope. He smiles, then his facial muscles spring back into their former blankness. Did the line work?

"In what way?" he asks.

"I don't know. I just find myself thinking about you sometimes. I don't think I do it purposefully."

That part is true. Rushope does appear in my thoughts without invite. I don't know why. It's as inexplicable as this inaudible voice I now speak to you with.

Light pulses lazily over his body as we drive beneath the chain of streetlights. My eyes pull to the fake-leather upholstery of the car seats. Its colour is somewhere between a lemon and a piece of paper. I feel an intangible sensation that is difficult to describe. It makes me desire more of it. It makes me perceive my environment more favourably. Pleasure, I think it's called. Or maybe happiness? Either way, I don't know why it's happening, but my body reacts with laughter before I've told it what to do.

Rushope smiles again. "What's funny?"

"This colour. You don't find it funny too?"

He shakes his head. His smile stays on his face like pins have been poked into it.

"You always hated that colour," he informs me.

"You mean before the accident? You said you didn't have this car then."

"I didn't. But you were always complaining about the wallpaper in the kitchen." His eyes wander somewhere else for a moment, somewhere other than the road they're aimed at.

We are parking outside a house. It has a driveway, a lawn, I think they call that feature there a 'bay window'. It sits squeezed into a row of identical dwellings like an encyclopaedia on a library shelf. My gaze drifts to it and remains there, as does Rushope's. He spends several seconds in silence, his finger rapping the steering wheel, his teeth masticating his bottom lip. Finally, he throws open the car door and steps out.

"Wait here," he commands.

He's walking up the drive. Now he's ringing the doorbell. A woman in a white blouse answers and the two have an inaudible conversation. The woman looks surprised.

E.D. Lusty

She is shaking her head a lot as she talks. I am feeling the inert sense that she's not where she's supposed to be. Is that an itch? No, it's deeper than that, less physical.

They have finished conversing. The woman shuts the door and Rushope returns to the car.

“What is this place?” I ask, still staring at the house.

“Doesn't matter,” Rushope replies, climbing into the driver's seat, “we're not staying.”

“Do we have to go?”

“Yes.”

We drive out of the street and I fix my stare to the upholstery once more. Around ten minutes pass before Rushope pulls the car into a space before a restaurant. His eyes flit between the restaurant and me.

“Anything stirring?” he asks slowly.

“Did I come here when I was alive?”

His eyes hone onto my eyes. His hand lassoes my hand, oscillating slightly. What could that mean? Excitement? Tenderness? Anxiety? Anger?

“This is where I proposed.” The muscles either side of his smile look like they're load-bearing a building. He's feeling something behind that smile. I can't tell what that something is. Come to think of it, what am *I* feeling? Pleasure left by the memory of the lemony-papery colour. Other than that...?

Nothing.

We enter the restaurant, are shown briskly to our seats and sit. A waiter appears with two menus, one of which is handed to Rushope, the other thrust at me, then retracted slightly as its bearer catches sight of my features.

“Oh,” murmurs the waiter. “I’m sorry, I didn’t see--“

“We’ll take both menus, please,” Rushope says smoothly, genially, stiffly.

“But, sir, I--“

“We’ll take both menus.”

The waiter gives me the menu and mutters the words “Bloody snatcher” as he leaves. I make a show of perusing the menu’s contents. Of course, I’m not really reading it, this assemblage of words that apparently fibrillates something known as an ‘appetite’. Neither am I drinking this glass of wine Rushope has insisted on pouring me. Something brings me to fondle it though, swirl the yellowy liquid, and I feel the tiny pistons in my rubber cheeks pull my lips taught without my say-so.

“Enjoying that?” Rushope asks.

“Yes. Do you know why?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

Do you? Perhaps it’s that the colour reminds me of... What does it remind me of?
It’s close to the car seat, but that’s not it.

“Is sleep the same as death?” I ask.

“No, not at all,” Rushope replies, twisting his eyebrows into asymmetry.

“How so?”

“You wake up from sleep.”

E.D. Lusty

“I woke up from death, didn’t I?”

“Yes.” Something’s happened to his face. Certain arrangements are lower than they just were.

“Is it dreams?” Something has returned to me. Something I forgot. Something I never knew. “Is that the difference?”

Rushope jerkily aborts a large sip from his glass and looks at me, a crease having appeared between his brows. “What would you know about dreams?”

“When sleeping I see this colour.” I gaze into my wine as I swirl it. “There are two planes of it... I think they’re walls. And they meet. A corner, I think. It’s all I see in the dream. I think I’m viewing it up-close.”

“Have you had this dream often?”

“Yes.” How did I forget? It’s so strange, I’m so used to my memories being crisp, vivid, unquestionable. I can’t quite... I don’t understand.

“This could mean something!” Rushope cries, he’s gripping the table hard.

I don’t understand! I want to understand but I can’t understand. What is this heat I feel but don’t feel? I think it might be frustration. I want this topic to end. I’m changing the subject.

“Where is my old body?”

“Hang on!” Rushope is speaking rapidly, “we need to talk ab--“

“I don’t want to talk about that anymore. Where is my old body?”

He leans back. I can hear his breathing from here, as well as the staccato thud of his finger on the table top.

“Why do you want to talk about *that*?” he asks.

E.D. Lusty

“Would you not want to?”

Rushope’s lips change shape, gathering into a hard, wrinkled knot. “It was... cremated.”

“Cremated?”

“Burned. Reduced to ash. Placed in an urn and put on the mantelpiece,” he locks his eyes on mine, “next to the more important part of you, the part quantum physics saved until other scientific fields created a substitute body.”

“We don’t have a mantelpiece.”

“Not anymore. I moved house after you... The house we used to live in was too big, too empty, too painful.”

“I want to see it.” I feel the deep heat again. It’s not the grating heat of frustration this time, this heat is warm not hot. It’s somehow pleasant.

“It has other people living in it now. Besides, you don’t remember anything, *right?*”

A stressed concluding word. Was that irritation?

“Yes, right.” A question sparks in my mind. “So if all my memories are new, then what do you love about me?”

“I love *you*, not your memories.”

“Why?”

“It’s unexplainable.”

“Should I love you?”

“No... I mean... yes--”

“I don’t know what love feels like.”

“Which means you probably haven’t felt it yet.”

“Will I love you again?”

“I hope so.”

“Is that why you delivered me?”

“Yes, wait... no.”

“Why did you bring me back?”

“Let’s stop this.”

“Why am I back?”

“Stop!”

“Why!”

Something yields with a crisp, alto snap in my hand. I look down as the stem of my wine glass dances and keels over, jagged leaves pluming from its head. The bulb has disappeared into my enclosed fist. A sensation explodes in my hand, one that I jarringly, forcefully and vehemently dislike. I know it’s pain, I’ve felt it before. But not like this. Strange noises charge from my throat as I tumble off my chair, clutching my hand. Rushope shoots from his seat, curls one gentle arm around me while the other carefully takes my wounded limb. He makes a continuous, low ‘*sh*’ sound for an unknown reason and implores me to open my fist. More pain happens when I do, and a wine-soaked palm studded with glass shards is unveiled.

A bespectacled woman at another table dabs her mouth with a serviette, places the serviette on the table, rises, strolls over to where I lay, and assures the recently-arrived waiter that she has the situation in hand.

“Are you a doctor?” Rushope asks her.

The woman grins. “Some like to call me that, but really I’m an engineer. I can help with that.”

Ingratiated, Rushope helps me back into a chair.

“How old?” the woman asks.

“Forty-two when... it happened,” Rushope answers.

“Then I was gone for five years,” I elaborate.

“How long since reincorporation, I mean,” the engineer clarifies.

“Oh, four years.”

“Ah, one of the older ones then.” She begins plucking shards from my hand.

“Why does it hurt?” I ask her.

“Because sharp things will pierce you.”

“Sharp,” I echo. “Pierce.”

“Quite the controversial debate was that,” the engineer monologues, producing a palm-sized instrument from her suit pocket. “Should they have to feel pain?”, ‘Should having blood be mandatory?’, ‘Should they sleep?’ The courts decided yes, no and yes, respectively, as I’m sure you recall.” She looks up at Rushope and winks through her spectacles. “I see you’ve spared yourself a bleeder.” She pulls out the last of the glass and pokes the nozzle of the instrument into the shredded flaps of rubber that is now my palm. It produces a gel, roughly my ‘skin’ colour, which seals the shreds together.

“The courts,” Rushope states with a sharply emphatic ‘c’.

“All for that true human experience, supposedly.” The engineer shrugs. “We can make the outside look as human as possible -- though still disquietingly uncanny if you ask me -- but what’s *inside* is a whole other nut to crack.”

“What about dreams?” Rushope asks cautiously.

The engineer shakes her head. “No dreams, that’s one of the tougher nuts. That question of where the brain ends and the soul starts sure had a sticky, albeit anticlimactic answer, don’t you think?”

Rushope isn’t answering.

“What do *you* think?” I posed.

“I think what I learned in my robotics degree. I think memories turned out to be based solely-” she chuckles, “*solely* in the brain, the brain that rots away like all flesh when we die. The physicists found markers confirming the soul’s existence, and differentiating one from another: breakthrough number one. They harnessed those souls, stored them: breakthrough number two. Roboticists made a house for them, with cameras for eyes, microphones for ears, the bare bones of a CPU, and alakazam! *Something* moved them, *inhabited* them. Without aid. Breakthrough number three. But the subjects didn’t *remember* anything, did they? Neither could they make new memories, systems had to be built in for that. They were like newborns learning how to use a body again, to speak again, to relate again. Same with emotions, we had to programme them in too. As you can see; pain reactions, reflexes, facial recognition, etcetera: all easy to replicate. But that more abstract stuff: joy, pleasure, fear, anger, *love*... Well I’m sure you’ve seen them emerge in peculiar ways. Nothing we can do to control that. Really all that we’re left with is--” She stops abruptly and her eyes flick momentarily to Rushope. Her throat clears. “I apologise.”

Rushope’s face is pinker than previously. He says, “The soul is the crucial part.”

The engineer nods. “The soul is the kernel, the *seed*. But maybe we shouldn’t have been surprised when ash trees sprouted from the apple seeds we sowed. It’s all uncharted waters.”

The last shred of my palm is mended and all that remains is a knotty network of dried sealant resembling the rest of my hand. The pain remains, though diminished.

“*Like a newborn?*” I say.

The engineer smiles at me, but her eyes don’t wrinkle behind her spectacles.

“Enjoy your evening,” she says, and returns to her table.

“Sharp,” I murmur, studying my scar tissue. “Pierce. Hurt.”

“If I had it my way, you wouldn’t feel that pain,” announces Rushope. Something else I don’t want to talk about.

“I want to see our house.”

Rushope’s elbows are on the table, his face enveloped in both palms. “This again?”

“Can you show it to me? Now?”

He releases his face. “Fine.”

We leave the restaurant, get in the car, and drive away once more. I feel the warm pleasure as I observe the hue of the upholstery. The rumbling of the road through the seat’s padding is favourable too. Perhaps you’re assuming a sexual nature? Maybe it is, I wouldn’t know, but I doubt it. The engineers haven’t admitted to figuring that out yet. But my pleasure isn’t just in the rumblings or the nice colour this time. I’m anticipant.

“Rushope, you don’t love me,” I find myself declaring.

“Of course I do.”

“But how? My memories are different.”

“Yes.”

“And my emotional reactions and attachments are different.”

“Yes...” He repeats the word more weakly.

“And my attitudes and values are different.”

Rushope doesn't answer.

“So what exactly is left?”

“Identity markers were discovered--”

“That's all a human is then? Numbers in a spreadsheet?”

Silence.

Then Rushope says, “You think about me, you said it.”

“I see and interact with you the most, isn't it natural that I think about you?” I understand that's an odd word to use.

He is parking the car. We get out, walk up a driveway and ring the doorbell of a house. I recognise it from earlier: driveway, lawn, bay window. An encyclopaedia in a library. The woman in a white blouse answers again.

“Yes?” she greets, immediately looking uncomfortable upon seeing me.

“Sorry to bother you again,” says Rushope. “I was wondering if we could just quickly take a look at the old place? I think it's very important for--”

“Look,” the woman responds awkwardly, “I told you before, I'm not comfortable with it. I'm very sorry.”

“I want to come inside,” I'm asserting.

“I'm sorry,” she says again, “this isn't a good time.”

E.D. Lusty

Over her shoulder I can see the interior, the kitchen beyond the hallway. White bannister. Ceramic sink. Sliding windows. Wooden knife-block. *Sky-blue wallpaper*. It's all wrong. It's all wrong.

"Please let me in," I entreat, louder this time.

"Stop," Rushope orders me sharply. He seems to realise himself. "Sorry to bother you, ma'am," he says to the woman, the resident, the *squatter*. "This was a mistake. I'm... I'm sorry." He steers me back to the car.

We reach the car, but I am compelled by something. Something hotter than my earlier frustration haunts me, something that puts me in fierce opposition to the woman, something that is at once unpleasant, yet reveals its own path back to pleasure: a release.

I shake Rushope off and run back to the doorway. I ring the bell until the door opens. The woman in a white blouse answers again.

"Look, I told you--"

"Let me in!"

I slam into the woman and bowl into the hallway that's wrong.

"Get back here!" I hear Rushope yell.

The resident grabs at my wrist. I pull free and run into the kitchen that's wrong. She follows me in, loudly issuing commands and threats.

Pierce.

"Get out!" I think that's me yelling. This squatter shouldn't be here. This is our house! Rushope said! This is *my* house!

E.D. Lusty

This ghostly heat in me seems to be doing all the driving. The squatter won't let me have what is mine. The path back to pleasure is plain. I know what I can do, what I *must* do, what I *want* to do.

Sharp. Pierce.

“Get out! Get out! Get out!”

The wallpaper is wrong! Everything is wrong! The ceramic sink is wrong! The sliding doors are wrong! The full knife-set is wrong, all gathered in their wooden block like a family.

Sharp. Pierce. Hurt.

What is ‘family’? Now the family of knives is missing a loved-one. I can put it back, but will it be the same?

The woman's clamorous words are aborted, replaced with a piercing sound she's making with her voice.

Pierce. Sharp.

“Stop!”

“Get out!”

Is family something that can be pieced back together like the shards of a shattered vase? Or will the glue be obvious, the shards laughably crooked?

“No!”

“Get out!”

“Wait!”

Pierce. Sharp. Hurt.

E.D. Lusty

The missing loved-one of the family in the wooden block is ‘re-embodied’, ‘delivered’, ‘repotted’. I house it into a body, into a white blouse.

Hurt. The high-pitched vocal fades. The white blouse blooms into a red flower. The flower wilts. Will it be the same flower once it’s replanted? Once the seed is sown?

Why are they making so much noise? Loud voices, long moans, incoherent commands and statements. They know it’s not permanent. Nothing is. They can bring anything back. Sleep, death and whatever the difference is.

This is my home.

This is my kitchen, wrong though it may be.

This is my corner. Yes, it’s not between lemons and paper, but it’s my corner. I smooth my hand over the wrong sky-blue, painting a trail of red. This is my corner. I like it here. I belong here. They can’t have it.

Something has ensnared me from behind, wrapping me, embracing me. I prepare to shake it off but discover it’s Rushope. He’s crying into my back. Happiness? Sadness? He’s not trying to move me from my corner, my corner in the house where I belong.

“Your dream,” he’s repeating, voice muffled in my back.

My dream. This voice in my head. This thing puppetting this synthetic corpse. This thing that only I know for sure is peering out of this mechanical husk. Just what on Earth is it?

It doesn’t matter.

It doesn’t matter.

I am where I belong.

