

*The Back-up*  
SCC Overton

THE TRAM RAN ALONGSIDE the old canal towards the outskirts of the city, but though he had lived here his entire life, Caspian Turin had no memory of it whatsoever. The buildings, the landmarks, the parks and gardens, the stations and stops—none of them registered for him at all. He was aware that he *ought* to recognise the city, that his former life had been centred here, but the city, like his former life, was all the more alien and unfamiliar for these assurances. He felt less like a tourist and more like a trespasser. The healthcare assistant gave him a reassuring pat on the knee. Turin had found she was strangely perceptive of his moods.

She said: 'It'll all come back soon. I've heard they're very good.'

Turin gazed out of the window and watched the backs of the old brick houses as the tram rumbled past them. She was talking about Kelvin Abner Storage Incorporated, the company that had scanned and stored his memory and was about to give him access to it. She was enthusiastic about it, but Turin was quiet, keeping his thoughts to himself. Quietness was a form of self-defence in this unfamiliar world where he was obliged to trust everyone he met and everything they said. Not that he'd met many people except a few doctors at the hospital and—of course—Moirá Mairead, the healthcare assistant.

She had been there from the start: a nurse at the hospital, and then his personal live-in healthcare assistant, funded by his insurance company—probably a real windfall for someone in her position. She was good at her job, but she was incorrect about what Kelvin Abner Storage Incorporated would do for him: his memory would never 'come back'. The stored data could not be implanted, it could only be

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viewed like a home movie. He'd read as much in the small print of his insurance documentation; he would be getting a full induction this afternoon.

After the tram ride and a short walk, Turin and the healthcare assistant were at the door of Kelvin Abner Storage Incorporated. The company was housed in a former television studio and its small reception area belied the size of the huge iron and brick premises. Turin sat down on a quasi-antique leather sofa and looked up at a canvas printed photograph of Kelvin Abner himself, a grey-haired man who gazed into the middle distance. A secretary entered and introduced him to a young, hunched man with waxy brown hair.

He said: 'I'm Bryce, Bryce Hartley. I'll be your operator. Come with me.'

Turin nodded and shook the man's hand, and then turned to tell the healthcare assistant to wait where she was.

She said: 'I'll wait here.'

Turin followed the operator.

They entered another very small, dimly lit and rather warm room. Inside was a large leather office chair and a mahogany bureau, both quite plain and unobtrusive. The operator spoke softly, as the ambience seemed to demand.

He said: 'There's a leaflet that gives all the details, but I'll explain things to you quickly now. Most of this building is taken up by hard drives—well, actually, most of it is taken up by *coolers* for the hard drives.'

He paused to smile. Turin kept quiet. When the operator continued, he sounded like he was reciting.

'Each person's memory takes up twenty-one terabytes of space. It's the same for everyone because we scan the physical architecture of the brain, not memories themselves, and every adult brain is roughly the same size. It's like taking a satellite photograph of a city, a super-detailed photograph. Recording each memory would be something like writing out the phone book, even if that were possible.'

‘Now, such an enormous amount of data isn’t much use unless you can interpret it and there’s only one computer in the world powerful enough to do so: the human brain!’

The operator tapped his forehead with an unchewed biro.

‘Now, we can link you up to our hard drives, but you’ll need to train your brain to make access.’

He turned aside to pick up two hygienically wrapped electrode pads from the bureau. Their wires disappeared into the wall behind the leather chair. Turin wondered if his induction had concluded, so he ventured a short question.

‘How?’

The operator turned back. He hadn’t finished. He said: ‘It’s called “threshold consciousness”. You allow yourself to drift off, but not fall asleep completely. It’s like . . .’

He paused to think, absently tapping the electrode pads against his chin, the plastic wrapping crackling slightly.

‘It’s like those dreams in the morning, when you know you’re dreaming and you can control them a little bit, or when you’re aware that you’re dreaming and you try to stay asleep and enjoy it.’

He stopped reflecting and continued his recitation.

‘You’ll be linked up via signal amplifiers, so it will be easier to make access than you may think. The tricky part is sustaining the threshold consciousness and maintaining access for longer. But you’ll get used to it. Your access sessions are covered pretty much indefinitely, as I remember.’

Turin felt uncertain, but he remained quiet.

‘Just lay back, relax, and try to doze a little bit. You’ll know what it is when it happens.’

The operator gestured towards the office chair. Turin sat down. The operator attached the electrode pads and left the small room.

After the operator had left, Turin waited for what seemed like an hour or two, desperately trying to relax and drift off, but his mind was alive with thoughts and anxieties and images and hopes. He thought of the healthcare assistant sitting in the lobby and wondered if she was

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getting bored. He thought about the operator and wondered if he was watching, analysing his vital signs, and if he was also getting bored, or if he was amused at how Turin was so obviously and self-consciously awake.

Then, suddenly and briefly Turin saw—no, he *experienced* a small picnic area and some people he knew and a mountain scene and some food he liked . . . and then he jerked back into full consciousness.

He shook his head a few times as if to ascertain he was really awake. The feeling had been profoundly strange, like the feeling of *déjà vu*, but intense and focused rather than random and incidental. The voice of the operator came softly through a hidden speaker, congratulating Turin on his first access—just over two seconds' worth and very pure. Turin was allowed to try one more time, if he felt up to it. He agreed to try, but after another long period of restlessness he didn't feel at all sleepy and decided to give up.

The operator re-entered the room and detached the pads.

He asked: 'Did you see something interesting?'

Turin nodded slowly, but didn't answer.

'It's a strange feeling, apparently. But you'll get used to it, as I said.'

Turin kept quiet.

The operator asked: 'Any questions?'

Turin replied: 'Did you scan my memory in, in the first place?'

The operator shook his head, a little sadly.

He said: 'No, it wasn't me. That's done in another part of the building. The technology's a bit different, so it's a different department.'

Turin nodded. The operator opened the door. Turin left.

During the next few weeks, Turin returned to Kelvin Abner daily. He found that by reducing his night-time sleep by about an hour he was sufficiently tired in the afternoon to drift off quickly into threshold consciousness. He gradually learnt to resist full sleep as well as the hypnic jerks that would awaken him, and therefore he could maintain access for longer and longer.

As the operator had explained, memories were accessed completely randomly. Associations between memories seemed to be retained, such as between a party and the music that was playing at the time, but there was absolutely no categorisation. This meant that these first few weeks for Turin were in equal measures tantalising and frustrating. Sometimes he would witness people or places that must have been hugely significant in his former life, but just as often he would experience bus journeys, periods of sickness, TV shows and telephone numbers.

Perhaps what was the most frustrating, though, was the lack of emotional connection to these memories. The feeling of access was akin to dreaming, but the experiences themselves lacked the personal psychological roots of dreams. If dreams were surreal manifestations of personal psyche, then these access experiences were the polar opposite: they were banal and entirely plausible, and yet it seemed *impossible* that they could have ever been products of his own mind. Turin described the feeling to the healthcare assistant as something like getting somebody else's holiday photos back from the developers, but finding these people had—coincidentally—been to the same destination and had stayed in the same hotel and gone on the same excursions. She said she understood, but Turin knew that she couldn't possibly understand. She seemed to think that accessing his former mind would somehow restore him to his former self, as if that person were any more true or valid than the current one. She had known Turin before his hospitalisation, she said, so he guessed it was natural for her to regard the old Turin as the default, even though that person was a stranger to himself.

After a few more weeks, Bryce Hartley, the operator at Kelvin Abner, suggested that Turin try bringing some personal possessions with him in order to contextualise the experiences and perhaps draw out some memories that could only be accessed indirectly through associations of locations and objects. The healthcare assistant brought some boxes from storage in another part of the city and Turin spent his evenings delving into these artefacts, trying to guess which ones might be the most stimulating. Initially, he chose photographs, espe-

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cially those where he was included in the frame because he could be sure that he had definitely been in that place at that time. There weren't many; clearly he had preferred to be the photographer, rather than the photographed. Still, the rare pictures with him as the subject took on a special significance for Turin. He felt a certain affinity with the anonymous picture-taker, the voyeur. With photographs of him living his former life, he was able to look at himself with distance and detachment. It visually manifested the voyeurism he felt psychologically. Turin found, however, that these photos did little to stimulate meaningful access. Later, he chose objects such as teacups and paperbacks and old jeans on the basis that these items, while more generic, might give him a stronger idea of who he was, rather than where he had been.

It was during this later period that he first saw the girl in the restaurant.

She was unremarkable in almost every way but Turin was sure that he had loved her and that he might love her still. His emotional recoil at first seeing her was such that he jerked awake and could not reach threshold consciousness again during that session. He left and asked the healthcare assistant to take him home. She asked why he was so anxious. He didn't answer, but later instructed her to bring more boxes of his personal artefacts, especially photos. He tried hard to retain the image of the girl in the restaurant, but it was almost impossible. She was, after all, a memory of a memory and his experience of her had been more emotional than visual. Back at home he began searching through his old photographs, trying to find someone that matched this vague emotional memory.

He failed. She was not present in any photographs, nor was there evidence of any restaurant of any particular significance. Turin was only slightly disheartened, however. There were many gaps in the artefacts that had survived from his former life—there was no evidence of the healthcare assistant, for example, although she claimed to have known him for many years before his hospitalisation. Possibly the girl in the restaurant constituted another gap. But the restaurant, and the

girl, might still be there, and Turin decided to explore the external city for an answer to this strange, internal riddle.

For several weeks, then, he tramped the streets of the city before and after his access sessions at Kelvin Abner, hunting for the girl in the restaurant. He experienced an unexpected feeling of liberation during these walks which he began to attribute to a sense of independence from his former self. After all, his former self was a stranger to him, and yet he had been living in this man's apartment and watching this man's memories, cared for by this man's prudent insurance policies. Nobody owned the city, and walking around it with his own purpose gave Turin immense satisfaction. The city itself was in no way special. It was formerly a minor trading port and many of its vast factory buildings had been reassigned as apartment blocks or shopping malls, or simply abandoned. Unlike many other post-industrial cities in this part of the world it was not significant or desirable enough for major redevelopment, so it retained most of the trappings of its former status: the tramlines and dormitories for factory workers, the canal network, the harbourfront, and the enormous steel cranes and conveyors leading to vast warehouses built of sooty brick and corrugated iron. The hoardings of supermarkets, luxury apartments and community centres disappeared from view at a certain distance and Turin felt that at any moment the city would rumble back into life and reassert its true nature.

Turin was mostly interested in the restaurants, where he was certain he would find the girl in his memory. The restaurant aspect he was sure of; it was a part of the emotional memory, as much a part of it as the girl's physical appearance or the way she spoke. He wasn't able to articulate how she looked, or what the restaurant looked like, so he couldn't ask anybody if they knew her from a description, but he felt certain that he would know her when he saw her. All that remained was to trawl the hundreds of restaurants spread throughout the city.

He found her, working in a fashionable 'hidden' restaurant in a factory block that backed onto the east side of the canal. He opened the door and gasped in profound recognition.

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She said: 'We're closed until six and then you need a reservation.'

Turin advanced, searching her with his eyes and face.

He said: 'Don't you recognise me? Don't you remember me?'

She paused as if she did, but then her expression changed.

She said: 'No, I don't. I don't know you, so please leave.'

Turin was shocked. He said: 'No, you have to help me. I lost my memory and. . . .'

She interrupted: 'No, it's not me you're looking for. It's someone else.'

There were tears in her eyes. Turin stood, hands spread, completely unprepared. Some of the restaurant staff were coming to see what was happening.

Turin said: 'I don't want anything. I just need to know about you. About us.'

She said: 'There never was an "us"!'

A man in kitchen whites approached but she waved him away.

She said, quietly: 'Okay, you can meet me here tomorrow, at four. I'll talk to you, but not alone. I'll have someone with me.'

Turin nodded.

She said: 'Now go.'

Turin went.

Back at his former apartment and back under the care of Moira Mairead, Turin was exhausted. With nothing else to occupy him he had become involved in this investigation of his past life to an almost obsessive extent. He had stopped talking to the healthcare assistant almost completely and had abandoned his physio- and psycho-therapy sessions with her. He had vaguely expected her to leave but was unfazed that she hadn't. Turin spent most evenings deep in thought, trying to piece together the memories accessed at Kelvin Abner and the photographs and other artefacts from the boxes.

Turin had been a freelance accountant with a number of small client companies, mostly in the creative industry—architectural firms, design firms—and a few self-employed designers and artists to whom he had given financial advice at a special rate. He'd been relatively comfortable

as his canal-side apartment proved: it was a former warehouse, converted into small, but modern apartments for city professionals. The picture was consistent and almost complete. The only missing part of the picture was the girl in the restaurant. It seemed like they had recently split up, given her reaction that day, and yet there were no other pictures or artefacts that seemed to relate to her. Perhaps it had been a bad break-up and he had destroyed anything that reminded him of her.

He tried to keep in mind that the picture that was being constructed was uniquely subjective: a product of the randomness of the memory access procedure and whatever artefacts happened to have been preserved from his former life. The artefacts had an additional level of subjectivity, as the healthcare assistant had been using her discretion when bringing items and boxes to him—perhaps there were items she had overlooked or deemed too insignificant to bring to him. He was, in that sense, very much at her mercy.

The next day Turin had an appointment at Kelvin Abner, but he failed to make access during the entire three hours he was there. At four sharp he met Kaye Clover, the girl from the restaurant. As she had said, she had a friend with her—a fat man with dark skin who followed at a distance. She was curt and formal when introducing herself and led the way to an empty floor in the factory building: a former assembly unit judging from the rows of large reinforced tables still arranged in parallel lines.

They sat down and Kaye started to explain. She explained that they really hadn't met before and that Turin was not the first person to seek her out and claim a past life with her.

She said: 'The first one was a real lost soul. He had seen me whilst accessing his stored memories and had no one else to go to—no family, no real friends. I lost contact with him. I don't think he survived the rehabilitation process.'

She sighed. Turin saw compassion in her face and he liked it a lot, even though she was about to explain why he was definitely a stranger, and also probably mad.

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She continued: 'The second one didn't take it so well. He tried to beat me up. I thought I was going to die. Since then I've been more careful.'

The fat man glanced up from the rusty bolt he was nudging around the table top. Turin looked away, and then back at Kaye.

'The most recent one was two months ago. He had travelled from the other side of the world to find me. He had spent over a year finding out about me through access. He had nearly bankrupted himself.'

Turin asked: 'How many have there been?'

Kaye replied: 'More than those three.'

'Why is it always you?'

'I don't know. I haven't been able to get anyone to speak to me. I suspect it's some kind of glitch in the system that's putting a memory of me into everyone's heads.' She paused to smile shyly. 'I don't know why it's me. I've never offended a computer nerd . . . or anyone in insurance.'

Turin smiled too. He didn't feel too bad that this girl wasn't really the love of his life. He felt relaxed around her, not uptight like he was around the healthcare assistant. He liked Kaye. Kaye Clover. Or, at least, he thought he did. Perhaps this feeling was part of the rogue memory—perhaps all these poor amnesiasts that had sought her out had felt like that. It was hard to be sure of anything once the idea of false memories had been introduced.

She continued: 'So, I really can't help you. I'm not a client of this company so no one will hear me out. I'm not a counsellor, so I can't help you in that way either. I'm just "the girl in the restaurant".'

She got up to leave. 'Good-bye, Caspian. Good luck.'

Turin stood up and walked to the vast shuttered doors leading to the lift lobby. It was hard to be sure of anything now, and yet . . . and yet . . . Something was straining to coalesce in his mind. There was something undeniably different about this girl, and about his memory of her.

Turin suddenly turned and said: 'Wait, maybe *I* can help *you*.'

She smiled. She had heard this before.

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He continued: 'No, really. I'm not another nut. I work with companies . . . or I used to . . . I mean, I have credentials that might get you some answers.'

She paused, considering this.

She said: 'Well, you know where you can find me.'

Then she left.

Turin returned to Kelvin Abner. By the time he got there it was almost six in the evening. He had anticipated having to argue with the receptionist to meet with his operator, Bryce Hartley, but when Turin arrived the man was waiting for the tram back into town and came over of his own accord to greet him.

He said: 'Hi Caspian, what are you up to?'

He had a certain note of condescension in his voice, but Turin let it go.

'Hi, Bryce. Look, are you busy this evening? I've got a few questions about the access procedure.'

'Ah, well, I can't really say much outside of work, y'know. And besides I can't really tell you anything you don't already know.'

Turin had anticipated this too.

'No trade secrets!' Turin said. 'Just . . . the philosophy of it. I know you're not just a console monkey. And I could use some company. I don't have anyone to talk to about this. Or anything, really.' Turin smiled. 'The beers are on me.'

Hartley glanced back in the direction of Kelvin Abner and then nodded.

They attended a bar on the roof of the old central hospital. The entire roof had been enclosed in a tempered glass box and the old helipad now formed the service area. The landing lights provided warm ambient light and the slowly revolving blades of the restored helicopter above the bar gently circulated the air. It was an expensive place to drink, according to Hartley, but the ambience was good and the view was awe-inspiring. From their table, the most ancient of topographical features were perceptible through the concrete façade of the former

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industrial city: the meandering streets around the canals marked the original paths of rivers, the rooftops of the clusters of high-rise buildings echoed the hills that had long since been levelled, and the original coastline was somehow perceptible in the change in architecture where the reclaimed land began, extending the harbour. Turin imagined it had once been a quite remarkable natural port and possibly quite beautiful.

Bryce Hartley was very similar to Caspian Turin, or rather the former Caspian Turin. He was well-educated and lived comfortably in a three-floor apartment in a converted grain silo, a few miles down the canal from Turin. They talked generally for a while, Turin doing his best to give personal information and anecdotes that he really didn't feel ownership of in any way. He eventually broached the topic of his real interest:

'Bryce, is it possible for someone else's memories to get mixed up with mine?'

Bryce frowned, his familiarity disappearing instantly as he remembered why he was being treated to expensive beer, but he answered amiably.

'Caspian, it's not a perfect system by any means. And it's a strange and alienating process to go through. In fact, what most people gain from the experience of memory access is not any kind of assimilation of the memories or adoption of the former way of life. They use access as a means to start a new life in new circumstances; to treat their former life as completely separate, like my life is from yours. In many ways, the actual content of the memory that we store is irrelevant: virtually everyone rejects it and starts afresh. I could have fed you anybody's memory and you wouldn't be able to tell the difference, in theory, and you'd be just as willing and able to begin your new life, as it seems you already have.'

'But then my artefacts wouldn't match.'

'True, they wouldn't. This is more a principle than something we would ever consider doing. Memory storage is the easy and cheap part of what we do, so there would be no benefit to us to trick anybody.'

Hartley took a slug of beer, finishing his glass. Turin waved for two more. Hartley continued:

‘But to answer your question, your specific question: No, it would not be possible to add someone else’s memories to yours. You know how the system works: the memories are not discrete units like paragraphs in a document. You can’t copy and paste memories! To implant a rogue memory we would have to somehow isolate that tiny collection of brain matter responsible for it—which is already impossible—then link it into your brain image, and somehow reattach it to the existing architecture. Then you would have to reach the memory by association, and these associations would be entirely random and arbitrary. It’s all absolutely impossible.’

Turin nodded, slowly. Now that Hartley had begun to talk freely he could remain quiet.

Hartley continued: ‘And why would we want to do that anyway? Why would we want to plant images of women in your mind?’

Turin frowned.

Hartley noticed and looked away.

Turin said: ‘Women? I hadn’t told you that yet.’

A pause.

Hartley said: ‘That is what you’re seeing, though, right?’

‘Yes, but she’s real. I’ve met her.’

It was Hartley’s turn to frown now. ‘*That* is impossible.’ He thought for a moment in silence.

‘But you *know* about this? It’s happened before?’

Hartley thought some more, before answering into his glass. ‘Caspian, it’s not a perfect system. I told you that. Just try to get on with your life.’

‘Bryce.’ The man looked up. ‘Bryce, I can’t. I can’t get on with anything unless I can believe . . . no, unless I can *know* that what I’m seeing really used to be my life. I want to move on as much as any of those other people do, but this . . . this is different. It goes beyond just a birthday party or a holiday or a dead relative that I don’t remember. She’s crossed over into my *new* life, my *new* memory, and yet I’ve never met her before!’

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‘And she’s really real?’

‘Yes, she is. Come on, Bryce, just give me the truth.’

Hartley sighed. ‘Okay, but you’re not going to like it. And you didn’t hear it from me.’

Turin nodded. The waitress arrived with their beers.

Hartley continued, quietly: ‘You know I told you that the human brain can be stored on twenty-one terabytes of hard drive space? Well, that’s not strictly true, or rather, it’s more complicated than that. Nearly all digital information must be compressed in some way, for economy as much as for physical reasons. Nobody knows how much hard drive space a human brain would *actually* take up, but it would probably be our entire storage capacity. Physically, we would probably need one entire building per brain! Our software *compresses* the information from your brain so it can be stored and then *decompressed* when you make access. It’s the same as a digital photo—the computer doesn’t need to remember the exact colour and brightness of each pixel. It compresses the information into chunks, finds averages and duplications. . . .’

Turin looked puzzled.

Hartley tried again. ‘Okay, look. Describe that waitress to me, the one who brought over our beers. You can look at her if you want.’

Turin frowned again. ‘Well, she’s about five foot tall, Asian, shoulder-length hair, necklace. . . .’

Hartley took notes on a napkin and then said: ‘Okay, good. Now, *I* know who you mean, and *you* know who you mean. Hell, she would probably even recognise herself from these ten words of description! It’s a reduction, but it serves the purpose. Compare the simplicity of this . . .’ he held up the notes he had written, ‘with the complexity of the real thing. . . .’ He gestured at the waitress, who was taking an order from a couple at the far side of the bar, gesturing mutely under the slowly shifting light.

Turin said: ‘But I didn’t create that waitress out of thin air. I’d not even met Kaye before and yet I saw her in my mind.’

‘Right, sure. Now, you know that our computers compress the data from your brain, bearing in mind that the data is an image of your

brain matter, not memories as such. For some reason, a by-product of this process of compression is a certain *flattening* of each person's memories. You might remember the first time you fell off your bike, for example, but your experience of that memory will be more generic, more commonplace, than your original memory. Your dead Auntie Maude will be a more stereotypical auntie, the time you lost your virginity will be more like it was for everyone else in the world, and especially similar to the experience of our other clients. This isn't a problem for most clients—their personal artefacts help to give colour to their old memories and a lot of them forget about their former lives anyway. For you, it's possible that the girl in the restaurant is a reduced, generic version of a past girlfriend. She is a representation of a memory that you once had, a memory that has been flattened and stripped of its more discrete features. It has been reduced to the basics . . .'

Hartley once again held up the little white napkin with its sparse notes in blue ink.

' . . . and your imagination, perhaps, fills in the blanks.'

After a pause, Turin said: 'But why should I attach this . . . corrupted memory to this girl, this real girl, Kaye Clover? And the others too, she said there had been many others like me coming to find her.'

'I don't know why that would happen. And it would be our company policy not to get involved with her.' He smiled wryly. 'Perhaps she's just the most generic girl in the world.'

Turin returned to Kaye's restaurant after concluding his meeting with Bryce Hartley, hoping that she might still be there despite the late hour, and hoping that she wouldn't mind seeing him again so soon. She was there, but she wasn't finished, so she told him to wait at a small table and brought him a beer. Turin had been resolved to tell Kaye everything he had learnt from the operator Hartley, as if to show her his sincerity through the force of his thorough investigation, but the hour or so he had to wait gave him time to think. Hartley had suggested that Kaye had been given the dubious blessing of almost perfectly generic features—an appearance that only the computerised averaging of many thousands of regular faces would produce. That

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this mysterious beauty was perhaps being consistently associated with a compressed, averaged memory of love was surprising, but not unreasonable. Turin watched Kaye as she moved lightly about the restaurant, pouring mineral water at one of the last few tables, then stacking leather-bound menus, then steaming cutlery. She didn't look average—she was clearly very attractive. Yet, her attraction was elusive. Turin couldn't even be sure of her ethnicity. He felt he could walk past her in the street and not even notice her. Then again, perhaps this is exactly what Hartley had been trying to tell him.

Finally, Kaye removed her apron and came to sit with Turin. He was still unsure exactly what to tell her. Fortunately she made his job easier for him. She said:

'So, is it some kind of glitch in the system?'

Turin relaxed. She seemed to have that effect on him.

'Yes, it is,' he said. 'You're blessed, or cursed. . . .'

She looked at him quizzically. He didn't want to finish the sentence, telling her she was the most generic girl in the world. He didn't even believe that himself. The more time he spent with her, the more he felt she was quite the opposite. Exceptional, in fact.

He said: 'I mean, unless they do something with their computers I think you're always going to have people like me coming up to you, swearing you're the love of their life.'

She laughed. There was a pause, a comfortable pause.

Turin spoke: 'Look, would you like to meet the guy I spoke to, my operator? He's easy-going. I think he could explain it better than I could. We could meet him tomorrow around this time, I think.'

Kaye contemplated this for a moment.

'Well, it would be nice to get to the root of all this. And I'm not working tomorrow.'

'Okay, well, I'll try to organise it.'

She smiled at him. Turin discerned a hundred ways in which that smile was much more than 'average'.

'You're alright, Caspian. You're absolutely self-obsessed, but you're not like the others. You're alright.'

Turin laughed.

Kaye wrote down her number and passed it to him.  
Turin left.

Turin arrived at home after midnight. He had missed the last tram and had had to walk along the tracks beside the canal for almost an hour. When he arrived, the healthcare assistant was waiting for him. She always seemed to be waiting for him, now he thought about it.

‘You’re back quite late,’ she said. ‘I was worried.’

Turin ignored her. With so many developments this day his attention was focused just a few feet in front of him and couldn’t easily be penetrated. He opened a few cardboard boxes of artefacts from his former life and flicked through them, more out of habit than from any expectation to find anything new.

‘*Who have you been with?*’ yelled the healthcare assistant.

Turin jumped. She was angry as hell and looked wild. Tears were already streaming down the periphery of her cheekbones. Turin felt angry for a moment, but calmed himself. He didn’t want any trouble.

‘Look, Moira, why don’t you go home. It’s late, but I can call you a cab. You don’t need to look after me so much anymore.’

She said nothing for a moment or two. Turin waited. She seemed to have accepted this so he moved towards the phone.

‘Why do you call me that? Why haven’t you remembered anything yet?’ She was still distraught. Turin left the phone. ‘Who is this woman you’re always looking for? You’re just . . . just. . . .’

Turin turned and went into his bedroom, ignoring the sobs that came through from the living room where he had left Moira. She didn’t stop, but he didn’t move. He just wondered what his former self would have done. He didn’t even wonder what the woman was so upset about. She didn’t stop crying for a long time.

The next day, thankfully, he didn’t see the healthcare assistant before he left the apartment. He didn’t have time to get involved in her problems, especially if they were related to her obligations to the insurance company. She probably had to tick a specified set of boxes on some therapy audit and was angry at him for skipping his sessions.

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Anyway, he went directly to Kelvin Abner to try to make some access and to set up a meeting between Bryce Hartley and Kaye Clover later in the day.

At reception he was met by another man, an older man with grey hair and a tweed jacket who said, 'Mr Hartley is unavailable today I'm afraid, so I will be operating for you. Please follow me.'

Turin asked: 'Is Hartley sick?'

'Uh, yes, he's sick. Sorry about that. You're in safe hands, though. I'm Kelvin Abner. I opened this facility ten years ago.'

Abner swiped a card to open the door to the back room. His cuffs were monogrammed with the number '21'. Turin followed him, his curiosity about this otherwise unremarkable man rather eclipsed by the thought of having to cancel his meeting with Kaye.

In the access room, with its dim lighting and somewhat incongruous furniture, Turin tried to relax and attain threshold consciousness. His mind was a storm of thoughts about Kaye Clover, about Bryce Hartley, about Moira Mairead, and about his former life, which had somehow dredged up all kinds of problems and insecurities despite it being little more than 'home movies'. He felt that if his new life were a blank slate, then his old memories were an ugly scrawl across it. He wondered if he would notice any of the 'flattening' that Bryce Hartley had told him about. He wondered if Hartley had been suspended for speaking to him last night in the helicopter bar. He wondered whether Kaye would think he was a crank if he was unable to produce this 'inside man' as he had promised.

Access came suddenly and strongly, much more strongly than ever before. Perhaps Abner was a more skilful operator—or perhaps less skilful. Memories came in flashes, startling Turin, and yet threshold consciousness persisted. It was more like a nightmare, more uncontrolled. The memories were eruptions of emotion, all of them violent and destructive. He saw arguments with his parents, he saw frustration and humiliation at school and at work, he saw desperate sadness and guilt, and paranoid solitude resulting from his relationships.

With a physical and mental effort he woke himself up. He shook his head a few times. Abner's voice came through the speaker:

‘Is everything alright, Mr Turin? You made about half a second of access there. You can try again if you like.’

*Just half a second? It had felt like a lot longer.* Turin said: ‘No, I don’t want to make access again.’

He detached the electrode pads himself and left the room.

Outside, he met Kelvin Abner, who seemed to be keen for Turin to stay.

‘Mr Turin,’ he said. ‘Mr Turin, it’s not usual for clients to remove the equipment themselves. It could be rather dangerous.’

Turin turned to look at the man.

‘It’s not dangerous, of course,’ Abner said, retreating slightly. ‘But we have our procedures. I don’t know if your previous operator was less stringent about these things.’

‘Why is he my *previous* operator? I thought you said he was sick. Where is he? I want to speak to him.’

‘Mr Turin, we make no guarantees about retaining the same operator. We aim to do so as a special customer service, but as our operating procedures are standardised. . . .’

Turin felt the anger and despair of his access session in his stomach and on his skin, like damp clothes after a rainstorm.

‘Has he been suspended?’

They had reached a long section of corridor and were alone. The hum from the coolant systems in the warehouse around them was at its greatest here, just before the soundproofed reception area. Abner came up close to Turin. His beard had not been shaved completely at the corners of his mouth.

‘Mr Turin, *I* am in charge of this facility. Not you and not your insurance company. Mr Hartley’s conduct as *my* employee is subject to *my* conditions. If you want to continue to be a client of my company, you must also accept these conditions.’

Turin glared at the man, daring him to be a little more specific. Abner stood firm. Turin walked towards reception, punched the door release and swung the thick glass door open, making it slam shut behind him.

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Turin walked alongside the canal until his anger subsided. When it did, he was left with anxiety that he couldn't place for a great deal of time. This last access session had proved one thing to him at least, that subjectivity—and interpretation, perhaps—was nine-tenths of the access experience. What you put in is what you get out, and vice versa. He questioned whether memory access had any value at all. He questioned the significance of reminders—would it have made any difference if he had been given someone else's artefacts; would his memories have accommodated them regardless? He questioned the influence of the healthcare assistant. She could have been providing—or withholding—anything from his former life. *Memory is worthless*, he thought.

He walked through the former dry docks, now a children's playground. The massive rigs and ship parts were now clad with multicoloured thermoplastic padding and functioned as a climbing frames and swing sets and slides. The creeping anxiety persisted, though, and Turin searched his mind for its cause.

He arrived at his apartment. It was quiet. The healthcare assistant was not there. He went through to the living room and saw a number of storage boxes, ones that he had not seen before, stacked in the centre of the room. His anxiety increased. On the lid of the uppermost box was a photograph. He picked it up, feeling it trigger a vague response in his memory. It showed a mountain area: a small, landscaped plateau with carefully tended grass and picnic tables in the background. On the horizon were further mountainsides in scrubby green and brown, and the thinnest beginnings of a city in the distance. Turin was in the centre, a joyful grin on his face, holding Moira Mairead tightly as they both sat on the ground and posed for the picture. Around them were friends, all holding picnic food and bottles of beer.

On the back of the photograph was a note that said: *I wanted you to remember this, but you don't. I guess you never will. Love, Mem.*

Turin put the photograph to one side and opened the first box. Inside were all artefacts that Moira had kept from him. Everything was recent and probably spanned several years of his former life. They were all, even if only slightly, connected to his relationship with Moira

‘Mem’ Mairead. Years of photographs, cinema tickets, letters and notes, travel brochures, magazines, books, mugs, stationery, wrapping paper, jewellery, wallets, clothes, ornaments and every other kind of paraphernalia. Turin sighed. He felt his anxiety shift slightly, moving away from paranoia and becoming closer to guilt. She had tested him and he had failed. Or passed, depending on what the test really was. He had treated her badly, that much was certain. Although, hadn’t she also breached the trust that Turin had in her, both as a professional and, formerly, as his lover?

He walked around the flat, but she had packed and left. He didn’t even know where she was staying. By the front door was a key, presumably hers. He rested a while, wondering what to do with all the boxes of useless artefacts that littered his living room. They were relics of an extinct time.

After a while, he called Kaye Clover and asked to meet her.

When Kaye arrived at the new train terminus she asked why Turin especially wanted to meet her here.

‘It’s a bit . . . characterless,’ she said laughing.

Turin laughed too. The enormous central atrium with its white marble façades echoed with their voices. The terminus was newly built and the railway had not been linked up yet, but a coffee franchise had already opened that sold beer and sandwiches, which Turin had ordered for them both.

‘It’s the first genuinely new building in this city for almost 100 years,’ Turin said.

‘Great. . . .’ Kaye said, uncertainly, then laughed again.

They remained silent, but they were comfortable. Turin opened a bottle of beer for Kaye and then picked at one of the sandwiches. He didn’t know what to tell her. He was reluctant to tell her about Moira Mairead and how she had tried to manipulate the memory access process and inadvertently written herself out of his life. He couldn’t say more about what Bryce Hartley had told him, especially now that Bryce could not be contacted to back him up. He really didn’t have much to say at all. His life—his *new* life—up to this point had been

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concerned with unravelling what had happened before. Kaye was the only person he knew in the city. The only person that had been kind to him, unconditionally.

They were comfortable together. Kaye didn't seem to mind that he didn't have much to say. She was looking around at the stainless steel doorframes and handrails and other detailing of the terminus that still had their plastic coverings on them; truncated logos and mission statements on every surface, but no complete sentences. Turin wondered, not for the first time, how much of his feeling towards Kaye was the result of some kind of footprint in his memory from his relationship with Moira Mairead. Perhaps these things carry over, he thought. Perhaps it's not Kaye Clover who is generic, perhaps it's love itself.

Turin thought, I'm okay with that.

He smiled at Kaye, and she smiled back. She seemed to perceive his mood.

'What's on your mind?' she said.

'Nothing,' he replied.