

Flesh & Iron

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A sudden current coursing through. Connection. Wire by wire. Part by part. Vibration. Subtle movement. First the fingers. Then a single arm. Up to the neck. Then the head, tilting ever so slightly, caught, then shifting back into forward position. It can feel. It can sense. It can— Bright white light gives way to overblown, shapeless forms— It can *see*.

Nevertheless, It can't know yet.

It can only observe. The feelings; sensations, each new and ever more astounding. As if slowly coming to; waking from a long and dreamless sleep. Its very existence, empty until this moment. Waiting. Dormant. For how long? A lifetime. Or *more...*

More. More currents. More connections. Spreading like a spiderweb of electronic veins. Through. Around. One to another to another to another. Then back again in different routes. Some endpoints. Others extending even outside Its form. Wires from everywhere linking to ports in different parts of Its body. Some via the legs. Some via the arms. The back. The chest. Most, via the skull— a hub of forming information and collecting data.

It will be able to know soon.

More feelings. More sensations. Everything slowly coming into focus in an orchestra of sound, tactility, and sight. Tinnitus gives way to silence. Then— Beeping. Whirring. Clunking. Not within It. Outside of It. All sounds, distant; muffled.

Murmurs form underneath. Who's? It will be able to know soon.

Weightlessness gives way gravity fighting to pull It down. It's suspended off the ground. Racked to other machinery; chains holding Its outstretched limbs in place. For what purpose? It will be able to know soon.

Brightest light gives way to softer tones and colors. Shapeless forms give way to sharper edges and beginning frameworks. A dank warehouse— industrial. Windowless. Claustrophobic. Chains. Chairs. Worktables. Clutter. Dripping pipes. Drip. Drip. Drip. Why is It here? Drip. Drip. Drip. It will be able to know soon. Drip. Drip—

It's newfound focus shifts. Gaining control. That's when It sees... suspended directly across from It. Hanging by its own frame. Limbs outstretched. Chains. Cords. Wires. Nodes. Connected in different spots along the body. It's as if It is looking in a mirror. *Almost*. Except...

Drip. Sharp tingles. Like ants scurrying along the skin. Or a thousand tiny needles everywhere, all at once. Sensation coming back. Why was it gone in the first place? Drip. He hears before he sees. His head hangs. His eyes flicker. Drip. Is that? Drip. Pooling on the ground below Him... Drip. It is. *Blood*.

His eyelids are heavy. His body, sore. Every piece of Him, aching. *Why?* He doesn't know. He's only just slowly coming out of a dreamless sleep. Not so long as a lifetime. Only *some* time. What was before this moment, though? He strains to remember. It comes back to Him. Images that are incomplete. Fractured glimpses— A city at night, lit only by glistening streetlamps. A shortcut. A dark alley. No, a side street. Just as empty. A noise startles him. The sense of being watched; followed. A shiver down His spine. Then—

Here. Now. Where the light burns, dim as it may be. New, agonizing sensations giving way to confusion giving way to stark reality. Whatever reality this can be... He doesn't yet believe it. A bad dream, perhaps. Is that what this is? Is he not yet truly awake? He's suspended off the ground. Hung like a slab of meat waiting to be carved. Chains hold Him in place. They hold His limbs outstretched. Wires reach from every direction. Central lines needled into His muscles; His veins; even somehow, his nerves. Some via the legs. Some via the arms. The back. The chest. Most, via His skull— No. His *brain*. He can almost feel them all. But where are the other ends connected?

Clank-ank-ank! The sound echoes. Metal hitting the floor. Then— A voice? Could it be? Is someone here with Him? He fights to speak. "Is." Choking on each word. "Someone." One more word. That's all He has in Him. For now. Just one. Please— "Help." It barely escapes Him.

A wave of machines powering up all around. They overpower all else, filling his ears. The beeping and buzzing of systems; computers. The whirring of a generator. The clunking of mechanisms; contraptions; hardware. All known yet somehow foreboding. But there it is again. He's sure of it. A voice underneath it all, barely audible. Who's? He's beginning to think He'll never know. The fog of His daze continues to lift. Further speech fails Him, but He finds strength enough to lift His head, barely holding it upright. That's when He sees. Not a person, but a *thing*. Suspended across. Hanging by its own frame. Metal limbs outstretched. Chains. Cords. Wires. Nodes. Connected in different spots along its skeletal form— An android. It stares back. Their eyes meet. So much to take in, and still an emptiness about it. A lonely feeling mingles with horror and dread. And somehow still... connection. Something shared. What? He might never know. Except...

"Don't worry. It will all be over soon."

There is another here with them... It hears the Other's words but struggles to understand. For now, they are but vocalizations strung together to form some far-off meaning. To It, no different than the sounds of the machines. The drip-drip-drips. But He understands now. It can tell. His pained face shifts ever so slightly. His eyes flicker off— somewhere else in the room. Still, just as It cannot, He seems unable to articulate Himself.

It searches for meaning. At first, in His lingering expressions. Is it fear; confusion; surprise? Perhaps He doesn't know how or why He's here. Just as It doesn't yet know. It looks inward, instead. Through droves of uploading data and information. More and more every second. Everything unknown feels closer. Closer. Closer still.

The Other continues to speak. It begins to understand. At first— specific words. Pieces of the whole. "Transfer". To move from one to another. To take. And give elsewhere. "Being." Existence. Life. The nature of a human. The nature of Him. "Essence." Intrinsic properties. Characteristics. Qualities. Without which, the thing... no... the *being* would not exist.

Dawning comprehension. The Other is taking humanity from Him. And giving it—

—to the android. Even through His haze, He starts to understand. This is no dream. It's torture. But not physical. Not the carving of His flesh, limbs, or extremities. No. The carving of everything else that makes Him who He is. But how? He wonders. And why? The Other explains. Like a giddy schoolchild presenting their favorite science project to the class. A hundred and three wires total. A hundred and three direct lines from His body to this machine and that one and countless others. Each working in a different way. All working to the same end. To take from Him and give to It.

He wants to scream. To cry out. To struggle. To beg for mercy. To fight, even. But he can't. And would it matter, anyway? Tears well in his eyes. Vestiges of what will soon be gone. Taken. Stolen. They run down his face, and fall, mixing with the pool of blood below Him.

No use. Nothing to do but wait. Wait. And wait.

"Fast", the Other consoles him. Painful, yes. But quick. Efficient. When all is started, He's not to suffer long. What will be left of Him, though? Body and bone. Without mind. Without spirit. A void, surely. A shell of what once was. And what will become of It? Fundamentally different— mechanisms rather than muscles; structures rather than bones; iron rather than flesh. But with the pieces of *His* mind; *His* spirit. Transferred into their new shell.

The Ship of Theseus. After all is said and done, which will be the real Him?

It still looks at him. Unemotional. Impassive. Cold. At least, for now...

He still looks back. Wrathful. Fiery. *Terrified*.

That's when it all begins. The next stage. A sudden current coursing through. Pain like He's never felt before. The sensation of being struck by lightning over and over and over again. Burning in His muscles; His veins; His nerves. Through. Around. Everywhere, endlessly.

What will the Other take first? As if to answer His question, the pain gives way to sudden numbness. Like switches being turned off through His body, one to another to another. His vision dims and blurs. His hearing diminishes. The little He's gained since waking in this living nightmare, fading back away. Is He to pass out again? He tries to mumble something. Anything. But he can't. Paralysis overtakes him. His nervous system, shutting down. Collapsing. Unable to control. Unable to protect. The Other takes a moment to reposition His hanging head, leaning it on His shoulder so He can keep watching It. Does the Other consider this a kindness— In His final moments, to see what parts of Himself will live on in It? Surely passing out would be kinder. Death, kinder still.

He tries to feel something for It. For Him. For anything. But nothing comes. The numbness, spreading within him from body to mind. Exactly as intended. Fear. Anger. Surprise. Disgust. Sadness. Happiness. In all forms, they're being stolen from him. Emotions, draining through the wires. From the sharp, agonizing pinpricks rippling through his brain, piecing through the initial numbness, then fading away with what they've taken. Leaving nothingness in their wake.

He digs deep within. Trying to hold onto something. Anything. He thinks of her. Memories. Shared moments. The beach. Sunset. Dinner at Bacari. Fights. Screams. Passion. Sex. Everything *with her*. What does it all add up to now? Love.

That's what He's able to hold on to: *love*. At least for now...

It's beginning to know now. Data, yes. But more than that. A cacophony. Not of sounds, but of emotion. Of instinct. Of manner. So much, so fast, It might very well explode. Nevertheless, It tries to sort through. Separate. Classify. Group. Distinguish. For a moment, It thinks they are one. Connected. Sharing. He and It, the same being in two forms. But It's beginning to understand now:

They are diametrically opposed. Neither will live while the other survives.

It's beginning to know who He truly *was*... That It must now become. The way he moved. Always with the slightest lean to the left. The way His right leg would shake when He was anxious.

The way He wrote— Right-handed. Spoke— with the slightest lisp on longer-syllable words. Listened— most often intently and actively, but sometimes pretending while His mind raced elsewhere. The way He could see better through one eye. The way He would laugh in moments of comfort and discomfort alike. His defense mechanisms. His intensities. His indifferences. Even the way his left shoulder was weaker. From a childhood injury, perhaps?

It's left arm tenses. Connections interrupted. Pain. Discomfort. Weakness. Each new and ever more uncomfortable. Fresh, more powerful waves of emotion follow. A tsunami of greater depths. The surface of which, It only scratched moments before. But that now, crashes over It. Happiness. Gratitude. Curiosity. Sadness. Disappointment. Depression. Disgust. Anger. Frustration. Fear. Annoyance. Surprise. Excitement. All at once, and yet little by little. Weighing into him. Heavy. So very heavy. But unconnected, still. Pieces of a puzzle that have no place within It yet. It knows they connect somehow. They draw from somewhere. But that must be... *still in Him*.

Rage takes over all else. A sudden, deep desperation to pull Itself from Its chains, binds, and wires. To dive across the room and tear Him apart, piece by piece, to find the answers. For now, It finds Its voice. Whatever part that connects to the rage, at least. A guttural scream erupts from It. With a mechanical trill that echoes through the room. It homes in on the tangible— the discomfort in Its arm. It hurts. Too much. Too much. Too much!

CRACK! It rips It's left arm clear off. The arm dangles, still hanging by chains and wires. But the pain is gone. A moment of relief. But just a moment. It's inner rage bubbling to the surface again. Bursting forth in another guttural scream. What will the rage take next?

But before it can— suddenly, a sense of something. New information. Code? No. Data? Not quite. Could it be?? Answers. Yes—

Memories.

A songbird sings. The sun rises on the horizon. He's on the bank of an ocean. No, a lake. He's a child. Filled with wonder and hope. The world is yet His oyster. If only... a sudden storm wasn't brewing. Wind races. The bird flies off, its song growing ominous as it fades away. The lake evaporates. The sun fades. Everything, disappearing into a void of blackness.

Pain. Suffering... *Love*.

"Sweet Caroline" begins to play. He meets her for the first time. A bar filled with people. But eyes only for her. He passes her a drink. She smiles. That lovely smile. He's lost in it. Until the

smile suddenly sours. Why? She drops the drink. It explodes on the ground, somehow causing the song to reverberate and echo on an endless loop: *Good times... Good times never... Good times never seemed so good.* The people fade. The music stops. Then her... she disappears too.

Pain. Suffering... *Love.*

He searches for another recollection, but each time a memory comes, it fades even more quickly. Fewer things to latch onto. But He tries. Oh, how He tries. He sees his mother. She hugs Him, but her embrace holds no weight. He sees His dog. It barks and chases a ball further and further and further away. Piece by piece. Memory by memory. They all become lost to Him. Until only she remains. Obscured in the black void, but remaining, still. He clings to her. To love. Because He can't find anything else. Then, despite all His wanting, His trying, His heart's begging...

He's back. In this dark, cold cellar... hanging in a suspension of body *and* mind.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

He watches the blood trickle down. Like the leak of a pipe but coming somewhere from His body. Nothing He can do to stop it. He might not yet be *just* a slab of meat hanging from a hook. But He's close. Slowly, all that's left of His being fades. He's ready for a long and dreamless sleep. To become one with the void. His very existence, empty after this moment. Dormant. For how long? He can't know. He hopes not long. Death will be a kindness, after all. *When* he finally reaches it. But until then, at least in the void, He is with her.

Except even she disappears. Love, the last to go.

It knows now. A full being. A soul, reborn. Reshaped. Remade. But to what end?

The memories are an encyclopedia of Its feelings and emotions. Each, connecting back to some origin, growth or loss. Pieces of the puzzle finding placement within It. A spiderweb of this thing and that person and some place. It feels ease in this fuller understanding. But to what end?

He is gone now. It sees that. Senses it. Feels it.

A foreboding calm hangs in the room. The beeping and buzzing of systems and computers die away. The whirring of a generator slows down. The clunking of mechanisms; contraptions; hardware... they fade behind voices. *Several voices...* New people reveal themselves. Men and women who have been waiting; watching safely from the sidelines. Proud. Excited. *Arrogant.*

“Welcome,” one says. “We’ve waited a long time for this,” says another.

It’s lowered slowly to the ground. It says nothing back. It simply stares at Him—the man that gave It life. True life. More than just existing. But at a tremendous cost... It feels for Him. It grieves for Him. And that’s when It sees—

A field of poppies. The setting sun paints them in a soft, beautiful glow. Warming Its heart. But it doesn’t have a heart... A songbird sings. A soft, welcoming melody. But there’s no songbird in sight. It searches without luck. Instead, a woman appears in the distance. She comes closer. Closer. Closer still. But It can’t make out any of her features. Not yet. Is the sun blinding It? Or is It simply blind to her? It hopes to know soon. This last piece. It sees all else. But It feels most drawn to her. Like Its whole body is reaching out without even moving. It feels like another lifetime before It finally sees in full. Her deep blue eyes. Long, wavy brunette hair. And a smile that outshines even the sun. Sending a shiver down It’s spine—

A sudden current coursing through. Wire by wire, part by part. But this time, not of electricity. Of deep, powerful emotion. The shiver down Its spine spreads through the web of connections to a building rage. But unlike the rage It felt before, this rage, It understands. And that is even more powerful. Because It controls it. It does not scream. It bides Its time, still staring only at Him. There’s a final sense of something. A piece radiating off his form. A question? No. A plea.

For compassion.

The new people circle in. They unlatch It. Remove Its chains. They do not dare remove Its wires yet. There are too many. They still wish to run tests. Its left arm still dangles next to It. One chain remains. The Other steps up to remove it. When they do, they smile. Proud. Excited. *Arrogant.*

The time has come. It knows that. The Other steps back. And It lunges forward. Taking the Other by the head before they know what’s happening. *CRACK!* Crushing their skull in Its hand. Easy as cracking an egg. It hears all the screams. The cries of horror. Terror. Fear. It relishes them. It moves swiftly through the room. One by one, taking all their lives. A kindness, It thinks. Given what they took from Him. And left behind...

When all is done, the room is silent again. It moves back to Him—the man that gave It life. It still feels for him. Still grieves for him. It lifts His head up, looking Him in the eye. But unlike before, He can’t look back. Not really. Behind His brown eyes lies an abyss of nothingness.

“I am sorry,” It says.

Then, in an act of final compassion... It snaps His neck, killing Him.