

KEEP YOUR HEAD

Ever since the head transplant, I haven't been feeling myself, well that's not surprising. My number is 4442, and they have removed my sense of smell. So I can't tell you what the room I am confined to smells like, maybe it has no smell, but I can't tell you that either. Nothing particularly memorable about my number, except for some reason I keep saying it over and over in my head, my new head to be accurate, and it feels like it has made a groove in my new brain and my tongue feels rough, a bit like it has been rubbed against a sharp tooth filling relentlessly. 4442, 4442, 4442...4442 is not my name, just my number. My name is, well, let's leave that for now. I don't want to tell you my name. There's no big secret, it's just that it feels strange to say my name. My name feels theoretical. I wonder what part of me is represented by my name. I need time to adjust myself to some of these things.

They confine me in this sterile room. I don't mean sterile as in there is nothing much in it, although that is true as it happens. No, it is 'sterile', as in bacteria-free, I hope. I can't be exposed to any germs or viruses. The anti-rejection drugs are severe and have knocked out my defences. It is the only way to stop my head from attacking my body. It is the complete opposite of other transplants, like in the case of liver, lungs, heart etc. where the danger is that the body rejects the new organ. Not in my case. The danger is the new head will initiate an all- out attack on my body. 4442.

My wife has visited twice. It is a whole ordeal. She must be stripped and scrubbed from head to foot and dressed in sterile clothing. They allow me sexual contact with her but with surgical gloves and a sterile condom. We are not allowed to kiss for obvious

reasons. Besides, she breathes through a mask attached to a tube that supplies her oxygen from outside the room. The earlier numbers died, swift, ugly, and excruciating deaths. It was only as they neared the first thousand that things started working better, and the mortality rate declined. 4442, 4442. The first attempts were crude and experimental—the heads won.

I feel sad and lonely, and alien most of all. They tell me it's normal but what's normal? How normal can anyone be with someone else's head on their shoulders or someone else's body under their head? And how do they know what's normal? They have still got their own heads. It started to occur to me the other day, how do I know the doctors and surgeons have their own heads? I can't stop the tears, even though they aren't technically my tears.

After the first one thousand or so, they started to get much better results, and I have every chance of surviving. I use the word 'surviving', and I use the personal pronoun 'I' but that is arguable. It is debatable just which 'I' I am and 'survival'? The best that can be said is that I am not dead, at least not in the traditional sense, but do 'I' any longer exist, am 'I' dead? Or am I not dead? 4442. My original head is dead. Four thousand four hundred and forty-two. It hasn't escaped my notice that 4442 ends with forty-two—the famous Douglas Adams number signalling the answer to the big question. I've never been superstitious, but I am now. Is that me or him?

I have been experiencing some odd thoughts. I don't know if they are my thoughts, though. There's not much to do here, and I don't feel like reading or learning anything. I'm feeling, well it is difficult, but I feel antagonistic, but this makes no sense. My brain, that is my old brain, died. It grew one of the terminal tumours that started spreading through all populations several years ago. They recommended a head transplant as a

matter of some urgency. I feel resentment toward my old brain, as though it was weak, not tough enough, and succumbed to the tumour. Like it didn't bother to put up a fight, like it knew it could be replaced, so it didn't try.

I don't know whose head I got. They don't tell you. You can't know whose kidney or liver or heart you get, so why would they tell you whose head you're getting? They remove your face and surgically impose it on your new head so you look the same, with the proviso your new bone structure will be different from your old bone structure and, therefore, while you look near enough the same there will be subtle differences. Differences that remind you, you aren't you. These differences are affecting my wife too. I can tell by the way she looks at me. I think my nose is bigger, which might be ironic, given I can't use it to smell. I have different coloured eyes. Mine were brown, and now I have blue eyes. These things are not important, they say. You are alive, and you look pretty close to yourself. But when I look into a mirror, I don't see me. At least I seem to have more hair, and I look a bit younger. I wonder for a moment who my donor was and how he is now influencing my life.

I guess, as they tried to convince me, you are who you are because of your memories regardless of whose brain you house them in. I can't say I found this comforting, but what choice is there? You remember who you are throughout your life, and yet we all, those still in possession of our own heads, are largely blissfully unaware that, apparently, you are who you are because of what you remember. So they have developed this somewhat crude and rudimentary method of transplanting your memories from your now dead head to your new head. They must do this before the new head you are receiving has been removed from its body, which means you need someone who is in an induced coma but is going to die when the machines are turned off. They have to be dying of something below the epiglottis, like heart disease or pancreatitis. By the way, they cut just

below the epiglottis, for reasons no one explained or thought to, and I didn't ask. You ask why not transplant the brain? The surgery would be way too complicated—you have to connect eyes and ears, indeed all the senses nearly. If the whole head is done, then the connections, while incredibly complex, are far less in number. So, obviously, your donor's head, eyes, ears, nose, mouth etc. must all be healthy, and the brain must be in tiptop shape.

You might not get the same IQ as you had, but they say they try to match it with your own as best they can, though there are no guarantees. Anyway, as I say, they try to transfer as much of your memory to your new brain as is possible. This is inefficient though, as this technology is well behind the miraculous business of completing a successful full head transplant. They started this with pigs, and it wasn't necessary to transfer a pig's memory, so they spent less time on this part of the procedure. My brain started to suffer memory loss due to the increasing advancement of the inoperable tumour, so the sooner they got on with the whole business, the better.

But I have definite gaps in what I remember, and I know this because when I look at old photographs there are people, I don't recognise even though I am in the photo with them. This is a weird feeling. It feels heavy, like my brain has sunk to the bottom of its cranium cradle and I feel a bit foggy. They also can't guarantee I will not have some residual memories and thoughts still alive in my head from the donor. I know my donor was an engineer or builder of some sort. He built things and had mathematical formulas in his head and preferred redheads. We have something in common there. At least he wasn't gay, which would be a complication too far. I keep getting flashes of information or partial thoughts about all sorts of things that don't make sense.

They tell me smell will be the big problem. It is a powerful trigger for memories, and certain smells will trigger donor memories. This can cause mental deterioration and lack of balance, and so they dismantle your smell, which is one thing you lose. You might not think loss of smell is that great a price to pay for life, and it is damn hard to argue against that, but it is a big loss, much much bigger than you might imagine. 4442, 4442...Some of these rogue residual thoughts can be frightening, not that I want to kill people or anything like that. If truth be known, I had those thoughts from time to time with my brain.

I have a lot of sexual thoughts, more than seems normal, or normal for me, as far as I can remember. It is fascinating, looking into the sexual fantasy of another person. I was shocked, but then we all would be if we knew others' sexual fantasies. In the memory transfer, sometimes some memories come across incomplete. For example, yesterday while daydreaming, I was counting the number of times I've been to London. I was sitting in a vineyard on a warm day, with a summer breeze blowing across my face, and I was trying to count the number of times I'd travelled to London, but then I couldn't remember anything about London at all, except the names on the monopoly board.

They told me that with the assimilation drug regime and time, I soon wouldn't remember which are my memories and which are the memories of the donor, and that is the best it will be. The alternative is death, and as far as I know, death has its own limitations—such as no memories at all, yours, or anyone's. They tried to explain to me it is much like it is when you enter a witness protection program. You are the same person, basically, except you have a different persona you have to relearn and use.

You have to ignore your past and embrace your new future, except you can't leave everything behind. You remember things from the life you had to leave, your wants, your

desires. You spend a lot of time wondering about who you were and who you are now, and mostly who you are now is made up. So the critical question is, 'Does my body have a new head, or does my head have a new body?' You miss a lot of things too. I do—I think that's why I'm so teary. They told me this would be the case, it is also, in part, the drugs working. So I'm trying to generate as many new memories as fast as I can, a new life I can cope with and develop. This is what they counsel you to do—move on, accept it, your old self has, by and large, gone, it's there by degrees, but it will be changed in remarkable ways. That's what they say in the counselling, but it's hard to accept, very hard. I'm not sure I have yet. You might think this is a fantastic opportunity to reinvent yourself, be a better person. But don't forget you are dealing with only some of your own memories and some of someone else's memories, and what if the donor wanted to be a different person as well? You would still fantasise over reinvention but now with someone else's head. The whole thing is enough to give you a headache.

They tell you that you must accept you are a hybrid version of you, your donor, and your new self. How much of your memories do you need to call yourself who you were, to be authentically you as you were? They never answer these questions. They can't, they are learning too.

I look through new eyes, but eyes are eyes, they see, and that's about it. The same with ears. They don't see and hear things differently—they just see and hear. It's your new brain that is seeing and hearing things differently, you think. You can't be sure. When does this new brain belong to you? When do you feel it does? Immediately you come out of the anaesthetic? Not really. You feel pretty lousy at first as though, I said this jokingly to my wife, you've just had your throat cut.

Luckily, I remembered my wife, there was no guarantee. And I still seem to have a sense of humour. Whether or not it is mine, remains to be seen, but my wife laughed, sort of. It's an urban supposition that some head transplantees use the occasion to not remember their wife. No one knows what you remember— only what you tell them you remember.

I remember thinking the first time I made love to my wife with my new head, it had a feeling of 'first time' about it, for her as well, she reported. I saw in her eyes she looked at my face, my new face as though I were a stranger, her orgasm seemed more intense to me. I wonder if it has been a fantasy for her to have sex with a stranger. Am I a stranger to her? She is to me, at least in part, but not in looks, she looks the same. I look different to her, but that isn't enough, after all she could just close her eyes during sex and remember me as I was. I have the same penis so nothing new there. One of the memories I have is that she almost always closed her eyes during sex and that is what I noticed was different. This time she stared at my face (through her full-face mask) and into my eyes with some kind of alien intensity. For me it was like making love to an astronaut, not that I've done that. I heard her laboured breathing and her muffled orgasm. She made love to me like she never had before, at least as far as I can remember. It concerned me. Was she making love to me, or was she being unfaithful? She confessed it felt like she was being taken, only with her consent, if that makes sense. I remember how much I loved her before. I am glad of that memory. I cried after we made love the first time with my new head. I couldn't smell her. I remember what she smelt like, and I felt an intense comfort from that. I hope I never forget that smell even if it's not me, entirely, remembering it or smelling it.

(...an excerpt from the novel *What Will Happen To You?* by Gary N. Lines)