



Reborn Again

Sheckley, Robert

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About Sheckley:

Robert Sheckley (July 16, 1928 – December 9, 2005) was an American author. First published in the science fiction magazines of the 1950s, his numerous quick-witted stories and novels were famously unpredictable, absurdist and broadly comical.

Sheckley was given the Author Emeritus honor by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America in 2001. There are those who were shocked he was not given the Grand Master Award instead. Commented one scholar, "Kingsley Amis' critical overview of Science Fiction named Sheckley as our field's brightest light. But Sheckley was a humorist, and nowadays this is how our Mark Twains are treated."

Source: Wikipedia

Also available on Feedbooks for Sheckley:

- *The Status Civilization* (1960)
- *Bad Medicine* (1956)

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"Damn," a voice said. "I'm still alive."

"Who is that?" Ritchie Castleman asked.

"It's me, Moses Grelich," a voice inside him said.

Grelich? Ritchie had heard that name somewhere before. Then he remembered. Grelich was the body he had bought to live his new life in.

Grelich said, "I was supposed to be dead. They promised me I'd be dead."

"That's right," Ritchie said. "I remember now. You sold your body to me. And I was supposed to have bare-bones possession of it."

"But I am still in it. It's still my body."

"I don't think so," Ritchie said. "Even if you are still in it, you sold it to me. It's my body now."

"So OK, it's your body. Consider me your guide."

"I don't want a guide," Ritchie said. "I bought a body, and I want to be alone in it."

"Who could blame you?" Grelich said. "Some schlemiel in the lab must have muffed it. I'm still here."

"Get out!"

"Calm yourself, boychick. I got no place to go."

"Can't you just... stand outside?"

"Like a ghost? Sorry, Herbie, I don't know how to do that."

"My name is Ritchie."

"I know, but you're more of a Herbie type."

Ritchie let that one go. He muttered, "I need to get this mess straightened out. There's got to be someone in charge around here."

"I doubt it," Grelich said. "This looks like a rich man's apartment to me."

"Where? I can't see a thing. My God, I'm in darkness!"

"Don't get so excited. I seem to still be in charge of the sensory apparatus. Go ahead, take a look. I turn the vision over to you."

The scene suddenly opened up to Ritchie's senses. He was lying in bed, in his bright, high-rise apartment on Central Park West. It was daylight. Sunlight was pouring in the window. Across the room he could see his mechanical exercise horse. The Chagall print still dominated one wall.

"It's my apartment," Ritchie said. "I guess they put me back here after the operation. Shouldn't there be a nurse?"

"A nurse! The boychick wants a nurse!"

"It's just that I've been through a considerable operation."

"And I haven't?"

"It's not the same thing. You're supposed to be dead. You don't need a nurse. Just a disposal service."

"That's a hell of a thing to say."

Ritchie was a little ashamed of what he had just said. But this was a new situation for him. Just yesterday he had opted for the newly developed choice of putting his mind into a new body. This had become necessary when his congenital heart defect suddenly started acting up. There had been no time to lose. He had gone to Mind Movers Technology Company, and found that they had one body he could take over immediately. Moses Grelich had decided to opt for self-obliteration, to sell his body, and to leave his money to Israel.

Yesterday the operation had taken place.

The doorbell rang. Ritchie slipped on a bathrobe and slippers and went to answer it, thinking maybe it was the nurse the Company should have sent in the first place.

He opened the door. Standing there was a tall, skinny old lady, her dark hair pulled back and tied in a messy bun. She was wearing a plain cloth coat. She carried her purse in one hand, a white paper bag in the other. There was something about her... Ritchie thought she must once have been a beauty

"Is Moses here?" she asked timidly. "They gave me this address for him at Mind Movers."

Ritchie felt like one of those guys in a fable. Since Grelich had taken over the body, Ritchie could see and hear, and sometimes even speak, but he had no control over anything else. And no body sensations. When the body walked, Ritchie had the sensation that he was floating about six feet above the ground.

"I'm here!" Grelich said out of Ritchie's mouth.

"Moise!" she cried.

"Esther? Is that really you?"

"So who else should it be?"

"Come in, come in," Moses said.

Esther carefully wiped her feet on the mat and entered the apartment.

Moses led her into the living room. He was already familiar with Ritchie's apartment. He waved her to a chair.

"Nu, don't you have a kitchen?" Esther asked. "I'll feel more comfortable in the kitchen."

Ritchie could hear Esther and Moses talking. Something about how Moses' old friends at the East Broadway cafeteria were worried about him. One of them had read an item in The New York Post about how Moses Grelich was about to undergo a whole-body transplant operation. It seemed that Moses had agreed to sell his body to someone.

Moses was quoted as saying that since God had failed, Communism had failed, and now Capitalism had failed, he saw no sense in going on. He planned to be the first man in history to prove the old saying, "If the poor could die for the rich, what a good living they would make!"

"So how come you're still alive?" Esther asked.

Ritchie summoned up all his energy and said, "He shouldn't be!"

"Beg pardon, what did you say?" Esther said.

"The operation was not a success," Ritchie said. "They had the transplant, but they didn't get rid of Moses. This is supposed to be my body now. But he's still here, damnit!"

Esther's eyes grew wide.

Taking a deep breath, and letting out half of it, she said. "Pleased to meet you, Mister—"

"Castleman, Ritchie Castleman. And you are?"

"Mrs. Kazorney, Esther Kazorney." She frowned, as if to say, "I can't believe what's happening." Then, timidly, she said, "Moise, are you really still there somewhere?"

"Of course I'm still here. Where else would I be?"

Ritchie noticed that Grelich's voice was more robust than his own. Grelich spoke emphatically and somewhat dramatically. His sentences were filled with highs and lows, and he made full use of diminuendo and crescendo.

"Yes, Esther," Grelich went on, "By the grace of the times we live in I am still here. These klutzes couldn't even kill an unhappy Jew, even though Hitler showed them how some years ago. Esther, we are living

now in an age of the goyishe apotheosis. The peasantry is now at the controls, and they are showing us what it really means to screw up, you should excuse the language."

Esther made a small dismissing gesture. She studied Moses' face and said, in a low voice, "Moise?"

"I'm still here," Moses said. "Where else would I be?"

"This fellow who lives inside you—is he a landsman?"

"Atheist!" Ritchie said. "Purebred atheist."

"You see?" Moses said. "Atheism is the first step toward Judaism."

"Not bloody likely," Ritchie said.

"What type of atheist are you, anyhow?" Grelitch asked.

"How many types are there?"

"At least two. Intellectual and instinctive."

"I guess I'm the intellectual type."

"Aha!" Grelitch said.

"What, aha?"

"Out of your own mouth you have proven a thesis which I have long held. Jews are not instinctive atheists. Jews, even the dumbest among us, are born arguers, which is to say, intellectuals. No Jew comes to suicide without a long, reasoned argument in his mind, an argument that takes into account the question of God's view on suicide."

The doorbell rang again. Grelich opened the door. "Solomon!" he cried, seeing the tall black man on the other side. "Solomon Grundy, the Ethiopian Jew," he explained to Ritchie.

"Can you hear me, Moise?" Solomon said. "Esther gave me this address."

"Yes, yes I can hear you, Solomon. You have come to the apartment of the man who owns my body. Unfortunately, I'm still in it."

"How can that be?"

"It'll be sorted out presently. Meanwhile, what do you have to tell me? Some more of your mystic African Hasidic pseudo-scientific nonsense?"

"I simply come as a friend," Solomon said.

"That's very nice," Grelich said. "The murderer returns to weep over the corpse he has made."

"I don't quite understand your point," Solomon said.

"The point is, where were you when I needed a friend? Where were you before I killed myself?"

"Killed yourself? You don't sound very dead to me."

"I tried. It's an accident that I'm alive."

"So might we all say. But something that is tantamount to an accident can be said never to have happened."

"Sophistry," Grelich shouted.

Solomon sat silent for a long moment, and then nodded his head. "I'll accept that. The fact is, I was not a very good friend. Or rather, I was not a good enough friend at the time you needed one."

"Well, I don't know about that," said Grelich, momentarily uncertain of the line Solomon was taking.

"We are both responsible for what happened," Solomon said. "You elected yourself a victim, I perforce became a killer. Together we obliterated a life. But we reckoned without God."

"How do you figure?" Grelich asked.

"We thought we could produce the nothingness of death. But God said, 'That's not how it's going to be.' And he left us both alive and able to suffer the consequences of the deed we attempted, but didn't quite bring off."

"God wouldn't do that," Grelich said. "That is, if He existed."

"He does."

"What kind of a principle could He make of that?"

"He doesn't have to make a principle out of it. He is not restricted to His own precedent. He can do what he wants fresh every time. This time it's for you to suffer, and you deserve it, since God never told you it was all right to suicide."

Ritchie loved listening to what was going on. He qvelled (a word he would soon learn) to hear the aggressive, intellectual Grelich getting it in the neck from a guy like Solomon, who came on like a religious rapper and really knew how to dish it out.

But it occurred to Ritchie that all the talk was on Grelich, and none of it was on him.

"Hey, fellows," he said, "it looks like this talk could go on for a while, and I haven't even been introduced."

Grelich sullenly made the introductions.

"Why don't we get a bite to eat?" Ritchie said, now that he found himself able to speak. "I could use something, myself."

"Is there a vegetarian restaurant around here?" Grelich asked.

"Christ, I don't know," Ritchie said. "There's a pretty good Cuban café just a couple blocks from here."

"I wouldn't eat that treif junk," Grelich said. "Not even if I weren't a vegetarian."

"So recommend your own place, big mouth," said Ritchie.

"Gentlemen," said Solomon, "we will take a taxi, which I will pay for, and we will go to Ratstein's on the Lower East Side."

The taxi dropped them on the corner of 2nd Avenue and Fourth Street. A corner place, Ratstein's was open. Inside it was big—it must have had over a hundred tables, all empty except for two men at a front table, arguing over coffee and blintzes.

"We'll sit in the back, at the Philosopher's Table," Solomon said, and led them to an oval table with chairs for eight.

"Schlepstein from NYU often shows up here," Solomon said. "And sometimes Hans Werthke from Columbia."

Ritchie had never heard of these men. And he didn't much like vegetarian food. He settled for a plate of egg cookies and a celery tonic. Grelich ordered strawberry blintzes, Esther took rice pudding, and Solomon ordered the rice and vegetables dish.

Their waiter was a short, plump, middle-aged man with a fringe of pale thinning hair and a vaguely European look. He moved slowly on what appeared to be painful feet.

"I'll need this table by 7 pm," he said. "It's reserved."

"It's only 3 o'clock now," Grelich said. "God forbid that your famous philosophers should have to sit anywhere else. We'll be out of here long before they start their discussions."

"Our customers are used to seeing them here," the waiter said. "I am Jakob Leiber and I am here to serve you."

The talk was general for a while, with one after another relating incidents of their day. From their conversation, Ritchie got an impression of an older New York, filled with old law tenements, push carts, micvahs, and study rooms for young scholars. He wondered if they weren't talking about a New York of a hundred years ago, not today.

In the taxi down Second Avenue he had noticed the Hispanic food stores, perfumeries, lunch counters and laundries. What once might have been a Jewish neighborhood had become a Hispanic barrio or whatever they called their slum neighborhoods.

He commented on this to Esther. She told him, "Everything's changed. I've heard Ratstein's only stays open because of the support of some wealthy Jewish mafia types who live in New Jersey and need a place for lunch on their trips into the city."

"That reminds me of this movie I saw," Ritchie said. "There was this Jewish mobster and his daughter, and this other mobster, a young guy, falls in love with the first mobster's daughter and goes back in time to kill the man who became her husband but didn't treat her right. I forgot how they got the time machine, but it seemed pretty logical at the time."

"Did he get the girl?" Esther asked.

"Sort of. But there was a complication."

"There's always a complication in invented stories," Grelich said. "But life isn't like that. Life is terribly simple."

"I don't agree," Ritchie said, recognizing Grelich's propensity for climbing out on an unstable premise and inviting someone to knock him off. "I was writing a story about a similar situation—it's an old theme, you know—and all I found were complications. Christ, even my complications had complications."

That got a mild laugh from Esther, and a chuckle from Solomon. Even Grelich gave a sour grunt of approval.

"Boychick," said Grelich, "I didn't know you were a writer."

"Well, scarcely a writer," Ritchie said. "But I have published a few things in a magazine. An online magazine, no pay, but they get some good names."

"You're a writer?" Jakob the waiter asked. He had been listening to the conversation while serving the dishes.

"Well, I do write," Ritchie said. His recent experiences with real professional writers, who posted messages and comments on his Message Board from time to time, had convinced him that his best policy was to make no public claims for himself, at least not until he had a few professional sales.

"A writer," Jakob mused, drying his hands on his apron. "I'm in the publishing business myself."

"You're a publisher?" Grelich asked.

"No, I'm a translator. From the Rumanian. I have a Rumanian science-fiction writer I translate for."

"You translate into English?" Grelich asked

"Of course, English, what else? Urdu?"

Ritchie said, "What is this writer's name?"

He couldn't make it out even after several repetitions, so he decided to learn it later, and write it down, see if the name turned out to be of any importance.

"Has he published?" Ritchie asked.

"In English, no. In Rumanian, plenty. It's only a matter of time before I sell him here."

"You're his agent, too?" Ritchie asked.

"I have that honor."

Ritchie wanted to ask Leiber how good his agent contacts were, and whether he was taking on any new clients. But he couldn't find a way of slipping it into the conversation. He decided he'd come back to Ratstein's on his own some other time, go into the matter again, without Solomon and Esther, and, with a little luck, without Grelich. For a beginning writer it was always worthwhile checking out an agent, no matter what else he did.

"Anyhow," Grelich said, "we're here to discuss this situation I've got, with this goy lodged in my head."

No one had any ideas about it. They considered Ritchie's suggestion that they all return to his apartment. But Solomon was tired and had an appointment in the early evening; Grelich had had enough argument for the day, and Esther was looking forward to her late afternoon television.

They all agreed to meet tomorrow evening, first at the East Broadway cafeteria, then, after Ritchie said he'd pick up the tab, at Ratstein's.

Exhaustion ended the night for both Ritchie and Grelich. Ritchie had a long, dreamless sleep in his own bed.

In the morning, after Ritchie made coffee, they agreed that it was time to go downtown to the MMT sales office and find out what had gone wrong.

Grelich was feeling a little funny about this. His desire to kill himself had abated remarkably. In fact, his suicidal urge had vanished.

Replacing it was an unexpected zest for life, the strongest he had ever known.

It was difficult to account for this. Maybe the medical procedure, even though it had not killed him, had driven philosophical despair out of his head. These problems, which had recently driven him to suicide, seemed academic to him now, even puerile. Why kill yourself because you can't decide whether God exists or not?

Ritchie for his part wanted to own his own headspace uncluttered with Grelich. But he liked Grelich's friends. Esther looked like she had been a classy lady. Solomon was interesting. Ritchie hadn't known there were any black Jews. He wanted to find out how this had come about.

And there was Leiber, a possible agent contact.

Of course, Leiber was not a friend of Grelich's, but Ritchie owed the meeting to his association—or amalgamation? —with Grelich.

Ritchie also had a well-developed sense of fairness. It didn't seem right for him to bring about the death of the man whose presence had helped him meet Leiber, a man who, if he was a real agent, could change his life.

Despite that, he hated the idea of Grelich being in his head with him. Was he maybe even snooping on Ritchie's memories?

Grelich was acting correctly, however. He didn't stop them from going to the MMT office to find out about his aborted death, even though with his superior control of the body—after all, he was the original occupant—he could have prevented the move, could have made them both stay in the apartment all day, or walk in the park, or see a movie.

Instead, they taxied down to 23rd Street.

Grelich, with Ritchie aboard, entered the offices of MMT and told the receptionist that he wanted to see Sven Mayer, the president.

They waited while the receptionist whispered into the phone. Ritchie was expecting they'd be told Mayer wasn't in, they would have to talk with some flunky who would tell them he knew nothing about this but would get back to him "as soon as possible."

But no such thing happened. The receptionist told them that Mr. Mayer was in his office, expecting them—last on the left at the end of the corridor.

Mayer was a short, stocky white-haired man. "Come in," he called when they knocked at the door. "Mr. Grelich! And Mr. Castleman is in there with you?"

"I am," Ritchie said. "And I demand an explanation."

"Of course you do," Mayer said. "Come in, have a seat. Coffee? Something stronger?"

"Coffee, black, no cream," Grelich said.

Mayer said a few words into the phone. "It's on its way. Gentlemen, I am so sorry... "

"You didn't return our calls," Ritchie said.

"I apologize. Miss Christiansen, our regular receptionist, left early when Nathan didn't show up at the lab. She didn't come in today. The one outside is a temp. When I reached Miss Christiansen today by phone, she claimed she didn't know anything about the situation."

"Hah!" said Grelich.

Mayer went on, "So far I have been unable to locate Nathan, the lab tech, the one who actually did your operation. Or botched it, I should say."

"Nathan," Grelich said darkly.

"He is the one we will have to talk to, the only one likely to have an explanation for how this sorry situation came to pass."

"But where is this Nathan?" Ritchie asked.

Mayer shrugged. "I phoned his boarding house, he wasn't there. I talked with his rabbi, whom he gave as his main reference when he applied for this job. His Rabbi, Zvi Cohen, said he hadn't spoken with Nathan in over a week. I went myself to the handball courts at 92nd and Riverside, at the rabbi's suggestion. None of the players had seen Nathan in several days."

"Have you notified the police yet?"

"I shall have to, if he doesn't show up very soon. I have no other way to trace him."

Ritchie asked, "What about my own body? The Castleman body?"

"I'm afraid it didn't survive the transfer," Mayer said. "As we expected. It has been disposed of according to your instructions."

Hearing that his body was irrevocably gone gave Ritchie a pang of regret. It hadn't been a particularly nice body, but it had been his for a long time. And now he had no physical body. Except for Grelich's body, and Grelich didn't seem so keen on giving it up any longer.

Back at his apartment, Ritchie decided it was time to find Nathan Cohen, the missing tech who was probably responsible for the whole megillah, a word that Grelich supplied him with.

But before he could get started with that, he got a telephone call, which Grelich didn't prevent him from answering.

"Ritchie Castleman here," he said.

Mr. Castleman? I am Edward Simonson. Mr. Mayer has recently hired me to run the lab. I am a graduate of CCNY, fully accredited and certified. I worked for two years at the Zeitgeist Institute in Zurich. If you want—"

Grelich said, "What is this?"

"This is Mr. Grelich speaking now?"

"Yes, it is. What do you want?"

"I am authorized by Mr. Mayer to tell you that if you wish to return to the lab, we assure you that the operation and removal will be properly conducted at this time, and at no cost to you."

"You'll make sure I die this time?" Grelich said.

"Well... Yes, that was your original intention in coming to MMT, was it not?"

"That was then and now is now."

"Does that mean you've changed your mind?"

"I'm thinking it through again," Grelich said. "Look, we're not interested right now. We have a few matters to sort out first. We'll get back to you."

Grelich hung up. Ritchie was glad Grelich hadn't immediately accepted this offer to correct his bungled suicide. He didn't want to see Grelich die. But he wasn't too happy that he was going to have to continue sharing a body with a near stranger.

Grelich said to Ritchie, "We need to find out what went wrong."

"Of course," Ritchie said.

The telephone rang again. This time Grelich picked it up.

Mr. Castleman?" a female voice asked.

"This is Grelich."

"Mr. Grelich, this is Rachel Christiansen. I'm the regular receptionist at the MMT Company. I wanted to call and apologize for what I have done to you—not on purpose, I assure you—I never imagined—"

"What did happen?" Ritchie broke in.

"It's such a complicated story I really think we should meet—that is, if you have the time... "

"I got the time!" Ritchie said. "Where? When?"

"There's a sort of coffee shop near where I live. That's in The Bronx, or maybe it's upper Manhattan—I'm new in the city and I only know how to get to work and back."

"What's the place called?"

"The Brown something or other. Cow? Sheep? I'm not sure. I never go in there. It looks—shady."

"Address?"

"Let me see, I get on the subway at 167th Street and Jerome Avenue, and the Brown whatever it is is two blocks downtown from the entrance, that would be at 165th Street, on the east side of Jerome Avenue. Unless it's two blocks uptown—forgive me, I'm usually much more together than this—but recent events—"

"I know," Ritchie said. "I understand. Look, we'll get a cab. Probably take half an hour to get to you in the Bronx. Is that OK?"

"Certainly, Mr. Castleman. It's the least I owe you. Though I'm not sure the place is entirely savory—"

"How bad can a coffee shop be?" Grelich broke in. "We'll be there."

Grelich hung up the phone.

"I was going to ask for her home address and telephone number," Ritchie said.

"Don't complicate matters, she'll be there."

The taxi ride was a trip in itself, and not without its own share of humor and pathos. But it doesn't bear on our story, so we skip it, mentioning only that they found the Brune Vache on 166th Street and Jerome Avenue, and left a Cuban taxi driver wondering why a well-dressed guy like Ritchie was going to a place that was known to serve the worst coffee in the five boroughs. Must be Mafia-related, the driver decided.

Rachel Christiansen was inside, at a table near the door, a cup of tea in front of her. The place was dark, and nearly empty. Rachel was an overweight, sweet-faced woman in her late twenties. Her face was framed in fluffy light brown hair. She stood up when Castleman walked in.

"Mr. Castleman? I am Rachel Christiansen. I am so sorry for what happened. Believe me, I had no idea..."

"What happened?" Ritchie asked.

"Well, I can only guess. It might be something else entirely."

"Just tell me what you think."

"Well, as I said, I really don't know. But Nathan was very conflicted about the work he had been hired to do. Or would be doing. You were his first subject. But the very idea of taking a human life—even with the consent of the owner of that life—seemed to him sacrilegious."

"So what was he doing in the job?" Ritchie asked.

"Well, at the start he didn't really know it would involve taking a human life. I mean, he knew but I guess he blocked that part out. He needed the job so. He had just arrived here from San Antonio, Texas, to attend Rabbi Tomasi's Torah studies class. Rabbi Tomasi also came from San Antonio. I believe he knows Nathan's parents."

"Was Nathan studying for the rabbinate?" Grelich asked.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Did he want to become a rabbi?"

"I would prefer he answer that himself," Rachel said. "It is a little personal. And anyhow, I don't really know. I think he had been planning to, but was having second thoughts. He came to one of our meetings, you know, and asked our pastor some questions."

"Meetings?" Grelich asked.

"At the International Circle of Christian Friendship of Fort Wayne, Indiana, which has a branch here on 173rd Street."

"What sort of questions did he ask?" Ritchie asked.

"They had to do with the proper relations between God and man in our secular age. Obviously, our pastor didn't approve of murder."

"Suicide is not exactly murder," Grelich said.

"Murder of the self is still murder," Rachel said. "And it's still a sin, even if Mr. Nietzsche did approve of it."

"How did Nietzsche get into this?" Grelich asked.

"Nathan was always quoting him. And Camus."

"Aha!" Grelich said. "He must have been quoting the Camus who says that whether or not to suicide is the only real question."

"That must have been the one," Rachel said.

"And he talked about an old Greek. Sissy-something?"

"Sisyphus?" Grelich guessed.

"This Nathan sounds like a man after my own heart," Grelich said.

"Do you really think so, Mr. Castleman?" Rachel asked, her disapproving attitude evident.

"This is Grelich speaking," Grelich said. "I'm here, too, due to your boyfriends' change of heart or failure of nerve or whatever it was."

"This is so bewildering," Rachel said. "You're the one with the deeper voice?"

"Yes, and the imaginary payes. Never mind. What else did Nathan talk about?"

"I scarcely know... One time he talked about the moneychangers in the temple. I think he was referring to Mr. Mayer. Anyhow, he didn't approve."

"Money changers have to earn a living, too," Grelich said.

"Let's not get off the subject," Ritchie said. "Rachel, why do you think you're responsible?"

"I encouraged Nathan to follow his conscience. I told him that was the truest voice of God within him. I think I had some influence over him. But believe me, I never dreamed he would take matters into his own hands—if that's what he did."

"Do you know where we can find Nathan Cohen?" Ritchie asked.

Rachel opened her purse and took out a slip of paper. "Here is his address, and his rabbi's address. That's all I know, all I can do for you. Oh, one thing more. Nathan is very fond of chess. He took me to a chess club once. I don't remember where it was. Midtown? Downtown? It was very nice."

Nathan wasn't at the Marshall, but they found him at the Manhattan Chess Club on West 9th Street in Greenwich Village. The director pointed him out—he was the tall, skinny, pale, dark-haired young man hunched behind a Nimzoindian defense on board 1. The Hungarian grandmaster, Emil Bobul, was playing white. Bobul had dropped in for a casual game, but it had become a hard-fought contest. Nathan was bent over the board, one hand propping his jaw, the other hand touching the chess clock.

After a while Nathan looked up, recognized Grelich, thought for a minute, pursed his lips, shook his head and leaned over and whispered something to Bobul. Bobul shook his head. Nathan murmured something else. Bobul shrugged. Nathan turned down his king, got up, and walked over to Grelich.

"Mr. Grelich," he said, "I believe I owe you an explanation."

"If you would be so kind," Grelich said.

Over coffee in a nearby coffee shop, Nathan tried to explain why he had aborted the operation.

"I knew I shouldn't do anything to screw this up," Nathan said, referring to the transfer operation. "Suicide and body-transfer are legal, you don't fool around with government-sanctioned procedures. I transferred Mr. Castleman without moral difficulty. If Grelich wanted to share his body with Castleman, it was no skin off my nose. But when it came time to turn Grelich off—to shatter his electro-chemical connections—assign him to death—well, I hesitated. My hesitation turned into a long delay. And finally I just walked out of there. I reminded myself that I took this job to turn the dials and press the buttons. But now it was getting too personal. They want me to play executioner. Consciously, that is. That was too much. I got out of there."

It was after eleven at night when Grelich and Ritchie got back to Ritchie's apartment. They stopped for dinner first at an Irish bar nearby. Despite Grelich's vegetarianism, he made no objection when Ritchie ordered a corned beef sandwich, home fries, a small green salad, and a pint of Killian's Red.

"I hope you don't object to this," Ritchie said, gesturing with his sandwich.

"Why should I object? I sold you my body. If you want to fill it with treif junk food, that's your business."

"Another beer?"

"Suit yourself."

Ritchie didn't order another. He was afraid he'd be going to the bathroom all right. He had been wondering about how the night would go. Last night had been easy, he'd been exhausted. But tonight? It was like the first time. He felt uncomfortable, having to sleep with Grelich, even though there was just one body involved. Would he be able to sleep at all? Last night he had been exhausted and in shock. But tonight? He hoped the body would sleep when it was ready.

But whose body was it? Did this body even know which mind it belonged to? Had the body itself—neither Castleman nor Grelich, but a representative of the body only—had this body witnessed the change of title?

At the apartment, Grelich took a shower, then found a set of Ritchie's pajamas, and undressed and put them on. Without discussing it with Ritchie, he lay down on the bed, turned off the bedside lamp, tucked his arm under the pillow, and fell asleep.

Ritchie lay there, uncomfortable, wide-awake, watching lights and shadows cross the ceiling from cars in the street far below.

He tried to resign himself to a sleepless night. He watched the play of light and shadow across the ceiling—a weaving, hypnotic pattern. He felt miserable that he didn't have a body of his own, so that he could get up, fix himself a sandwich, watch some television, or play a game on his computer. Instead, with Grelich in control of the body, he had to lie here maybe all night watching the lights on the ceiling. He couldn't even get up and fix himself a drink. He'd have to talk to Grelich about that, if this situation went on much longer. Which he fervently hoped it would not... How could he sleep in an unfamiliar body, sharing his headspace with a man he scarcely knew? Given the circumstances, anyone would have insomnia. So thinking, he fell asleep.

He began to dream. In his dream he was walking down a long dark corridor toward a closed door with light coming from under it.

The door swung open. Ritchie walked in.

He was in a small, dark room. The ceiling slanted down. It seemed to be an attic room. In front of him was a plain wooden table. On it was a lighted candle in a pewter holder.

Behind the table, at the end of the room, he could see a tall window. It had no shade or curtain, and through the glass Ritchie could see the darkness of a city night, a darker shade than the darkness in the room.

Now he made out the middle distance. There were two men seated behind the table facing him. The one to his right, near the end of the table, wore dark, shapeless clothes, and had a yarmulke on his head. He was old, with a skinny, stubbly face. He had wire spectacles pushed up on his forehead. There was a parchment on the table in front of him, and he had a steel-nibbed pen in his right hand.

The other man was also old, but he was large and hearty looking. He wore dark clothes, a black beaver hat, and black horn-rimmed glasses.

He had a sort of shawl thrown over his shoulders. He had a white beard that came down to his mid-chest.

He looked up when Ritchie entered the room. "So come in. It's time, already. Did you bring the katubah?"

The skinny man said, "I have it, rabbi." Turning to Ritchie, he said, "I am the scribe. It's customary for the plaintiff to bring his own writing instruments and parchment. But in this modern age of ours, who's got? So I make you a gift of my pen and parchment. Maybe you'll be good enough to loan them to me so I can make out the document?"

"Yeah, sure, OK," Ritchie said, not sure what was going on.

The rabbi said, "You're not Jewish yourself, are you, Mr. Castleman?"

"No, I'm not," Ritchie said. The rabbi didn't give him any particular look, but Ritchie felt it was somehow not OK for him not to be Jewish. He restrained himself from apologizing.

"Let's get on with the ceremony," the rabbi said. He coughed and cleared his throat. "It has been brought to my attention that you wish to be separated from Moses Grelich, your mind mate. If this is so, please state it."

"You got it," Ritchie said. "I wish to be separated from Moses Grelich."

The rabbi picked up a little memorandum pad, opened it and indicated that Ritchie should repeat after him. "Moses Grelich sold me his body, to be my exclusive possession. A medical ceremony was made, but I didn't get the unencumbered body. When I got in, Grelich was still there. Despite this breach in the arrangement, I let him reside in the body with me while he made other arrangements. It is now time for him to vacate."

After Ritchie had finished saying the words, he could hear the dry scratching of the scribe's pen on the parchment.

"Therefore," the rabbi said, "I, Rabbi Schmu-el Shakovsky, empowered by the civil law of this state and by my congregation, do demand that you, Moses Grelich, tell us you are here."

"I'm here, rabbi," Grelich said. "But you know I've never been a believer. I don't even believe in God."

"You are not bound by God. You are bound by tradition."

"I accept that, rabbi. I'm here, aren't I?"

"On my command you will vacate your body, which, by your own assertion and willful act, is no longer yours."

"I was in a weird mood when I made the agreement," Grelich said. "Life had been a disappointment. But this half-life isn't exactly paradise, either."

Rabbi Shakovsky said, "I will now sign my name to this document. When the last stroke of my name has been written, you will vanish, Moses Grelich, and go wherever you are to go to next."

The scribe handed the rabbi the pen and pushed the parchment toward him. The rabbi began, very slowly, to sign his name.

And Ritchie began to think. He was remembering that he hadn't had a chance yet to question Grelich about Nietzsche or Camus. They both sounded important. There was Jakob, the waiter-translator-agent. Ritchie knew that on his own, without Grelich he'd never go back to Ratstein's. He'd convince himself that the agent thing was nonsense, how could a broken-down old Rumanian waiter in a Jewish restaurant do anything for him in the American market? And he'd probably never see Solomon again. Or if he did, what could he say to him? He wanted to ask Solomon about his life, but Solomon wasn't likely to talk about the good old days back in Addis Ababa and how black people became Jews when he knew Ritchie was responsible for his friend Grelich's death.

Grelich, of course, had no one to blame but himself. He had set himself on the path of death all by himself. But was it the act of a friend to go along with it and help him out when the suicide didn't go right in the first place? Was it even the act of a compassionate stranger to help Grelich complete what he had begun, probably not in his right mind?

Ritchie thought about his own small and non-interacting family. His mother was dead. His father had passed away a few years ago in an expensive rest home in Arizona. His younger sister was studying Library Sciences at Vassar. He never saw her, they didn't correspond.

This new family, which had sprung up around Grelich and included him, was a strange and exciting experience. He'd have to give up all that once he got rid of Grelich.

It was suddenly in Ritchie's mind to call off this ceremony, cancel the execution. There was enough room in his head for Grelich and himself!

The rabbi finished his signature and looked at him with his eyebrows raised.

"Nu?" the rabbi said.

The rabbi made a gesture. The flame of the candle flared, and died out.

Ritchie sat up in bed. Wow, what a dream. He looked around. He touched his face—the new familiar face of Moise Grelich.

Ritchie said, "Grelich, are you there?"

No answer.

"Grelich! Come out! Don't sulk. Let's talk."

Still nothing from Grelich.

"Oh, Grelich," Ritchie said, his heart breaking, "where are you? Tell me you're still here!"

"So nu, where else would I be?" Grelich's familiar voice said in his head.

"Christ, you had me scared. I had this dream. I dreamed a rabbi was divorcing us."

"Are we husband and wife that a rabbi should divorce us?"

"No, but we're pretty close. Roommates. Mindmates. In some ways, closer than husband and wife."

"What a line of gab you've got."

"It's not gab! I want you here. I want you to call Solomon and Esther and have them meet us at Ratstein's this evening."

"Consider it done. You want to talk to that Rumanian agent again? Ritchie have you no common sense?"

"If I think he's too much of a shyster," Ritchie said, "I won't ask him to represent me. But maybe he's an honest schlemiel. We'll see."

"I got some stories you could write," Grelich said.

"I'll be pleased to hear them."

"That's for tomorrow," Grelich said. "For tonight, what do you say we get some more sleep?"

Ritchie grunted his assent. Again, Grelich fell asleep almost at once. Ritchie lay on the bed and watched the lights and shadows on the ceiling. At last he fell into a slumber. His last thought was, more than likely there would be a tomorrow for him as well as for Grelich.

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