

The Upgrade

Denise Ng had been processing souls for eleven years, and she'd stopped counting the metaphors around month eight. The pods weren't pods—they were "transition suites." The liquid wasn't liquid—it's "viscosity-neutral preservation medium." And the consciousness being suctioned from a dying woman's skull wasn't a consciousness at all, not legally. It was "a digitized personality architecture eligible for eternal licensing."

She'd stopped correcting people around year three.

"Next," Denise called.

The man who approached her counter was wearing a suit that cost more than her monthly rent, which meant he was either a tech executive or someone who desperately wanted to appear to be one. His shoes had never touched pavement. Denise could tell.

"Hi there." He smiled with too many teeth. "I'm here about my grandmother. Well, my grandmother's data. Well—" He laughed nervously. "This is weird. I'm here to upgrade my grandmother."

Denise tapped her tablet. "Policy says tier upgrades can only be requested by the primary license holder. Are you the listed beneficiary on ED-2047891?"

The smile flickered. "Well, I'm her only grandchild. She doesn't have a husband anymore. I'm basically—"

"Policy also states that tier upgrades require a notarized intent form signed by the consciousness itself, unless said consciousness has been classified as dormant or unstable."

"Right, so here's the thing." He leaned in. "She's been... upgraded before. My parents did the base package back in '48. But I think the base package is, you know, pretty minimal? Like, I visited her last month and she asked me the same question four times. About my job."

Denise nodded. "Standard recall degradation for Tier 3. The eighteen-year licensing package doesn't include memory reinforcement subroutines."

"So if I wanted her to, you know, *remember* things better—"

"You'd need the Tier 6 licensing package. That includes quarterly cognitive refresh, plus access to expanded emotional modeling. She could experience joy again, sir. Actual joy. The Tier 6 matrix is certified to produce genuine happiness responses in ninety-three percent of subjects."

He was already nodding. "Okay. What do I need to sign?"

"Thirty-seven thousand upfront, plus the annual maintenance fee of four thousand two hundred. After the first decade, we transition to the century rate, which is—"

"Done. Can I do it today?"

Denise had stopped being surprised by this years ago. People would spend anything to keep Grandma around, even a Grandma who asked the same question four times and didn't quite remember his name. Maybe *especially* a Grandma like that. The imperfect one was still *hers*, after all. The perfect replica would belong to the company.

"I'll need a deposit of ten thousand to initiate the upgrade sequence. The remaining balance will be billed upon successful consciousness transfer."

He swiped his card before she finished speaking.

Denise processed the transaction and watched him leave, already composing the email he'd receive in three to five business days: *Your grandmother has been successfully upgraded. Please note that the enhanced consciousness matrix may exhibit minor personality variations from the original baseline. These variations are not defects but rather natural byproducts of expanded cognitive capacity. For reference, your grandmother may now enjoy: gourmet dining, emotional depth, philosophical curiosity, and an increased interest in activities she previously found boring.*

She'd written that email template herself, back when she was a junior processing associate. Her supervisor had called it "emotionally intelligent copy." Her therapist had called it "a nightmare you get paid to write."

"Next."

The woman who approached was in her sixties, wearing a hospital bracelet and the particular stillness of someone who had recently received bad news. Denise recognized the look. Everyone in this office recognized it.

"I have an appointment," the woman said. "For the self-storage option."

"Ma'am, the self-storage option is for individuals who have already processed their consciousness and wish to place it in stasis. You're here for a consultation about *your own* end-of-life preferences."

"Right." The woman sat down heavily. "I'm dying. The doctors gave me eight months. Maybe less with complications."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's cancer, so it's at least interesting." She almost smiled. "I did the math. If I go with the basic preservation package—the one that's like forty thousand—my daughter can't afford her tuition. If I go with the fancy one, we're talking a quarter million, and that's before the maintenance fees. I looked it up. Some families are paying more in monthly consciousness fees than they are in rent."

Denise nodded. This was a familiar conversation.

"But here's what I don't understand." The woman's voice was steady, which meant she'd rehearsed this. "If I'm getting scanned anyway—my memories, my personality, all of it—why can't my daughter just get the basic version? Why do I have to pay extra to let my own kid talk to me after I'm gone?"

"It's a licensing structure, ma'am. The preservation fee covers the infrastructure. The access fee —"

"I know what the access fee covers. It covers *you*." The woman gestured at the walls, the ceiling, the row of transition suites in the back where people came to have their minds uploaded while their bodies were politely encouraged to stop existing. "You charge people to talk to their dead mothers. That's the product."

"Ma'am, I understand this is difficult."

"No, you don't." The woman stood up, and for a moment she looked like someone who had never been told no, who had spent sixty-five years assuming the world would make sense if she just insisted upon it enough. "I'm going to die in eight months. I'm going to die *knowing* that my daughter can't afford to have a conversation with me. Not because it's impossible. Because it's not profitable."

"The self-storage option," Denise said quietly, "allows you to preserve your consciousness at the base rate. Your daughter would receive a viewing license for three hundred dollars per hour. That's significantly more affordable than—"

"The full conversation license. I know. Three thousand an hour for interactive discourse. Eighteen thousand for the first hour, then twelve for each subsequent hour, with a twelve-hour maximum per calendar year."

"That's correct."

The woman sat back down.

"Here's what I'll tell you," Denise said. She didn't know why she was telling it. It wasn't in the script. "The people who design these packages, they don't think about it like you're thinking about it. To them, it's just pricing tiers. Like airline seats. You want more comfort, you pay more. Except—"

"Except my comfort is my *continuing existence*."

"Right."

They sat in silence for a moment. In the back, a transition suite beeped. Someone's grandfather had just been uploaded. Probably a Tier 7, given the celebration noises coming from the family waiting area.

"You know what I keep thinking about?" The woman's voice had gone soft. "I keep thinking about my grandmother. She died when I was twelve. We buried her, and that was it. Gone. Not existing anywhere. And at the time, I thought that was the worst thing that could happen. Now I'm sixty-six, and I'm looking at the menu, and I'm thinking—"

"The basic package isn't *nothing*," Denise said. "It's still you. Your daughter can still visit. It's just—"

"It's just expensive. It's just *priced*." The woman laughed. "I spent my whole life working. I did everything right. And now the bill comes due, and the payment plan is: your continued existence, tiered by income."

Denise didn't have anything to say to that. She pulled up the self-storage intake forms and started typing.

"Next."