

The Memory Thief

a short story by R. E. Warner

The amount of intensity and determination always etched into his sweat-dappled brow intimidates enough to make even the occasional onlooker presume him to be a neurosurgeon, mathematician, or rocket scientist. He is never aware of these disembodied suspicions floating around him, consumed as he usually is by his thoughts. And any preening bystanders never guess that they are actually right a lot of the time. Even at a heavy pace (somewhere between 148 and 155 beats per minute), his vermilion eyes are as still as frozen ponds as they search inward for answers—answers to questions about the brain—questions that plague him. A traveling electrical whirlwind surges through the occipital lobe at the back of his skull, forming the steady pulse of a million strands of electrically charged tissue, networks of cells that somewhere in the visual cortex may eventually point to answers that hide behind every newspaper machine and garbage can he dashes past, again, none of which he sees, lost in self-interrogation. Somewhere branching out from the hippocampus, the seat of memory, another million strands form the pristine hologram of his patient's fMRI, an image that he is searching over, looking for an explanation for her newfound inability to recognize faces: prosopagnosia.

The cadence of his foot thumps and the course he is on are given over to the work of the muscle memory hardwired in the motor cortex, as the environment of Central Park West melts away into the vacuum of lost perception, wherever it is that perceptions in the mind go to die. His determination is born of a need to know—to consume—information. Like a horror flick zombie seeking out its macabre pabulum, no detail, no study, no paper, no case study, escapes his notice. What he did, the art of what he did, was not the, albeit precise, slice-and-dice of other surgeons digging into muscle and bone—what *he* was cutting into were the concrete ideas and memories of his patients. A mistake did not result in sutures; it resulted in the loss of that which is most precious: the soul. Or some fraction of the soul as a neurosurgeon understood it to be, anyway. The word soul was a little

pretentious to him. But something ineffable in a human mind could be wiped out by his scalpel; something irreplaceable.

His predilection has left him without many friends or a significant relationship for the most part, its gargantuan appetite too ravenous to allow for trivial concerns like feelings and the banality of so-called "lives". "Feelings." Another word that gives him a sense of derision. Primitive things. Most emotion was located in or around the amygdala, one of the oldest evolved parts of the brain, one of the most animalistic. He felt it was almost pathetic to be guided by such compulsions and it was hard to have a reasonable conversation with anyone who allowed himself or herself to be persuaded by feelings. They were sticky, absorbing, inconsiderate. But he couldn't afford to get caught up in all that. His current hunt lay in the fusiform gyrus where facial recognition occurred. The tumor would be there. He can see, in his mind's eye, the pussy yellow-brown mass. He takes a deep breath and focuses.

Running freed him from the incessant monologue of debate concerning all the decisions—frequently life or death—that he had to make. When plucking a tumor out of the tissue, it was never the pure choice of a savior. To not take enough of a tumor meant regrowth and death; too much would result in brain damage. So the running quelled the choices, but never the questions. When he hits 60th street he turns around, breathing heavy, (oxygen to the brain!) to head back to his apartment, hardly thinking about the change in course. Rather, as he turns, he closes his eyes and reminds himself that now he has fifteen minutes left to try to achieve an internal quiet, the alpha wave pattern of meditation, before the onslaught of phone messages, emails, patients, greetings, hand shakes, meetings... feelings. He turns his attention like a radar dish to the urgency and nobility of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 playing out between his ears, and sets into the final twenty block obstacle course of cracks, curbs, streets, cars and bodies.

* * *

The television chatters at him as he toasts a whole wheat multi-grain bagel. It is a window of chaos and color leaking into his zen-like gray palette and cleanliness—"emptiness," others have remarked—of the apartment. He wonders, only briefly, if he always eats meals in front of the television to simulate company. He was never sure. It was the only time he watched television. There are what are called mirror neurons in the brain, specifically "designed" to deal with modeling human interaction, abstracting from it,

deciphering it, and turning it into some sense of yourself in the situations in which you observe others: the mind's model of other minds. In a very real sense, you are never alone. Every one you have ever known, their movements, are encoded in you. But he's never sure about his motives—could just be the noise. Maybe it was just something to stare at.

Then, of course, there was the suspicion. He keeps the television tuned to CNN in some effort to keep a spyglass on a world that he does not trust, the macroscopic world. He did not think the picture from CNN, or any of the 24 hour cable news channels, was even remotely complete. You'd have to be delusional to think that. So, why watch it?—The low definition, coarse-grained picture of the world—none of it had to do with him. He had nothing to do with it, the world. Politicians, celebrities, workers, criminals, industries, wars, stock markets; none of it truly affected him... unless it all came crashing down, of course. So it had always seemed like a good idea to keep at least one eye on the experiment that was human civilization... just in case. 6.5 billion brains, and counting, all desperately sending feelers out into a fuzzy reality just to decipher one another as obstacle or mirror.

The television now: "Damon Carver, a ten year-old boy from Portland, Oregon, was found by police thanks to a bit of new sci-fi technology—get this: the boy was found when police were able to identify him by a microchip implanted in the boy's arm by his parents."

Morning news anchors, Miles and Soledad O'brien banter like water-cooler colleagues for a while about "Science!" until the pundits are all paraded out in their satellite connection squares, one to howl at the loss of privacy with a twist of what-is-the-world-coming-to; the other to blindly list the benefits of constant surveillance that would only be used by government agencies for good. Jacob thinks, *yeah, because technology's only ever been used for good*. RFID chips implanted in kids. Barbaric. Still though, he didn't know what it was like to have one of your own snot-nosed half-copies running around. It was pretty clear that brain chemistry changed dramatically as a result of parenting. Could it change an idea—a single thought even? Would an RFID chip implanted in a child suddenly seem like a good idea if he had one?

And then in the middle of that thought, with a bite of bagel in his mouth, the television throwing out light into the room, Jacob just drifts away.

His eyes gloss over and he vanishes. Waves of billions of protons of varying frequencies of color fly out from the television 29.97 times per second, smashing into his eyes where the rods and cones of the specialized neurons behind the lenses of his ocular

spheres detect and shuttle the signals on to be processed at near light speed, but nothing comes into view in his mind. Eyes, body, brain, present and accounted for.

He is gone.

Elsewhere in the room a clock ticks as reality churns briefly without him.

Seven minutes and twenty-three seconds later Jacob comes out of it. He spits out the bite in his mouth, suddenly unsure of what it is—where he is. Confused, he looks to the television where they have moved on to another story. He looks to the clock and sees the missing seven to ten minutes.

Pushing himself up from his stool he wobbles to his refrigerator and looks across the days of a calendar. He makes a mark on today: a tiny black dot in one corner. Then he counts backwards from that dot and flips the calendar one month back, still counting, to the last dot: 22 days. He counts back to the dot prior to that: 34 days. And he counts back to the time before that, his eyes wide open with the Hunger: 37 days. He could continue on like this but he already knows the pattern. Epilepsy. A petit mal seizure—sometimes called absence seizures. The intervals are shrinking. Some malformed rorschach of blackness on his own angiogram is coming to devour his consciousness.

* * *

There's a knock at the door and then, "Hey, Jake,"

Jacob continues to read.

"Dr. Coooburn?"

Jacob sighs and looks up.

Dr. Reid Richards enters the room, sliding his hands into the pockets of his lab coat.

"Do I really have to call you doctor to get your attention?"

"No, Doctor. Jacob would suffice."

"All right fine, be that way. I'm just in a good mood is all." He waits for the question but Coburn doesn't look up. "Come with me to the lab—I need to show you something."

"What's that?"

"I don't wanna spoil it. Trust me. You're one of the few people on the planet who could appreciate this."

Flattery will get you everywhere. "All right then."

Jacob gets up from his desk, a ridiculously pristine affair when compared to any other desk at the Center, most of which are piles of academic papers, patient files, notepads, pens, conference schwag, anatomically correct models of brains and eyes and ears, computer print outs, and drug pamphlets. Dr. Jacob Coburn has nothing on his desk with the exception of the paper he is currently reading (squared up with the desk and with the finished pages facing down opposite the unread) and the patient file for his afternoon surgery. Richards often wonders to himself how Coburn finds the time, but then remembers that he's married and Coburn's not. And, of course, there's the fact that Coburn's likely an artificial intelligence of some kind. Coburn arrives at the hospital by five and leaves when he wants to go to bed. It's not fair. The pair of brain men walk down the hallway past offices and labs. "Long story short, some very intelligent nanostructure engineers over at MIT managed to create a long-chain protein that can act as an RFID chip."

"Really?"

"So I realized that there was some potential there in that we might be able to attach a structure like that to a dormant prion—or cage it anyway."

They arrive at Richards' lab and he opens the door with his security ID. Inside are white countertops piled up with metal boxes all whirring and beeping and oscillating. The space is more lit by the glow of computer monitors than the few desk lamps placed around the room, giving the lab a constantly shifting feeling. All along another wall are cabinets of rat cages with dozens of white rats in them. Jacob nods to Carl, Richards' big, jolly postdoc. Jacob disliked Carl for always being so jovial. It struck him as idiotic. Carl smiles back and Richards leads Jacob over to one particular rat cage covered in transmitters.

"We can add one more component to the RFID prion that will allow it to attach to a synapse and once there, the RFID portion of the molecule will be able to reverberate a radio frequency signal using part of the charge coming down the dendrite." Richards points to a computer monitor where a stream of massive numbers are scrolling by at illegible speeds. "Those are synaptic ID numbers."

Jacob stares at the numbers. There were probably 5 trillion neurons in a rat's brain. Each neuron might have up to 7,000 synapses where the neurons touch each other through

a thick web of connections of axons and dendrites. That meant that even a rat had up 10,000 trillion—10 quadrillion—synapses. Was this even possible? He'd never known Richards to pull his leg. "Of the entire brain?" he asked skeptically.

"Yeah."

Jacob just continues to stare at the numbers racing across the screen, occasionally looking at the rat surreptitiously sniffing through wood chips.

"Carl knows a pretty heavy duty programmer over at Columbia who's going to help us feed this data into a matrix, and from there we should be able to simulate a real-time visualization of the rat's brain."

"Jesus Christ," Jacob whispered.

"Yeah."

Jacob kept looking at the numbers flying by, the rat!—the rat's mind—digitized! There were rifts forming in reality around him, a chrysalis breaking open around his own mind as a completely new world began form around him.

He looked up at Reid, who was pleased with himself, "Jesus Christ, Reid."

"Yeah."

"Why the hell didn't you tell me about this sooner?"

"Well, we weren't even sure if the prions would attach properly or that once there we'd still be able to triangulate individual RFID signals. We just weren't sure if it was going to work."

"Well, it looks like its working!"

"Yup."

Carl laughs.

He looked from Reid to Carl and back to the numbers. Synapses. Individual synapses as numbers! "This changes everything."

Carl, "Well, Doc, do you want to see how it all works?"

"Yes. Yes I do."

Later on, back at his own office he finds himself drifting as he looks over the angiogram of a patient. With a synaptic level map, the precision of his work would become unprecedented. Suddenly the angiogram looks ridiculous, a magnifying glass compared to an electron microscope. Ridiculous! He turns to his office window, his glassy, glossy search-light eyes staring out into the new world. And somewhere in the back of his own brain, in the

back of his mind too, he feels a part of him rotting and seizing up because of that lack of precision.

"Dr. Coburn?"

Back still turned, "Yes."

"The Dreyfuses are here, along with doctors Flynn and Schanacter."

"Show them all in." He watches their reflections in the glass, the city growing pale as the sun moves behind a small cloud on the West Side. Chairs are moving, people speak. He moves over to the light box on one wall of his office as someone introduces him and he swaps out the angiograms there. Turning to everyone in the room, the saccades of his eyes' arcs fix on the blue eyes of a pale, blonde, frightened woman. Besides her sits her stern but equally frightened (Coburn knows) husband. He doesn't look at the neurologist or the resident. No need.

"I have total confidence that we can remove this tumor almost in full."

The woman reels a bit, having been expecting hello.

"You don't get a lot of good news in this line of work, but I can tell you that where your tumor is located makes this an ideal surgery—really the best odds that you can get." He stares like a trap.

"You think?" Mrs. Dreyfus manages to stammer out after a moment.

"I do. It is at the top of the basil ganglia region, inside a fold. This would not be a difficult operation, well... as far as brain surgery goes." A joke. But no hint of it on his face; like Death's straight man.

"Well, I don't know—I had so many questions—what about if we just leave it?"

Coburn looks to the woman's hands, shaking now, even resting on the arms of her chair. He looks to the back of his own hands and admires their steadiness. "Marylin!" he hollers lightly at his hand. Everyone else in the room seems shocked, but almost instantly, a secretary pokes her head in the door. "I want you to get Mrs..."

"Dreyfus."

"Dreyfus, yes, of course. I want you to get Mrs. Dreyfus a hot cup of green tea."

"Oh that's all right—" Mrs. Dreyfus began.

Coburn takes one step toward her. "I insist. It will help to calm your nerves. And right now, you need them." With a look he dispatches the secretary. Turning back to the angiogram for a moment, he says, thoughtfully, "If we leave the tumor it will eventually kill you." Staring at the image of the ghostly yellow walnut that is Mrs. Dreyfus's brain, Coburn

reasons that Mr. Dreyfus will now feel the need to weigh in and he waits for it. Often people felt that he, Dr. Jacob Coburn, doubted their intelligence. He did not. No one more than he understood the stunning intricacies of even the most mentally challenged individual, the most damaged brain. The true beauty of it. No, it was their insolence he found so hard to tolerate.

"What about other methods?" Mr. Dreyfus asks. "Isn't cutting into her skull jumping the gun here? What about chemotherapy?"

Coburn rubs the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger for just a moment. "If by jumping the gun you mean avoiding months and months of very painful therapy and debilitating sickness, then certainly you are correct that I'm jumping the gun."

Two quick steps and he is squatting next to Sandra Dreyfus, his hand on her hand. "Mrs. Dreyfus, the tumor is here." He points to his own thin, salt and pepper locks, ahead of and above his left ear. "We will make a very precise hole in the skull,"—the skull not her skull—relieves some of the pressure, making it clinical, he knows. "We will drain some fluid, remove the cancerous tissue, put the bone back. We could have it done by," he looks to the resident, who, used to the Show, is already looking at dates in a small notebook.

Mr. Dreyfus, "Now wait just a—"

"End of the month."

Coburn, "There. The end of the month. Problem gone."

"It's all just so fast." But he can see he already has her.

The secretary comes in with the tea. Mrs. Dreyfus smiles, still very nervous.

"Mrs. Dreyfus," still squatting by her side, "you are facing permanent, imminent damage. You do not have to."

Mr. Dreyfus is still half-cocked in his chair almost ready to storm out of the room it would seem. Mrs. Dreyfus, sensing this, puts her hand on his and pats it without looking at him. She is still staring into Jacob Coburn's rock-solid blue eyes. They radiate a cold confidence and icy reason. She could put her life in his hands. She knows it in that moment. Some probabilistic calculation deep in her brain, summed up and divided all of the looks she had ever received in her life, looks of lying, suspicion, guilt, cheating. Here now, in front of her, was the gaze of Truth. His calm was infectious. "Yes. Yes, you're right."

Coburn smiles, slightly, for the first time.

"Yes, let's do it as soon as possible."

Jacob takes her hand and squeezes. "Good. Okay."

Mr. Dreyfus relents impotently but with one last just-because protest, "Sandra, I really think that—" but she quiets him with a serene glance. Coburn's look is imprinted on her now and she shows it to her husband with the same effect. Everything was going to be just fine.

Looking to the resident and the neurologist, "Harry, Sam, if you all can take care of things here, there are several matters I have to attend to before evening rounds." Never finish the meeting. Always let them know you are the busiest neurosurgeon in New York City.

Harry and Sam just look at each other as Coburn leaves and exchange exasperated smiles. He might as well have taken a bow as he left. They'd seen him walk this tightrope of consultation so many times it was The Show. Mrs. Dreyfus looks almost enchanted by the idea of surgery, her eyes lit up with the glow of a light at the end of some tunnel and the passion of Jacob Coburn.

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In the monitor hued darkness of the laboratory, Coburn starts the machine up to run diagnostics. As it begins he checks his own vitals, writes them down and compares them to others he has taken over the last several days. Aside from the usual nervousness, everything looks to be in order and there are so far no apparent side effects from the injections. The detector had been built into a sophisticated small platform onto which the rats were placed and the program run, but by laying his head down on the platform he could run the program on himself, setting up the scanning settings first and then reaching out to hit the enter key. He felt like he was faxing his mind but for two weeks now the process had seemed totally harmless. Watching the diagnostics run across the computer screen he still marvels at the accuracy of the machine, and then, arriving at a crude text-based menu, he begins to set the machine up for a test run on one of the rats the way that Carl showed him. He waits for a moment, for the machine to begin its calibration of the detector and then he steps over to the rat cages and reaches for one nearest him.

((SHOCK! PANIC! movemovemoverun nam ger—a hand—kek—giant shadows PANIC))

Coburn reels back from the cage in a sudden panic that knocks him into the counter, print-outs spilling, as the rat scurries around in its cage. His heart rate has jumped and he cannot shake the feeling that something massive was falling down on him. He could feel it. Breathing deeply he looks around the science arcade of lights for some signal of what had happened. It was that feeling of something just appearing from out of the line of sight, but something massive, like a bear. He puts his hand to his heart and takes a deep breath. Gathering himself, he shakes it off after a couple of minutes—its all the lack of sleep. He takes a final deep breath and looks to make sure that the machine had not been roughed up in the commotion. It seems fine and he steps back over to the cages.

((Hand face?—ab bac NERVOUS WARNING erv FEAR—Coburn's face—Coburn's hand reaching—bars FEAR))

Stepping back from the cage like a magnet repulsed, Coburn covers his eyes with his hand. His vision had been momentarily blurred, coupled with hazy images—his own face! Shocks of sensations, sparks of feelings, blips of images. He feels disoriented, nauseous. The lesion—was the lesion was having some effect? But now the doorknob is jiggling ((work too latewhite farv tired no work erkerk)) Carl!—coming in the door. Coburn steps quickly back over to the prototype and types in one of the diagnostic codes for the rats, obliterating his own scanning codes. The computer begins churning out charts as Carl walks in and turns on the lights.

((SHOCK))

"Dr. Coburn, I—((worry—Coburn's face—he angry? GUILT)) —orking with the machine?"

"Uh. Yes. Hope you don't mind."

((CONCERN—the machine on the desk—looks okay))

"I, uh, I think I know what I'm doing. I just couldn't make time to look at it until after evening rounds, you see."

((PUZZLEMENT aks too fak hard sleep? tired too)) "Sure thing, Doc."

Coburn closes his eyes, to will away the thoughts that are plaguing him—puts his hand to his head.

((You all right?)) "You all right, Doc?"

"Yes! God, you know, Carl. The start from you coming in the door..

((scared himphone, gop me!))

I think I just really need to get to bed, you know?" The signals are absolutely exhausting, Carl's thoughts crammed in with his own, with no warning, surfacing like cruise missiles. "Anyway, I—

((seems weird abiv at radio sleep?))

I don't want to get in your way if you're here to work."

"Okay. ((not seem mad hofgood instern okay? You don't have to)) You don't have to ((worry about me)) worry about me, though, if you want to keep working with the equipment."

"No! ((calmrabbit)) No. I mean, that's okay. I should really head ((work so par hard danger ref patient?)) home. Coburn moves to the door, images of his own backside making it hard to know where he is. More images and feelings fade as he moves out of the room into the hallway. It must be the electromagnetic fields. Yes! The rats, Carl, their electro-magnetic fields are setting off the RFID prions, causing some sort of echo. But how could they be mirroring signals? He had to get home.

* * *

It was too stupid to work but he was desperate to do something and he had to test it out and found himself now standing in front of his neighbor's door at one o'clock in the morning. He had manufactured a skullcap out of aluminum foil and then concealed it with a stocking cap. Bizarre sites on the internet documented volumes of concerns about the effectiveness of so-called "tin foil hats" but there was at least some evidence that it would shield somewhat against electromagnetic radiation. Even if it just turned the "volume" down, that would be enough. Once he'd put on the stocking cap, the story from there practically invented itself and he'd grabbed the heaviest winter coat he had and gone across the hall to knock on the door, which was now unlocking. He feels a sense of agitation but

can't pinpoint it as his own—isn't sure if it is external or not. The door opens just enough for the neighbor to peer out, a chain drawn across her face. "Yes?"

"God, I'm so sorry about the time, but do you have heat right now?"

"Oh. Yes." He could tell that she recognized him now, he could sense it, but there were no massive intrusions.

"Unbelievable. Great. Well, I guess I'll give them a call. It's freezing in there." He thumbs back to his own door.

"I have a space heater you could have."

"Really? That would be just great."

* * *

His mind is finally free from the insipid clutter of sideways glances and concerned looks that had come his way just on his way to the locker room—everyone staring at his stupid hat. He had cancelled all his appointments and only come in for surgery. Everything but that would have to wait until he could figure out some other plan. He had waited in the locker room until other surgeons had left and then swapped his stocking cap for a surgical cap which did an even better job of hiding the aluminum. The O.R. was sparse, gray, dark and most importantly, quiet. He had gotten through the first two hours of surgery, primarily the trap-cut in the skull, without incident.

The EKG beeps rhythmically and the team, the residents, the anesthesiologist, and the nurses all wait quietly for him to continue. He closes one small open artery with an electric cauterizing gun and then gets ready for a probe of the tissue area. "Let's get the stereoscope in place." Two nurses move around behind him to roll a large scope and in a moment, in two corners of the room, large flatscreen monitors are lit up with the white gelatinous surface of the patient's temporal lobe magnified enormously. As they scuttle out of the way he steps up to the scope and peers in. He would start by locating the speech centers. "Tweezers. Label."

The patient, awake for the entire surgery, is mostly a pile of blue gauze napkins and plastic sheets. Her face is turned away from the surgeons and looking at the neurologist who is mostly there to talk the patient's dazed consciousness through the procedure. With his forefinger, Coburn presses gently against the tissue of the brain and ((Desert sky wide JOY huge motherfish filled with stars—silhouettes of saguaro—stay close stay close stay close—

skin moisture, someone touching him—rough holding rough hands sand—familiarface erf, naf eyes that love you glistening ek feeling tears JOY)) he pulls his finger away and steps back from the stereoscope with a jolt like he's been shocked.

For a moment he doesn't know where/who—he is. One of the nearby residents is coming at him—hand outstretched—and it comes flooding back, "Don't contaminate me, damn it! Just some sweat in my eye—someone get a rag over here." One of the nurses hurries to wipe his brow with a sterilized cloth. He is only just gaining back the feeling of where he ends and the patient begins. He takes a deep breath and "Okay." He sighs again. "I need a watch over here—one with seconds or a second hand or whatever." Again the team shuffles around him as a resident comes to stand near him. He can't make out who it is from just the eyes. "Okay. Stay close and when I say 'now' I want you to start counting. Out loud. Got that?"

If the resident is confused he refuses to show it. "Yes sir. Out loud."

"Okay." He steps back up to the stereoscope content to let the team think he is on to some new technique when Harry the neurologist chimes in, "That was memory, Jacob."

"Right. Thanks." Back at the stereoscope, "Tweezers. Label." A nurse hands over the requested items. Then he lines his finger up next to his initial probe. "All right, Now."

"O—"

((Purple black purple purple curves delicious curve purple petals. FREEDOM White edges my beauties. A shape—Lilacs—the smell ark arc ac heat light skin moist moisture—a greenhouse-lush see if Henry thinks green SOLACE everywhere all over everywhere—fireworks of flowers and color. Pure fresh chronosmell greenery humidity))

"—ne...Two..."

"Good! Stop." To himself quietly, "Okay, Coburn..." still up against the scope. He places the label on top of the tissue. "Okay." I can do this. He can hear Harry and the patient talking quietly but cannot make out what they're saying until he hears, "Lilacs." A shiver travels down his spine. He turns to the resident, "Okay, we're gonna' do it again, just like that. That was good."

"Yes sir."

"All right, root tip pick." The nurse hands it to him and he lines up his new angle and presses, "Now."

((PAINbreathebreathebreathebreathebreathe PAIN ball sphere jammed PAIN between his legs!—ohmygodohmygodohmygod—cramps PAIN—cramps—no more breath! fuckall faces all around—hand being squeezed—ohgodohgodohgodamnit!—out of breath!—someone shouting "Breathe!"—another voice "Push!"—the skin between his legs tearing apart—sweatpaincramps PAIN))—he screams.

"Aagh!" He backs away from the stereoscope again eyes shut hard, hands in front of him, searching. He bangs the stereoscope. He can hear voices all around him as he falls—is he pushed?—to a sitting position on the floor. Everyone, "Doctor!" or "Get him!" Someone else, "Get Hollings in here STAT!" He's clutching himself, coming back now. He's going to throw up but his stomach muscles, already cramped; he just gags.

One of the residents is pushing him back, pinning down his flailing arms. "Calm down, Doc! Calm down." He tries to push the resident off, "Get away." One of the nurses reaches out, brushes his head. "What the—" She peels back the surgical cap slightly to reveal the aluminum foil. He struggles to get his eyes open. "No, don't!" It's too late and she's pulled the cap and the aluminum off. He grabs at his own head uselessly but in some vain attempt to hold the maelstrom back.

((his arms grasping his head—doctor PANIC cool him im sain cap aluminum!? tin foil!? PANIC rack crack sweat—the side of his face—sweat pouring PANIC down—the aluminum cap—can can't be seventeen Cobrun good God ree where's hollings!?!))

"Where's Hollings!?"

((stroke what's going on FEAR fnsik get grup 4:15pm grip grap ap pa the lights 12 twelve fnsik k k PANIC what'shedoing hands on grabhim on—the tile—his arm—PANIC his arms—))

He feels hands on his arms, the latex gloves biting in to his skin ((struggling armsPANIC heads fingers elbows whatanasshole get his feet—the epilepsy surgery table

jennyJesusgetHollings!—the displaysPANIC PANIC, the brain tissue large on the flatscreen—frequent PANIC ccs STAT phenobarbital grup grip grap ap pa 45 20 50 ccs hold it rascal PANIC PANIC PANIC PANIC))

Finally a neuronal fuse blows somewhere in his brain, and then, darkness.

He—who?—awakens to a bright ((You had us team friend—his face—scared there)) light in his eyes, "You had us scared there, Dr. Coburn." Reid Richards tucks the light in to his lab coat breast pocket. ((You managed to not kill your patient, you idiot. But there's nothing to worry about now.)) "But there's nothing to worry about now." ((They've found the lesion DISTASTE)) "Your epilepsy is stemming from what may have been a small stroke or a head injury. When you're feeling better we can discuss treatment options. It's controllable with drugs." ((Not to say that you'll ever practice medicine again PITY)) "Another few years and we might be able to treat it with the RFID diagnostic and a gamma laser scalpel." Richards smiles, "But we're not quite there yet. Hang in there. I think everything's going to be okay ((Jakey boy, you asshole))."