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## THE SUBTLETY MACHINE

WHEN I WAS STILL QUITE young, I realized the problem with time travel, at least with the idea of going back in time. Going forward is no problem, so long as you don't plan on returning, but going back in time from a set point raises the issue of the same material—the very same atoms—occupying space simultaneously in two different places. I don't think there's any theory that would support the exact and identical duplication of matter. It can't be possible. If you sent a length of rope back in time to the day before yesterday, could someone then pick it up in one place while another person picks up the exact same atoms somewhere else? In the vastness of the universe, those atoms are already present and accounted for. What would the one that went back in time be made of?

I can dream about going back, I can suspend my disbelief and see myself crouching beside my father, but nothing will ever take me there.

The room where we waited was small and uncomfortably hot. Another family was waiting, too. They were uniformly overweight, a mother and two sons, the same configuration as my family. But one of these sons obviously had some kind of developmental issue, a mental handicap. He paced back and forth like a windup toy, and with one hand he worried a knot of hair on the top of his head. The few moments he stopped twisting it I could see that he'd shaped his hair so that it stood up like a horn. I remember that all I wanted was for this boy and his family to hear whatever news it was they were waiting for so they could leave. His agitation only intensified my own and my eyes were constantly drawn to his movement when I knew I shouldn't be looking. And my eyes were already tired. They were beyond tired.

That day had started a seemingly impossible short while before. So much had happened.

At breakfast we'd all sat at the same table. The four of us. My mother, my brother Rory, me and my father. An hour later my father had fallen into the crevasse, with me up top, looking down where he'd landed, his body all bent, with no way to get to him, my brother running for help, and me waiting and keeping my poor father company as best I could. He was making noise. He was saying words, what I was sure were important words, words that someone should have been close enough to hear, and no one was. For years I have dreamt of being able to float down to him and hear those few words.

I waited at the top for an hour and twenty minutes before my brother returned with help. By that time my father had grown quiet and in the intervening years he has not muttered so much as a word. At the hospital we learned the extent of his injuries. There was still hope then, hope that slowly dwindled to nothing over the months and years that followed. But in the waiting room that day, we had no idea what it was we were waiting to hear. That he was dead, that he'd be coming home with us. Either seemed a possibility. I don't think any of us considered that he might remain in a vegetative state to this day, eighteen years on.

The waiting extended for hours. At one point I went into the hall to give myself something else to look at. A minute later the boy with the horn on his head came out. As he paced something fell out of his pocket, something about the size and shape of a modern cell phone. I picked it up and offered it to him, but the boy just looked at me and went back into the waiting room. I stood there a minute looking at the thing. It was metal and made of various odds and ends. A hinge, a few nails, some bits of wire and a couple of rusty springs.

The boy's brother appeared. He was older and had a kind face. As I handed the object to him he said, "Thanks. He's always dropping this somewhere. My brother."

I didn't ask, but was told anyway. "A funny thing, eh? He uses it to talk to people. He's always talking to our grandmother. She passed away last summer. He's always asking her when she's coming back. It's more than that, too. It takes him back in time. He talks to people that way as well. Our old cat. He says it takes him back to it so he can pet it. It makes him calm." This brother paused a moment and hefted the object in his hand. "He calls it his subtlety machine."

I must have given him a strange look.

“Yeah. Subtlety machine. Nobody can figure out where the heck he came up with that.”

He looked at me a moment.

“You waiting to hear about your—”

“My dad,” I said.

At that moment a head poked out of the door and said, “Bradley? The doctor’s here.”

He nodded at me and disappeared through the door. It would be hours more before we heard anything, and half a year before my dad’s shell came home.

My father used to hit me. I’ve never talked about it much. I used to think that’s just how things were with fathers and sons, but as I grew and began to see how other people lived I saw this wasn’t how other fathers’ sons were treated. Not most of them.

One day I made my own subtlety machine. There wasn’t anyone in particular I wanted to talk to, though I did end up using it to talk to a variety of imaginary listeners, ones I hoped might be open to what I had to say, since quite often there was no around to listen to the thoughts flying through my head. What appealed to me most about a subtlety machine was the idea of time travel. At first so I could go back and save my dad, then later not for this reason at all. More so I could escape.

As I grew up he sat usually in our front room. My mom handled most of his care, with occasional relief help.

I used to fantasize about sticking pins in him. I never did, but I thought about it a lot. I pinched him once, but that was it. I did, however, grow into an angry young man, and not in the romantic sense. I had a temper I concealed from most people. Usually I took it out on various inanimate objects and really, it’s a miracle I never broke any of the bones in my hand. I left a lot of holes in the drywall.

One day I made the connection between myself and my father, between the rage I often felt and the blows my father dealt out to my young self. What I felt for him slowly began to change. I can’t say I’ve forgiven him and I don’t expect I ever will. Just that at times I’ve thought I understood.

A rope. It occurred to me one day that if we'd had some rope with us when my father fell I could have lowered myself down to him while we waited. I might have comforted him. My young self could have done that for him, where none of the older versions could. That young boy might have knelt by him and at least heard whatever it was he had to say in those last moments when he was still able to say anything.

I wonder maybe if there is no such thing as time, if perhaps there is only a perpetual now. That rope will never go back, and I have only the illusion of going forward. If what I've read is right, every cell in my body has been replaced twice since my father fell, everything except the cells in my brain. Presumably this is the same for my father and inside there somewhere, he is partly the same man.