

Last Rights

by Gustavo Bondoni (7157 Words)

Today, you can die. Tomorrow, who knows? Souls are transferred into artificial bodies, and because of the costs involved, they must work for their own upkeep. Sometimes, whether they like it or not. One of those transferred souls is a good Samaritan in the midst of an uncaring world.

Ginny blinked her eyes to see a young woman in a nurse's uniform looking down over her. "Wha... what happened? Where am I?"

"You're in Rothschild University Surgical Center," the woman replied.

"Surgical... wait. I remember. I stumbled on the curb and fell out onto the street. I was on my knees." She sat straight. "There's no way that truck could have stopped. It must have been moving at eighty... How did I survive?"

"You didn't," the nurse said.

"What? That's silly." I'm here talking to you." She looked around at the common ward around her. Machines beeped. Tubes gurgled. Patients slept. "And you won't be able to convince me that this is the entrance to the afterlife. I've never been very religious, but even I know that's not how it works."

"You were killed by the truck. But the injuries were mostly to your torso. Your head didn't impact the truck, so your brain was immediately placed in stasis to preserve it, since your heart had stopped and your chest was completely crushed."

"That sounds pretty dead to me," Ginny replied. "Then why am I talking to you?"

"Because you've been placed in a Synthetic."

"Me? Why? I'm not rich. I don't think I can afford it. And besides... I lived my life. Everyone I knew is dead. I'm not sure I want to go keep going. Can't you just turn me off, use the Synthetic for someone who actually wants it?"

The nurse's eyes softened for a second. "Look..." she began. Then she jerked like she'd suffered a shock, and anger and resentment replaced the compassion. "That's just the way it is. You're cleared to get up, so please report to position twenty-one. I'd hurry if I were you, you have ten minutes to report."

The nurse punched some brusque commands onto the handheld device she'd been updating, and walked to the next bed, studiously ignoring Ginny's questions.

Ginny shrugged and cautiously began getting out of the hospital bed, which was alarmingly high. It would be quite embarrassing, she thought, to fall off the side and break the Synthetic's hip. Although the hospital would probably deserve it. Who had asked them to re-life her, anyway? She was nearly sure you couldn't do that without major legal procedures.

She slowly put her leg over the edge and tentatively felt for the floor. Didn't these idiots know that ninety-year-old great-grandmothers needed help to get out of these high beds?

Ginny's leg caught the floor.

There, she thought, and looked down to see where she could put her other leg. "Crap," she said out loud.

The familiar, stick-thin mass of wrinkled skin she'd gotten to know so well was gone. In its place was a lithe white leg under whose surface she could actually see the muscles working when she moved it.

She lowered the other leg, and it looked like the first. Smooth, perfect. Ginny stood, holding onto the bedrail... but there was no sense of weakness. No swaying, no uncertainty. She was just standing without drama, in a body that just worked.

Her first step was tentative. Her second, a little less so, aided by the fact that, despite the fact that her glasses were gone — presumably smashed to tiny splinters by the same truck that had sent her here — she could see an arrow that pointed in the direction of Stations 1-30. She headed that way.

Position twenty-one, a desk behind a mesh with glass behind it, was manned by a dark-skinned woman with blond dreadlocks, lounging in a chair and chewing gum. She wore thick-rimmed glasses. A radio blared what sounded like sports scores.

"Hi... I'm supposed to report here," Ginny said.

"Name?" the woman said without looking up from her phone.

"Virginia Carruthers," Ginny said.

"Yeah. You're on the list. You're assigned to the post office."

"Wait. I think there's some kind of mistake," Ginny said. "I can't pay for re-living. I don't want it."

Now the woman looked up. "It's not your call, sweetie," she said. "Says here your family hasn't paid the death duties corresponding to your processing or allowed you to be declared dead. Without that, you can't be buried or cremated. And if you're not dead, but you have no body, you need to pay for the upkeep of your brain. That means you work for the Post Office now." She looked down at her phone. "Follow the yellow arrows on the floor and you'll reach the uniform dispensary."

"Now listen here, young lady," Ginny said. "I will do no such thing. In fact, I—"

The shock came so unexpectedly that Ginny didn't even scream. It was an intense pain that was gone as soon as it arrived, leaving her confused and terrified. If it had lasted long enough to actually feel the pain, she wouldn't be able to survive.

The woman at the desk looked up. "You should really get moving. The Als go easy on the new meat, but the grace period is maybe half an hour. After that, I hear they get really aggressive on the zapper."

Ginny followed the arrows, dressed numbly in a beige jumpsuit that appeared to have been tailored exactly to the contours of her body, and was issued a yellow card with an arrow that she was supposed to hold in front of her. When she did so, an arrow appeared on it, telling her which way to walk.

The card led her out of the hospital, across several streets. A large red cross appeared when she was supposed to stop at an intersection, and Ginny wondered whether that had been added because the system knew she'd been killed by a vehicle, and perhaps assumed she was too dumb to cross a road correctly — and into a large brick cube of a building that looked as if it had been built sometime in the 20th Century. Before Ginny was even born.

No one challenged her as she approached. A blue-uniformed security guard took a quick glance at her card and jumpsuit and ushered her through a little gate that bypassed the turnstiles. He nodded. "Better get a move on," he said. "Timer on that tells me you're cutting it close."

Ginny stopped. "What does that mean?"

The man propelled her forward. "Don't stop. You'll get zapped." Then he turned away, but her brand-new-from-the-vat ears heard him mutter: "Noobs."

She arrived in at her destination. If the building looked old, this man's office appeared positively antediluvian. Dark wooden paneling reached waist-high, and the rest of the walls were glass to the roof. Dozens of white bags with the Post Office logo on them took up space on the floor. The office's owner was a brown-haired guy with a three-day stubble. He looked up. "Whaddya want?"

"I... this brought me here," Ginny said, showing him the card.

"Well, tell it to take you away," the man replied. Then he stopped. "Wait. Are you Carruthers?"

"That's my name."

"Dammit," the man said. "I specifically asked them to send me a C-25 body, not a D-112. Hell, that's an admin model."

"I'm sorry," Ginny said. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about you!" the man half-shouted. "You were supposed to be a big guy who could lift six bags of misdirected mail in one hand, not a little waif that I could beat up with one arm tied behind my back. D-112s are pretty enough, but that's not what I ordered." He rummaged on the cluttered desk and pulled out a pink slip of paper. He waved it triumphantly in front of her face. "See? Right here. In triplicate. And they send me you."

"Can't you get it fixed?" Ginny asked. "Maybe if they realize you wanted something else, they can let me go back to being dead."

The man blanched. "Try to get it undone? You mean file an error report and attempt to get the operation annulled? And you think they'll turn you off because we report it?" He peered into her face. "Just how new are you?"

"Thirty minutes ago, I was happily dead," Ginny replied.

The man's expression made her think he'd tear his hair out if he wasn't so busy. "Crap. Welcome to reality, then. And reality says that everyone is better off if we just roll with what happened here. If we try to correct it, one of the bureaucrats is liable to get offended..." the man shuddered.

"So what should I do?" Ginny asked.

"I need you to take these bags to the bay number I've put on each one."

Ginny studied the nearest bag. A transparent folder held papers, and she began fumbling with the seal.

"Just leave that alone," the man said.

"But these look like the tracking forms. There's a scan code and..." Ginny protested.

"Yes. And you will not open them or scan them or in any way compound the errors that have already been made. Use this number." He put his finger on the bag right where someone had scribbled the number seventeen.

"But..."

The man sighed. "Just do it."

Ginny spent the next hour lugging bags on her shoulder and delivering them to offices where tired-looking men and women scowled when she arrived and muttered variations on the phrase “Oh, good, another load of mail that we have to deal with, thank you so much,” before dumping the bag in a corner and continuing with whatever they’d been doing before she arrived.

Finally, when the last of the closed and numbered sacks had been delivered, she returned to the original office. Before entering, she looked at the sign above the door. It had once had an office and department name on it, but all of that had been scratched out in black marker and replaced with the single word ‘Jones’

“Mr. Jones...” she began.

“My name is Oromov,” the man said.

“But above the door...”

“That is the name of the last guy who managed to get the system to recognize his change of office. Legend says he retired the day after he achieved that, since he understood that it was the pinnacle of his professional career. No one since has ever managed to get the name changed, and the wiser of us don’t even try.”

“What are we even doing here?” she asked.

“Sorting mail. What does it look like?”

“Aren’t there machines for that?”

Oromov sighed. “There are. They work well for about nine-tenths of the mail. So we get to deal with the rest.”

Ginny picked up an envelope. “This one looks like it’s correctly put together. Clear writing, the zip code where it needs to be.... Why would this one end up needing sorting?”

“Do I look like a sorting machine? How would I know?” Oromov said. “Here, take these. And here’s the list to tell you which station they need to go to. Get moving.”

Ginny sorted mail. When a bag would fill up, she would carry it to unenthusiastic receiving desks.

Hours passed, but buried deep inside the windowless block of bricks, it was impossible to tell how long it had been.

“Wouldn’t it be a lot less work to get the machines calibrated correctly?” Ginny said, tossing an envelope onto the table.

Oromov glanced up. “First of all, I’d recommend picking that up before the AI zaps you.” He waited until she did so. “Secondly, you’re welcome to try, but only during your breaks.”

“Why? Will you dock my pay if I stop working?”

He looked up, amazed. Then he shook his head and chuckled. “Pay? You’re not being paid,” he said. “You are giving this service in exchange for being kept alive.”

“But I don’t want to be alive. All I want to do is just stop. I lived my life... and it was a hell of a lot better than whatever this is supposed to be.”

“If you’re in a Synthetic, you either pay for it or you pay for the upkeep. Arguing won’t help. And the reason you should do it on your break is that if you’re doing it on company time, the AIs will zap you.”

“Then why don’t you do it?” she said.

“Because I *am* getting paid,” he replied. Then he bent back to sorting his mail with the air of someone who wasn’t going to talk to her anymore.

“Well, it’s been nice meeting you,” Oromov said as he picked up a light jacket and headed towards the door. Clearly, the workday was done for him.

“Wait. What do I do now?”

Oromov glanced at the clock above the door. “Wait for DeShaun. He should be here in a few minutes. I’d wait for him, except I really need to go see my daughter.”

And he disappeared.

DeShaun, when he arrived an hour later, turned out to be an enormous man with a ten-day stubble. “You’re the new synth, huh?” he said. “You know what you gotta do?”

“I need to sort this pile into these sacks and then take them to the correct office when a sack gets big enough to fill up.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right. Also, you’d better go get some more sacks.”

Ginny hesitated. “Am I supposed to work all night?” she said. “Oromov already went home.”

He peered at her and sighed. “A new one, huh? The answer is of course not. Synthetics don’t get tired like regular people, so you get two shifts on and one shift off. I’m not sure what you’re supposed to do on the downtime, though.” He scratched his beard. “Never socialized much with synths. They just seem to disappear at around two in the morning. Never had one ask me what it was supposed to do with itself. Thought you all just knew that.”

“You mean I get one shift to eat and sleep and...” Ginny realized she hadn’t gone to the bathroom since she’d woken, and she didn’t feel the need. Hell, she didn’t even know what the

body she wore looked like under the uniform. For all she knew, it could be as sexless as a Barbie doll. She was still wearing the panties she'd woken up with, and hadn't had time to look at how she was built. She'd seen herself in a mirror in the hospital, and knew she had a reasonably pretty face and blond hair, but had just assumed she was a woman all the way down.

"I'll go get those bags," she said.

Instead, she headed towards the nearest restroom and, ignoring the looks she got from a woman emerging, locked herself into the first stall and inspected the body while she pretended to pee.

It looked and felt the way it was supposed to, except for the lack of wrinkles and the strength in the muscles. In that sense, it was a perfectly normal twenty-five-year-old body which should last an enormously long time. After a while, she even managed to pee a little.

Then, she rushed to get the bags and return to the office, where DeShaun showed even less inclination to talk to her than Oromov had.

The hours passed in silence, with only the occasional grunted instruction between them. She noticed a difference in the two men's attitude towards their jobs: while Oromov appeared to face the inevitable drudgery with a deep sadness, DeShaun seemed to revel in doing the minimum amount of work possible.

"I've finished the pile," Ginny said, opening and closing her hands. She would have expected them to be tired, for her whole body to ache, after the last few hours. In reality, they felt as fresh as they had that morning. So did the rest of her body. "What do we do now?"

"We wait," DeShaun answered. "I suppose another truckload'll arrive during the dead shift." He chuckled. "You and Oromov can take care of it when he gets back. If you need me for anything, don't call me." He laughed at his own wit.

So they waited in silence, DeShaun watching videos on his phone and Ginny staring at a wall. It almost felt like those afternoons when she was at home, forgotten by the few members of her family she'd outlived, and without energy to do more than sit around. That had been good practice for waiting for the night shift to end.

"Well, I guess that's a wrap," DeShaun said. He got up and left, even though the shift wasn't quite over.

When Ginny emerged into the corridor, she saw him standing beside the exit arch, waiting for the exact time to arrive before he walked under it and clocked out. Ginny sighed and followed him, half-expecting an electric flash of pain to incapacitate her, but apparently DeShaun was right: she had eight hours to herself.

"What the hell do I do now?" she asked herself.

People were exiting the facility, so she followed them out, searching for anyone who looked like they might be a Synthetic.

That was when she realized she was dressed exactly the same way they were, other than the fact that her uniform was brand new, and the ones everyone else wore showed signs of both wear and customization. Everyone had an embroidered design, patches sewn or ironed onto the cloth, pins and ribbons. Apparently, self-expression had found its niche in customizing the Post Office uniforms.

She watched them file out, trying to guess, just by sight, which ones might be regular humans and which might be Synthetics. One would assume the Synthetics would be younger, healthier, with a spring in their step, but that didn't help much: everyone was pretty young, and everyone walked out slowly, with that slightly dazed expression of workers after a long shift doing stuff that should have been automated centuries before.

She shrugged and walked down the dark street until she came to a public information terminal. She felt her jaw drop. She'd never understood who in the world might use these bombproof booths dotted throughout the city. Even the poorest of the poor, the people without implants, had their handhelds.

Apparently, Synthetics were an exception to the rule. She entered the booth.

Ginny was unsurprised to realize the enclosure smelled like someone had died in there, and not too recently, even though the place appeared to be clean. A screen blinked, so she passed her hand over it.

"Synthetics must use the booth on Forty-Seventh Street and Warula Avenue," a garbled voice said. The door opened behind her.

Having nothing better to do, she walked to the booth indicated, the fifteen blocks a breeze in her new body. Once there, she found the machinery demolished, and the screen cracked. Someone had etched '51 + Cuagga Street' into the metal wall, so she headed there next.

The booth on Fifty-First told her to go back to the one on Forty-Seventh, because that was where Synthetics could be served. When she emerged, she found a man waiting patiently for the booth. He was tall and thin, elegant in the way of people from a different era, an impression borne out by his suit, which was a couple of decades out of date: Ginny remembered when men had worn those suits, and had looked dashing in them. This man just looked forgotten.

He must have sensed her despair, because he said. "Can I help you?" He looked to be about fifty-five, much too young to be so lost.

"I... I'm not sure. I'm Synthetic, you see."

"Yes. I can see that," the man said.

“How?” she blurted.

The man smiled. “When you’re on the street, you learn things you never imagined. One of them is how to tell a synthetic.”

“And how is that?”

“There are only a few dozen models. At first, I thought I was seeing the same people over and over, or that I was imagining it because I was drinking too much. But I haven’t touched a drop in five years... and the same people kept popping up over and over. Eventually, I realized it wasn’t me, it was them.”

“I need an information booth,” she said. “The one on Forty-Seventh is broken.”

“Yeah, they never fix that one.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “I guess no one ever fills out the form.”

“Where do you fill the form?”

“Synthetics can’t do it. Not unless you’re one of those rich people who got themselves rebodied... and you’re not, because the rich people never use the standard templates.”

“So no one can ask for the information booth to be repaired.”

He shook his head. “Not the people it’s meant for, anyway. Look. I’ve heard that there’s a Synth place near here. On Thirty-Ninth and Cuagga. You might want to check that out.”

She nodded, but didn’t move.

“You’re not going?” he said.

“I don’t know. This is all new to me. All I wanted was to die. I didn’t want to kill myself, but I definitely wanted to die. And then I was dead and some weirdo decided to wake me up.”

“Synths are cheap labor,” the man replied. “And they can’t kill themselves because there’s an AI watching them, which shocks them if they try.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I learned about the AI the hard way.”

“Who were you?” he asked. Then he held up his hands. “I mean, it’s fine if you don’t want to talk about it. I can totally understand that.”

"It's all right," Ginny said. "I was just an old lady. I was nearly ninety, can you believe it? I'd had a decent life. Did the whole career and kids and divorce and house and loneliness thing, and I was ready to call it a day. Then this happened."

"Sucks. If I ever decide to end it, I'm going to make damned sure I do something to myself that pulps my brain to jelly. Or maybe blow my head off." He smiled sadly. "But I don't think I'll ever come to that. Too scared to pull the trigger."

She realized the man wanted someone, anyone, to talk to, but all she could think of asking was: "So how did you end up here?"

"Form 473," he said with a dry chuckle. "One after another, after another. At first, I would have a drink to stop myself from seeing it every time I closed my eyes. Then I'd take the first drink before going to work in the morning, just to ensure that I could cope with the first one of the day. After that, I lost track."

"What was the form for?"

"It was a manual request form for change of scheduled start and end time for the meeting rooms in Town Hall. That was where I worked, Town Hall. The online system was not designed to change meeting times, but we found that people were booking rooms and then not showing up because they had some problem with the original start time, and then were booking another room. At one point, all ten meeting rooms were taken up by the same meeting, but with different start times five minutes apart. That was when they decided to create form 473 because a manual form was a much quicker fix than going through the process to request the consideration of the intranet update project. Ten years later, we were still using the form, and I fell off that cliff."

"But you look alright," she said. "And you don't smell like you've been drinking. Hell, you smell clean. I always imagined people living on the street..."

"I stopped drinking five years ago..." He grinned. "But the real reason I look all right is that the last time I saw form 473 was twelve years before that. You have no idea how much healing simply not seeing that form can bring."

"Did you really hate your job?" she asked.

"Hate it? I loved it. I was a bureaucrat savant. I could find any form in any system, and my signature was gold. No one ever questioned a form signed by me, because they knew I would walk all over them, lose them in a mire of paperwork so tall they'd never see the top." He sighed. "But that one form became my nemesis. It was just so completely useless. So unnecessary. And there was no way to get rid of it. I felt it had been invented just to make me hate the world. And, of course, it became the single most-used form in the entire department."

She laughed, and they talked until dawn, then past dawn, and she felt anxiety building up. "I should probably get back to work," she said.

"Yeah. You don't want to get zapped." The man held out his hand. "My name is John Trulli, by the way."

She shook it. "Thank you," she said. "I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't been there."

"I have a feeling you would have made out somehow. You don't look like the kind to simply roll over and die."

"I wish I could," she said, and walked back toward the post office.

"You're early," Oromov grumped when he found her sitting in the office.

"So are you."

"I need to get all of this organized."

True to DeShaun's prediction, bags and boxes of returned, impossible-to-deliver mail had magically appeared overnight.

"Then I can help," Ginny said. They dove into the pile, trying to get it into some semblance of order, or at least attempting to keep it from burying them alive. "So, how did it go with your daughter?" she asked.

Oromov, who'd been moving at full speed, picking up envelopes and packages, glancing at them and quickly separating them into piles, suddenly stopped dead.

Ginny, surprised by the unexpected lack of motion, looked away from her own work to see what was up with him. She found him staring at her, jaw working noiselessly.

She stood, suddenly alarmed. "Are you all right?"

Oromov held his hands out to keep her from approaching. "I'm fine. Why did you ask about my daughter?"

"For no particular reason. It's just that you said you were going to see her last night... so I asked how it went. I was just trying to be polite."

He moved his mouth a couple of times then, to Ginny's dismay, he crumpled onto the chair and began to weep softly.

This time, Ginny wasn't to be denied. She'd comforted loved ones and family members, bereaved husbands and widowed wives. She'd seen children bury their parents. She knew that, sometimes, the only thing standing between a person and overwhelming grief was the touch of another. Even an ancient old woman. Maybe especially an ancient old woman.

She knelt beside him — once again delighting in the fact that she could do such a thing as kneel without having to pull herself up using the furniture afterwards — and put her arm around his shoulder. “Do you want to talk about it?” she said.

Oromov shook his head but only stayed quiet for a few moments before speaking: “They said it’s incurable. They can only stop the pain... but not all the way. If they give her too much of the painkiller, her kidneys will fail faster than the rest of her. But she still suffers. She’s always crying. She can’t even get comfortable when she’s asleep. I want her to enjoy the time she has left, not suffer this way.”

Suddenly, Ginny was transported back to her own childhood. Back to a day when medicine wasn’t as advanced, and when surgeons attempted to save her little brother’s life on the other side of a hospital door. Her brother hadn’t been ill, he’d fallen from a second-story window while trying to reach a ball in a rain gutter. But he’d only been eight at the time.

Ginny remembered her mother pacing back and forth, crying with sobs that were almost shrieks. And she remembered how the sobs had turned to wails when a doctor emerged and sadly shook his head.

Her mother had died a few weeks later. Her father, gray, pale, broken, had never told her how, but Ginny had always suspected suicide.

“Can’t they put her brain in a new body? One like mine?”

Oromov laughed bitterly. “Are you joking? Do you have any idea how much something like that costs?”

Suddenly, she understood why Oromov spoke so little, especially to her, and why he didn’t like to talk about Synthetics. It wasn’t that he was a bad man. On the contrary, he was a very, very good man who had made an effort to be civil, even though he must feel like screaming to see that a woman had been given the extended life his daughter would never have, just because of a clerical error somewhere.

No wonder he’d been so shocked to see her when he expected a hulking laborer model. What an effort he must have made to keep from going stark, raving mad on the spot. And what an even larger effort he must have made to keep from blaming Ginny. Hell, there were a million ways he could have taken petty revenge on her, and gotten her zapped a dozen times. And yet, he’d refrained.

“You’re a good man, Mr. Oromov,” she said.

“And what good has it done me? My little girl...” He cried again, and she said nothing more. Nothing she could say would help, and perhaps her arm around him would. A tension built inside her, a sense that she needed to get back to work. She ignored it.

Searing pain blurred her vision as the AI decided she’d dawdled on company time long enough.

Ginny gritted her teeth and kept her arm around Oromov. The shock passed quickly.

Ten seconds later, she hadn't moved, and the shock came again. Ginny screamed, but kept her arm where it was.

Oromov pulled away and looked at her. "Are you being zapped?"

Ginny couldn't reply until the pain went away, then, all she could do was nod.

"Oh, God," Oromov said. "This is my fault. Here, sort these."

Ginny did so.

He hovered over her. "You got zapped before, didn't you? I felt you flinch. And you still didn't move your arm?"

She nodded. She still couldn't talk.

"That makes me so furious. This country. Hell, this world." He stopped and looked out into the distance. "What kind of a world do we live in, anyway? Who chose this for us?"

"I don't know," Ginny finally managed. "But I know what I've always known. It's worth living in because there are people who still care. You're one of them. I can tell."

"Me? You were the one that suffered just to comfort me."

"Perhaps. But you were the one who earned it."

Oromov shook his head, still unable to understand it. They wordlessly returned to work.

"No," John Trulli said, shaking his head sadly. "It would never work. The conditions that led to you being revived in a Synthetic can't be duplicated for a minor. The state would have to have her father's consent to be placed in a new body, and if he gave his consent, he would be on the hook for the cost. The formula for calculating a loan of that size would automatically exclude him from attaining it because he's just a level 3B postal employee. You can't just avoid the death duties and expect immortality. Besides, the state can take the money from the next-of-kin if they aren't bankrupt like your son. Your case is quite rare." He gave her a smile that held more sympathy than mirth. "I'm pretty sure the actuaries made it that way on purpose. Just enough Synthetics to cover the jobs no one wants to do... but not enough to give people ideas about gaming the system to live forever. It's quite intelligent."

"That doesn't help," she said. Then she sighed. They were the only two patrons in an all-night diner, and Ginny was drinking a cup of coffee her artificial body probably didn't need, and which John had somehow paid for. "There has to be something... I mean, a little girl..."

"The system is designed for maximum efficiency, to give health, food, jobs, and safety to the maximum number of people in the most efficacious way. Sometimes, small injustices are the price to pay for enormous benefits. Your case is one. The little girl..."

"Isn't a small injustice," Ginny completed. "It's a monstrosity. We *could* save her... but we *won't*. How can they face the father after that?"

"Who?" John said.

"What?"

"How can *who* face him?"

"The person responsible."

John shook his head. "That's the beauty of the system. No one is responsible. There's a set of rules, a set of processes, a procedure for each situation. You can't blame anyone, because no one has power over it."

"Surely, the politicians, the men at the top..."

"No one would dare. The bureaucrats run the world. Trust me. I was one."

"But there must be something."

"Even if there was a way to confuse the system into taking action, anyone authorizing such a thing would be fired immediately. And it would take someone with authority. Do you know someone with clout who'd be willing to give up their career to help a little girl?"

She looked into her coffee and shook her head.

The hospital where Oromov's girl was being treated was not the one beside the Post Office. That would have been too convenient, too easy for a grieving father. Instead, it was clear across town. Far enough that it took Ginny more than four hours to reach it on foot. Unless someone brought her back, she would never be able to make it to the post office in time to start her shift, and the AI would presumably zap her to death.

Which might not be a bad thing, she thought.

The functionaries at the door challenged her exactly once, and she showed them the form she'd been carrying. One that specifically allowed her access to a single room on the second floor. They scanned it and said that everything was in order.

Relieved, Ginny climbed the stairs — the elevators didn't respond to her palmprint — and found the number on the form.

Oromov was sitting on a chair, still awake despite the fact that it was after six in the morning, looking intently at a figure on the bed.

Ginny only knew it was a little girl because Oromov had told her so. The tiny figure covered in tubes and wires was pale and bald and drawn and thin.

His eyes widened when she walked in.

"How did you get in here?" he asked. "They won't even let me in without a new form every day."

"I know. I saw you filling them out and I took one. Here. You can have it back." She stood silently for a moment. "I wanted to come see you. To come see her. What's her name?"

"Brittany."

"She's beautiful," Ginny said.

He nodded.

"Do you sit with her every night?" she asked.

He nodded. "Sometimes she wakes up. I don't want her to be alone in this place."

"I understand. I told you. You're a good man."

"She's my little girl."

Ginny sat beside him for some moments, both of them silently contemplating the girl on the bed. Finally, Ginny sighed and rummaged around in the folder she held, pulled out three sheets of paper and held them out to him. "Read those to yourself. Don't read out loud." She pointed to her head and his eyes widened. He knew what she was saying: the AI, monitoring her from god-knew-where, could hear everything she could. Whatever implant they'd put into Ginny's brain made certain of that.

As he read, his eyes grew wide in disbelief. He looked up at her angrily. "If this is a joke, it's in poor taste."

"It's no joke. I would never do that. Not to you. Hell, not to anyone."

"This is real?"

"I know it isn't perfect. But it was the best I could do," she replied.

"No. I mean is it real? Will this work?"

"I'm assured that signature at the bottom will push it through without question. It just needs your own signature there, where it asks for a parent or legal guardian's consent."

In a daze, Oromov signed.

Ginny snatched the papers from his hand and pushed the button to call the orderly. A bored-looking woman took her time to arrive. "All my monitors tell me the patient is stable," she said. "So what's the emergency?"

Ginny handed her the papers. "Please process this immediately."

A look of resentment passed over her features, hating to be told what to do—and by a Synthetic!—but also unwilling to ignore filled and signed forms. She held them dismissively at first, but then her eyes widened. "This is most unusual."

"Is there a problem with the forms?" Ginny asked.

"I don't think so... but they're never used in this combination. I've... I'll need to ask."

"Do so. You'll find it's all in order," Ginny said.

As they waited for the woman to return, Ginny held her hand behind her back so Oromov wouldn't see her crossed fingers.

The woman returned with two doctors and four orderlies. Without a word, they began disconnecting plugs and wires until only a single drip stand remained. Then they wheeled the little girl out, as Oromov watched, mouth agape.

A wheelchair was rolled into the room. "Please sit here," the nurse who'd taken the forms said. She was no longer dismissive but excited, looking at Ginny with awe mixed with incredulity.

Once Ginny was seated, she injected something into the Synthetic body's neck and things grew dark.

"Goodbye," Ginny said to Oromov, who was crying into his hands.

"Oh, come on..." Ginny said as she woke. Again. "What does a woman have to do to be allowed to rest in peace?"

She opened her eyes, expecting a single bored nurse, like the time before.

No such luck. Apart from the doctors and nurses she expected, several people stood at the foot of her bed, heads held at that angle which told her they were recording the scene with their implants.

Ginny looked at her hand and felt a moment's panic before she realized this wasn't the same body she'd had earlier.

It was a different body.

Excitement coursed through her and she looked at the crowd. "Did it actually work? Can someone tell me what happened?" she asked.

Before anyone could answer, a commotion ensued in the rear of the crowd. A couple of reporters were knocked aside unceremoniously as a figure broke through them and threw itself onto her bed. Before Ginny could react, she was enveloped in a huge bear hug.

"How can I ever thank you? How?" Oromov pulled away from her and she saw that he was crying. Again. Or maybe still. But the tears were tears of joy.

"Tell me what happened! That's what I need!" she replied.

"It worked. They put Brittany's mind into the Synthetic. After a year in that bed, she was walking an hour after the operation... and then the administrators appeared and they tried to make the doctors undo it... but they refused because the forms were all correct. And when they tried to figure out what happened, it turns out the legal questions were impossible to untangle. Each form tied into the next and made it impossible to undo. They can't remove her brain because it would be murder, because the hospital discarded Brittany's body due to biohazard concerns. And they can't put her in jail, because she's a minor. And they can't charge me for the body, because it was already synthesized and because... well, I don't understand it all. It's like magic. Complete paralysis."

Ginny nodded and put her hand on Oromov's arm. "I told you there were good people in this world. All it takes, sometimes, is a bureaucrat-savant. I wish you were able to meet John. He has a magic touch."

"He already met me." John Trulli pushed his way through the crush of people. "I decided it was time to get back into the world. And besides, they came looking for me, asking me to explain myself. So I asked them why they hadn't taken away my signature privileges when I became too ill to work, and they just looked at each other. I assume someone's taken care of it by now... but it's too late. The problem has passed from one of paperwork to one of reality, and that's a lot harder to undo."

Oromov spoke again. "He's been helping me explain to one bureaucrat after another that they're caught in a hole in the process, and they can't fix it no matter what they do. They're going to have to live with it."

"I'm so happy," she said, and sank back into the pillows.

A nurse stepped forward. "You need to get dressed, miss," she said anxiously. "It would look really bad if you got zapped on all these live broadcasts." She tried to smile, to make it look like a joke, but her anxiety shone through.

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked, her heart sinking.

“She means,” John Trulli said, “that, though Brittany has your body, your own peculiar situation is still the same. You will be kept alive at the state’s need.”

Ginny stood in a daze, not even caring that the covers fell away and left her naked for a worldwide audience to see. “Can’t you do anything?”

“I’m working on it... but there’s only so much that can be done. Maybe the news stories will be able to influence something...”. He shrugged. “I’ll do what I can.”

Numbly, Ginny walked in the direction indicated, following the yellow arrows. At the back of the crowd, a single figure stood apart from the reporters. As Ginny approached, she saw it was a Synthetic in a white dress.

It was the same model Ginny had woken up in originally. Of course, there weren’t all that many to choose from, apparently.

As Ginny walked past, the young woman held out a hand.

“Thank you for making my daddy so happy. And thank you for stopping the hurt. I won’t forget this. Not ever.”

Child’s words in a Synthetic’s voice. Ginny smiled.

“I’m so glad,” she said. “It makes all of this worth it.”

Then, before she managed to turn back in the direction she was supposed to be going, the AI zapped her.

END