

Paul's Personal Lazarus by H. P. Gross

"Paul Schwartz, you are a giant piece of shit, you know that, right?" an angry looking naked woman shouted from across the field.

"What did I do Maryam?" Paul shouted back. He knew perfectly well what he did.

She ran up and tackled his also naked body to the ground, punching him in the face repeatedly.

"Do you get off on this? Forty-six times? Really?" She got up and kicked him in the ribs. He groaned. She then turned around and ran the other way, towards a large glass building on top of a hill at the other end of the field.

Paul rolled and sat himself up, pulling a blood soaked tooth out of his mouth. A rectangle of light drew itself into the air in front of Paul's face. A face similar to Paul's own drew itself and began to speak.

"She has a point you know. You really could stop trying to revive her. She asked never to be brought back, just as the rest of the human species has by now."

Paul glared back at his digital copy. "Ersatz, you know how I feel. You know more about me than I do about myself. I can't give up on her, not yet. Can you start growing me a new tooth?"

"Sure thing boss." The blood in Paul's mouth coagulated much more quickly than normal, while dentin started to grow back on the nerve endings that were exposed. Soon the enamel would begin to encase the tooth, as if it had never left.

Paul dragged himself to his feet. Forty-six times indeed. Of those forty-six times, Maryam had beaten the shit out of him thirty-three. He dragged himself to his feet and began walking up the hill, knowing that by the time he got there, Maryam would be disintegrated into the disparate atoms that made up her body. The holographic rectangle that projected a portion of Ersatz into the world followed beside him.

"It's been twenty-three years since your last attempt to revive her. You really should give up, she'll find out eventually due to the fact that she has the ability and right to talk with me about the past," Ersatz said.

Paul said nothing. This conversation was old, they had had it many times before. It had been some millennia ago that he and Maryam came and terraformed this planet, with the blessing of the digital offspring of humanity. They were not the only biological humans left at the time, there were a handful of other planets, mainly religious sects which considered the digital copies of people to be heretical, but were still willing to use the technology developed by what came to be known as "The Hive" to infinitely extend their lifespans, until civil wars broke out. One by one, the remaining planets of humanity either destroyed themselves, or had a massive shift in ideas, until they uploaded themselves and joined The Hive.

Ersatz was a member of The Hive, formed by backups of Paul who cloned themselves and still took an interest in his activities, as well as biological and digital offspring of Paul who similarly has clones in the system that incorporated themselves into a new being. There were many similar beings, generally there was at least one for every biological human who ever had at least a backup uploaded to The Hive.

Paul stopped walking and turned to Ersatz. "Look, why are you trying to convince me to stop this time? Is it going to be another old hackneyed legal argument about the definition of a human, and free will and all that bullshit which you people proved didn't exist ages ago?"

"No, because I'm you after all, and your children and people who think well of you and want you to stop hiding things from a person who you have no right to be doing this to. Yes, the two of you promised each other at one point to stay in biological bodies until the heat death of the universe, but while it isn't forever, that's a damn long time."

Paul resumed walking and got to the glass building that served as their home base, where they read books, repaired their bodies, had sex, and received reports from the Hive through Ersatz. They had machines to build whatever they wished, the long descendants of 3D printers and replicators from early science fiction. Millennia ago, yet Paul still remembered Star Trek. This wasn't by accident, the portions of his memories that had to get removed and put in Ersatz every decade or two were relatively new; the old memories should stay with the biological body, one of the antiquated notions he and Maryam stuck with. Until she decided to end it, that is.

He had brought her back to life, prior to the point where she decided to upload herself and shuffle off the mortal coil. He still didn't understand why she originally did it, though he had some hypotheses. Maybe she got bored, got taken by the question of how to escape the heat death of the universe, or got tired of not being able to keep up with the modern digital mind. Maybe she had stopped loving him.

The glass doors of their home opened for him. He expected to smell a little bit of burning, like all of the other times she offed herself, killing herself in the most efficient way possible. Instead he walked in to have a knife pointed at him by Maryam. "You can't do this anymore Paul. It's sick. We agreed no more children after the last of ours decided to upload and eliminate their body. We philosophically knew that we couldn't force anyone else to have to live in these imperfect sacks of meat, even if we chose to. Yet when I finally said I was done, you couldn't let go?"

"Look," Paul said, "I love you more than anything else in this universe. I want to stay with you. So that we can enjoy ourselves more. Live in this wonderful world, or if you want, we could go find a new one. We could always go on some more adventures!"

"No! I'm done with adventures, and I see now why I originally killed myself. Past Maryam was done with you. She was tired of adventure, tired of your pompous ass, and realized that with the rest of humanity gone, staying in a fleshy prison wasn't going to help her any to catch up. She figured out that a functioning better copy of her was enough. Speaking of your pompous ass, you tried to hide the files from me and my past selves about our previous deaths. We said no secrets, back when we were close," she concluded, looking angry.

“I was only doing it to protect you. I love you after all, I couldn’t bear to see you kill yourself again,” Paul said.

“Don’t you remember when you were younger? Your talk of bodily autonomy, that you were so glad that we weren’t forced to upload ourselves and then stop living? Of choice? You stopped letting me have choices Paul, and by those actions, you have implied that you own me. That’s not love.”

Paul looked troubled. “Is this why you didn’t kill yourself this time? To lecture me?”

“Yes and no. I’m here to offer you salvation, an end to this pointless existence you have been living. I know why you were always afraid. The Illusion of consciousness was comforting, and ending it all in one body without continuity terrified you. So I’m here to offer a solution. My Ersatz has plans for robots to replace your neurons until your brain becomes replaced by them, and then can be integrated into a server farm of The Hive.” Maryam’s face was neutral, establishing that this wasn’t really out of love.

“And if I refuse?”

“Then I’m prepared to kill you. You haven’t respected my right to choose my own paths, but you have backups already in the system. I’m not willing to forgive you, because even the threats of punishment your Ersatz communicated to you seem to have not affected you in the slightest.”

He sat in thought for a bit while she stood over him with the knife. Having his body forcefully taken from him like this wasn’t something he expected to happen. And yet, there was a certain poetic justice, since he had been forcing bodies on unwilling people so much. This irony made him giggle a bit and then reply, “I accept.”

She strapped him to a table, gave him some anesthetic, and he went to sleep. She then created a backup and simply killed him and herself, because while he was unconscious continuity of mind would mean nothing anyway. This was the end of the last two humans.