

Singular

Prologue

New Year's Eve, 2051. It was either the beginning or the end depending on how you look at it, but to me, in a literal way, it was both.

We were late, speeding through the stormy streets of Riverside, California. It had been the kind of gray day that can make you feel dull and strip you of motivation, but not for us. We were on our way to meet dad for our three-person New Year's Eve party: just mom, dad, and me. That's how it had been since... well, long as I could remember, all my nine years. As we rolled through the warm rain, mom told me that years ago, before the Great Pacific Tsunami of 2036, it hardly ever rained in Southern California, but all that had changed. It now rained often, although it was generally hot enough that the rain quickly evaporated, keeping everything perpetually moist and uncomfortable with humidity.

I remember thinking, as my mom spoke, how pretty she seemed. Very petite, with soft features and sensibly short auburn hair; she was not the kind of person to spend a lot of time fussing with her appearance. The whole thing was topped off by over-large black horn-rimmed glasses, which just seemed right on her. "See, there was lots of disagreement back in those days over global warming, but after the Tsunami, well, that pretty much ended the disagreements, although even after that disaster, there are still some people who deny. Hard to understand... anyway, almost all the polar ice had melted, and the sea level was rising each year, and finally the extra weight of the water triggered a cascade of undersea earthquakes in the Pacific Ocean. It was way before you were born, but there used to be land and millions and millions of people 20 miles further out from where the coast is now, but the tsunami wiped it all out."

"Mom, what's a cascade?"

Mom laughed, and said, "That's the question you have after all that? You're funny, buddy boy."

I didn't really understand what was so funny, but I kept quiet, so mom would keep going. I loved hearing her talk, even though I didn't understand everything. "Anyway, all the coastal areas of the Pacific Ocean were completely decimated, and a lot of land is now under water. There used to be a very powerful country called Japan, but except for some mountain areas it's all under water, along with most of the Philippines, the Hawaiian Islands, all the Pacific rim countries, and more than... well, let's just say lots and lots of people too."

A kid from a normal family would probably be wondering why his mom would be telling him such a horrible story, but I was quite used to it, even as a nine-year-old. To say my parents were nerds would be... well, nerds think of my parents as nerds. My mom had a Ph.D in Astrophysics and seemed to know everything, and wanted to make sure I got exposed to as much as I could handle, especially things she found important or interesting, which was quite a lot, by the way. My dad, a Ph.D in Conceptual Physics and Nano-Engineering, was working on a project that he couldn't talk about, which of course made mom and me crazy.

Anyway, we continued down the dark, wet streets toward dad's office, and as we reached the freeway, mom took her hands off the wheel and allowed the mag-strips in the asphalt to steer and propel the car. She explained that some of the newer freeways had the mag strips, but most didn't have them yet, and probably never would. She programmed the car to take the correct turn-off, turned to me and continued her story. "Take out your phone and check for video of the tsunami. You'll be amazed. We were lucky, dad and me, that we were able to get out in time and get up here into the hills. We probably would have..."

The car swerved quickly to the right, then auto-corrected its course, throwing both of us from side to side. "*Whoa*, that was close. Crazy petrol-heads! I know things are hard, but why anyone would still drive those old junkers is a mystery to me, and that guy was all over the road, like he was racing or something. Anyway, as I was saying..." There was a sudden screeching sound, and somehow, I felt like I was doing summer-

saults, over and over... And that was the last time I heard my mom's voice. In fact, it was the last time I heard anything for quite a while.

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The lights are very bright; I blink furiously but can't seem to get my eyes to clear. Lots of people around; don't recognize most of them, but my dad is here. They're all standing over me; I don't understand why they are all looking at me in this way. Then I notice that some of them are wearing the "scrubs" that nurses and doctors wear; am I in the hospital or something? Through my blurry, unfocused eyes dad looks exhausted with worry. What's going on here? Did I get hurt or something? And where's mom? My throat doesn't seem to work, and I can't make any words come out; it sounds strange to my ears, like dull grunting and squeaking. That's weird...did I get my tonsils out or something? I can't remember anything about getting sick or...

Then, in a flash, it all came back to me. Driving along, chatting happily with mom, then an ear-shattering sound, flipping over and over and then... nothing. All the people assembled around me have deeply concerned expressions. I try to feel my body by moving different extremities, but I am not having much luck; nothing seems to be happening. Fear creeps into my mind, but dad's face is suddenly hovering close. "Luke, Lukey, can you hear me? It's me, dad."

I looked at dad like he was crazy, and tried to say, "Of course I can hear you," but again only grunts came out. *This is frustrating! What the heck is going on here?*

Although he was always kind of wiry, dad looked positively bony, and his dark hair was much longer and messy, like he hadn't been taking care of himself. His ocean blue eyes, which I had always thought were his best feature, were now clouded. All in all, he looked as if he was being squeezed from all sides by tremendous pressure. *How could his hair be longer? I just saw him yesterday! Would somebody please tell me what is going on?*

Dad looked deeply into my eyes, and although he was smiling, he seemed sad at the same time, which I thought was weird. "Lukey, you

can hear me, can't you? I can see it in your face. I didn't think this day would ever come." Then a big tear rolled down his cheek, landing on the bed covers just below my chin. I had never seen my dad cry before, and it made me want to cry too. *What is wrong? What's going on with everyone? I don't get it...*

A deep, gruff voice from behind dad called out. "Dr. Taylor, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I need to speak with you. This is very important."

Dad turned and slowly crossed the room to where the man with the long white coat was standing. He seemed to think that I couldn't hear or understand him, but I could. "I'm very sorry, Dr. Taylor, but we need to discuss what to do here. We have been keeping your son alive for quite a long time at your request and considerable cost, and it is clear there is no hope of any kind of recovery. You can see that. I know this is difficult but keeping him alive this way is not good for him or you. There's nothing left, and we don't have the technology to change it. I mean, no arms, no legs, half a torso gone, an artificial heart, there is nothing more we can do. It's been five years, and it is time to move on. I know you can see that. Yes, there is some brain activity, but if we remove the life support, he would go quickly."

As the man in the long white coat spoke, dad hung his head and rubbed his hands across his face. Following a long pause, he said, "Look, I know you mean well, Dr. Torres. I do, and I'm not a fool. I just need a little more time to accept it. Give me until tomorrow morning, please. Then I'll be ready."

He turned his face up to the man in the white coat who I now knew as Dr. Torres, and he had big tears in his eyes. *Wait... did he say I don't have any legs or arms anymore?*

Dr. Torres let out a big sigh, and said, "Of course, tomorrow would be fine. It's really for the best, Dr. Taylor, although I understand how difficult this is. I'm very sorry." He looked at dad for a moment, glanced over at me, turned and briskly exited the room, the other staff members following him.

Dad glanced up at the clock on the wall, strode over to me, and knelt beside the bed. “Don’t worry, Lukey. I know you can hear me. Everything will be alright, you’ll see. I’ll be back tonight. In the meantime, just rest. I love you, Lukey, I won’t let them take you. I promise.” He had tears in his eyes again, and I still didn’t quite understand what was happening. He leaned forward, kissed me on the forehead, and bolted from the room.

He said I don’t have any arms or legs, but... that can’t be true, can it? What happened to them? I wish I could see better... I almost feel like I can only open one eye, and the one I can open won’t focus right... Suddenly I felt exhausted, and I guess I fell asleep.

“Luke... Lukey, wake up, It’s me, dad. Listen carefully. I’m going to do some things that I’ll explain later, and then we’re going to get out of here. Some of this may hurt a little bit, but stay as quiet as you can, ok?”

I tried to answer but only a little squeak came out. I glanced at the clock on the wall: eleven-fifteen p.m. Dad put a chair up against the door to block it so that it could not be opened and rolled two large metallic suitcases to the side of the bed. Actually, I’m not sure they were suitcases; they were about the right size, but were square and plain, and emitted a faint buzz. He opened one of them, and in it was a large glass cylinder, maybe half a meter tall and wide, filled with some weird material about the color of my skin. I stared, transfixed by the movement of the stuff in the cylinder. Not like it was fluid, but more like it was *alive*. There were some wires hooked to the top of the cylinder; dad disconnected the wires and hoisted the cylinder up, setting it next to me on the bed, and it must have been heavy because he really had to struggle to lift it. He pulled back my covers, and let out a gasp, more tears spilling from his eyes. He picked up the container with the weird stuff in it and poured it onto the bed where my body would be, and right away I could feel it sort of connecting to me, worming its way into what was left of my flesh and bones, and it all seemed to happen very quickly, like the weird material knew just what to do. *That feels strange... wait, I haven’t felt anything in a long time*

down there... what is happening? Ow, that hurts... my foot hurts... hold on, I thought I didn't have any feet...

Dad bent over, opened the other suitcase, and in it was another glass container of the stuff. He picked this one up, again with what appeared to be great difficulty, and poured it on my head and upper body. I felt it mixing with my skin, and forming itself into... *wait, that hurts, but... my eye... I can see out of both eyes now...*

“Dad, I can see again!” *Did I just talk out loud? How did that happen?*

Dad fumbled with something else in the second suitcase, came up with an object about the size of a marble, and pushed it into the material that was attaching itself to the side of my head. He bent over again, produced another item about the size and shape of a baseball, and worked it into the material that was melding to the middle of my body. He tapped for a minute on a tablet computer, and I could feel the baseball-sized thing vibrating slightly. After some more tapping... well, this is hard to describe. Or, maybe not hard, but totally unexpected. I heard a woman's voice in my head; not like someone was talking to me, but like someone else was thinking words and I could hear them in my mind.

“Stand by, initiating boot procedure.” she said.

My eyes bulged out and I thrashed around; dad came in close and whispered, “Try to hold still just a little longer, Lukey. We're almost ready to get out of here. I'll explain everything soon, but we have to get moving right away.”

Dad seemed anxious, almost panicked, as he waited for whatever was happening to me to finish, when suddenly... an aggressive pounding at the door.

