

The Deadnet (Extract)

By Tatiana Zamirouskaya

From the author:

The reality in which this novel's events unfold is the near post-apocalyptic future. All diseases have been eradicated, except the flu, which returns every year in deadly new strains. There are constant terrorist attacks—echoes of the war that no one talks about. People have adapted to the constant threat of sudden death by creating a Consciousness Duplication Program. Once a year, they back up their memories. When someone dies, their family can activate the most recent copy; this allows family members to communicate with their lost loved ones over the Internet. The duplicates of the human consciousness are certain that they are the very same person who was copied. And yet, they are no more than a digital copy of the person who has died. The duplicate's reality is constructed out of their own memory cache. In order to combat the duplicates' loneliness in the worlds of their own memories, the government has connected the duplicates' memories. Their world has become indistinguishable from ours. Except that this is a world as remembered by the dead. A collective context. The Deadnet.

*I like to think
(right now, please!)
of a cybernetic forest
filled with pines and electronics
where deer stroll peacefully
past computers
as if they were flowers
with spinning blossoms.*

Richard Brautigan «All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace»

*Whilst it is true that we did not ask to be here,
it is also true that we did not ask to not be here either.*

Genesis Breyer P-Orridge «Psychic Bible»

Chapter 1: The Deadnet

Translated by Julia Meitov Hersey

It all happened just a little after the Deadnet broke.

But wait. Have I chosen the right tone?

It's important for me to tell the story as if you know nothing about the Internet for the Dead. As if you are my grandma, my only dead relative who left no signs of digital presence. As if you cannot feel anything, you cannot participate in anything; the latter issue is my biggest regret. What would she have told me now? Would we have been able to swim all the way to the honey webs of our old summer house, would she have talked me out of becoming a dog? Or would she have chosen to become a dog with me? Was she, in fact, that second dog, visiting me from the even more ephemeral and

unreachable version of the heavenly city? For her, this whole story must be nothing short of a miracle. Something miracle-like. By the way, someone has switched my layout.

Let's assume that at some point, they will configure the Internet for the Dead, the Deadnet, and I will want to tell the story this way. I call it "The Internet for the Dead" on purpose, to make things easier to understand. In reality (someone keeps changing the layout here, too -- which way is reality here?), it's not exactly the Internet, and it's not exactly for the dead. I would like to believe that the dead do not actually go anywhere, that they disappear for good, turning into memories, and those who end up someplace else remain eternally alive, never dead, and that 's why their existence is partial or they don't exist at all.

The first year everything was small-scale and very simple, like a unicycle (unicellular organism? single cell prison?). Once the new technology allowed copying human psyche and memory onto an external carrier, a new question arose immediately: what is to be done with the ever growing backups? Reserve copies, replicas, duplicates -- which ones were the most appropriate? Choosing among translations, one should always focus on the most obscure and nuanced one. You've lost the key, and there is no duplicate. There is no (and no one) home (anymore).

In the beginning, they tested the technology on the military personnel and scientists. Even in the state of distilled consciousness removed from their bodies, these two groups continued to be of benefit to mankind. Their copies could only be downloaded by pre-approved personnel: special forces, colleagues, and research staff. Later, after the war, ordinary civilians could be copied, but only for personal use. You had to sign a contract that listed the names of everyone who could communicate with your copy. Friends, family members, etc. Should you suffer a sudden death (it was a common occurrence -- new flu strains or terrorist attacks), these people would get an email offering them to download your duplicate, your copy, from (insert the date of the last backup) onto their personal communication devices. It is possible to decline the offer; some people prefer living through their loss -- the rupture, the disappearance.

On some level, I get it. Whatever we call 'soul' or 'consciousness' is not the same thing that the duplicate may have, even if it's the exact copy of the person. What we have here is microscopic detail, surgical precision. No minuscule fissures. A perfect match. And yet, shouldn't death leave a tiny defect, a crack, or a wrinkle? The familiar smile on a post-mortem photo is terrifying in its sameness. Shall we add something, like a broken front tooth? Some sort of a damaged pixel. Please. Let us know you've been somewhere. That you remember something.

But alas, the duplicates retain no death memories, they don't remember death, and will never recollect it. Their last memory is of the latest backup.

"Tell me all about it," their friends ask because in the beginning they don't care about anything but the death experience. "So you woke up on Deadnet. And before that?"

"I came in for a backup, I took a seat."

"And then?"

"I took a seat."

And then silence. Quite the same, and yet not quite. Because whoever took a seat was a different person, a live human being intent on preserving themselves, as all of us are wont to do. Please do something to ensure that after I die, I can continue communicating with A, B, and C. You may recite the alphabet a hundred times, but at the end of the day it is their choice whether to communicate with you, and you, according to some (but not all) are simply switched off.

In a world where nothing can be turned off even if it is the desired outcome, the biological death of consciousness is a true blessing. I envy those who have already gone through this. It is the only kind of experience that cannot be documented or shared, yet is accessible by and destined for everyone, and registered from within just until its successful execution can be registered by an external observer.

My diagnosis is envy towards an external observer. Envy towards an external carrier. Envy towards the external and its potential. Envy towards the dying, if we want to call a spade a different spade.

A while ago I read a long article by Elon Musk; the old man was fond of delivering his 'I told you so' spiels on different platforms the likes of *The New Yorker*, the ones gravitating toward the retro futuristic geriatric eloquence. In the article, he reminded his audience of how, years ago, he insisted that we would soon learn to copy the human brain in its entirety, while having absolutely no idea of how it actually functions.

Musk was correct. As it turns out, in order to execute a perfect copy of something, it is not necessary to understand *how it works*. All of us occasionally find ourselves in this trap; as we attempt to recreate or duplicate something, we desperately try to comprehend its essence rather than trying to comprehend the essence of duplicating as a process. Anything can be duplicated. And nothing can be found. There is no reason to look for something when it can be duplicated.

This duplicating revolution was aided by the final victory of the panpsychism theory. In my attempt to make it bearable, I am directing this message at the times that knew two theories of consciousness: panpsychism and emergentism. According to the theory of emergence, consciousness appears out of nowhere: for example, it's not found in the transparent jellyfish softness of a human fetus, but it shows itself as a ripe blood-colored cherry of meaning in a sturdy dumpling of a newborn. The impossibility of tracing the miraculous moment of the birth of consciousness brings the emergence theory practically next door to religion. Scientists nailed it with panpsychism, previously considered new-agey and Zen Buddhist. A fetus is sentient, a newborn is slightly more so, an actual dumpling on your plate is sentient as well. Consciousness exists everywhere from the very beginning, just not to the same degree. Consciousness is omnipresent and measurable, it does not appear from nowhere. And it is this theory that allowed the process of taking consciousness as is and using it as a skewer for a human copy. It's as simple as placing rocks in a creek. Or arranging objects in the light to get shadows of particular shapes. All you need is light and direction, river and current, and time.

Am I making sense? Am I making anything at all? Are we having a formal one-on-one conversation, or am I speaking to all of you at once? I am verbalizing the top of this iceberg of terror that we all found ourselves in after the Internet for the dead broke. I am the voice of this frigid elite, its shameless consciousness, millions of its conscious and conceivable dumplings.

By the way, the test text mode failed miserably. At first, shocked by the sight of the familiar resurrected icon in their feed, so alive in its radiant emerald green, the happy friends and relatives babbled incoherently: *How are you? Do you remember me? Do you remember yourself?* In response, they got even more incoherent babbling, an agglomeration of chaos, random nonsense. Seemingly, the same person, deeply loved, undeniably precious, but one who behaves like a search engine and a drunk DJ, a former classmate: sharing rad songs of their youth, torturing everyone with neverending memories, lacking emotions, hurting feelings.

No one realized that listening to the nonsense spewed by the duplicates of deceased loved ones would be harder for the living than the actual loss. That's where the therapists came in, to guide people through the disaster of these initial attempts at family communication. Back then we still had therapists.

Figuring out where consciousness comes from (but not how it works -- that's an important distinction) made it easy to understand why a senseless duplicate is nothing more than a handful of incoherent textual outbursts. Aside from the resolved issue of *what it's like to be dead or to be a bat*, consciousness requires an illusion of time flow. But even that was eventually resolved: simulating time for the duplicate and synchronizing it with real time creates something so close to real consciousness that it might as well be real consciousness. In the untime, where everything exists at once, consciousness is not formed; it connects to time like a physical entity. Perhaps, consciousness is a physical entity. To know what it's like to be something, one must have experience of existing in time.

When there is no time, there is no observer. No observer -- no consciousness. You are a giant pile of digital gruel; there is no one to chew and swallow you, and so you choke on yourself, spit, and drip down your own face.

Thus, every duplicate went through two stages: inactive and active copies. Inactive copy was nothing but a reprint of a person, untouched by the slow molasses of time and desynchronized with humanity; unthinking, lifeless, unaware of being nothing but digital gruel. Perhaps, that is exactly how we are before we are born.

However, an active copy is practically indistinguishable from the person who paid for it (and paid a pretty penny -- it's a very lucrative business; there is no better investment than immortality). That active copy is convinced that it is, in fact, the person themselves. A digital resurrection. *Hello, it's me, and yes, I do remember myself.*

Obviously, the first question arose immediately: what are the legal implications of the rickety rights of the active copy that, even though it may live on the cloud server, is nevertheless aware of being a real person? Simply put, your duplicate is convinced it's you. Obviously, one of you has experienced death. But usually duplicates try not to dwell on this issue.

That is how the No Influence Law came about: a duplicate is given nearly all the digital rights within the framework of *permitted communication*.

"Nearly all" means that a duplicate cannot influence anything. This is the first document you are given before duplication: you will be required to check the part where you agree that your duplicate will consider itself a continuation of the biological original (hence, it is a living human being) but cannot influence reality (hence, not quite living). You will be limited to observing the real world.

It is true that the duplicates of the reporters and writers certified by their unions can influence world news and public opinion. Duplicates of artists certified by museums and curators can continue to exhibit their work and earn their commissions (and choose the heirs). Duplicates of certified scientists can study all this and fight their colleagues from beyond. But unless you have invested heavily into your education and your career,

you will be limited to hopelessly scrolling the news feed and communicating with your friends and relatives.

Inevitably, problems began right away. It is a lovely thing to be able to chat with your dead loved ones -- it makes you feel better. You can share the latest news, ask for advice, cry, look into their eyes; activated duplicates perceive themselves as physical bodies broadcast during video sessions. But imagine this: your dead grandmother pops up in all communication channels, as if she'd never rode her fiery wheels on the way to her sterile white Valhalla and tells you her entire life story (you've never bothered to listen to her before, and now you are riveted, oil of myrrh streaming from your adoring eyes, writing down every word). She shares the family recipe of plum pudding with wrinkly and stoney homemade prunes, she consoles you -- no need to be sad, I am here, alive and well, and everything is just fine. Eventually you work through your loss and get used to grandma's constancy, and that's when all the merriment and dirt kicks off, Kharms-style: you are not raising your kids right, little Fima never calls, it's all your husband's fault, he tells Fima not to call, as if grandma's dumb, but grandma's not dumb, grandma understands everything, and why did you dig her out of her grave, there was no need to shake the dirt off her gray locks, put her back in, but you can't. The access is one way after all.

And that's that. That's when the conflicts, squabbles, and arguments began. The dead were bored, nervous, and took it out on their families (who else). For each of the dead, the world was fragmented, devoid of other people. A standard backup of memories, which their brain automatically uploaded from the cache in order to reduce the perception process to the absolute minimum. The dead found themselves in a vague but palatable reality; since the brain can always be relied upon to create a background, a duplicated brain would continue to do so as well.

Indeed, a man is an island entire of itself. And yet, this whole world was clearly not enough. It turned out the much-anticipated 'wish you were here' did not work.

It was very upsetting to the dead that, once their loved ones got used to their digital resurrection, they would slowly but surely get distracted, return to real life, and

start letting go. The practice of letting go -- an anthropological imperative for the latest version of humanity -- in this particular situation felt like treason. It was indeed perceived as treason. Widowers would remarry and stop responding to their loved and lost dead spouses. Children threw temper tantrums when their mothers filled the communication screens with plump, like buns fresh out of the oven, babies with solemn eyes as shiny and brown as ripe cherries: obviously, these drooly bastards would live to a hundred! They wouldn't be run over by a heavy truck making a sharp turn; they would be watched over and looked after, and their precious copy would never be activated! A digital child duplicate is precious, too, of course, and much loved, and the best in the world, but how does one cuddle them?

Embraces are forbidden; haptic suits, anthropomorphic robots, VR helmets -- the contract states none of these can be used. Influence is possible only through informational and digital methods, but not sensory or physical. Bioprivileges are the only thing that separates the living from the dead. The dead are incorporeal, and corporeality is life. After all, there must be some barrier between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

To turn off the dumb grandma with her incessant interference and nosiness? To forbid copying children (that was actually outlawed later)? To deactivate the duplicate, to stop its ranting and muttering? Ethically, it is forbidden and is considered equal to murder. When you received a friend request from a dead person, you chose to subscribe to grandma. Have you really thought about this before you friended a dead person?

That's probably why it worked out this way, because of the dead people's solitude. Five years after the start of the duplication program, we had our first revolution on our hands: living people took it to the streets to fight for the rights of our dead loved ones. No one should have to suffer, and even after death a person should not be alone (even if this person is your exact copy, is not quite human, and it was of your own volition).

At that point thousands of people suffered from loneliness on the Internet for the dead. There was the voluntary annihilation option, but none of the resurrected folks wanted to take advantage of it. No one wanted to disappear. Had they felt differently, they wouldn't have duplicated themselves.

The struggle for the rights of the dead was in full swing, even ahead of the neoliberal battles for the standard minority set (insert the relevant in your reality minorities that you are a part of, or for which you elbowed the others in a street parade, baring your head to the police batons). Lo and behold, the global government gave in and signed the law of merging contexts. The single cells united (cells interlinked within, etc.), and a pale fountain of singularity finally began pumping.

Victory! Everyone took to the streets again, this time with champagne bottles. It was a truly revolutionary event. The collective memory of the dead was now a single context.

Before that, the world of the dead looked rather dull, to be honest. Let's say you skipped off to your annual duplication, and then some new strain of the ant flu (we've managed to defeat nearly all the diseases, expect for the flu, but you guessed it already), or yet another act of terrorism (those happened more and more often), and after a certain time period your copy is activated. By default it's forty days, unless you choose to wait longer (it's a cultural tradition to let everyone grieve in peace, otherwise, the dead person interferes with the process, makes recommendations to the funeral home, asks for a particular music, requests streaming services where everyone is sobbing, and the dead person watching is enjoying themselves -- so unbelievably awkward).

You get up from the chair, go home, and find it empty. The city is empty. The entire world is a backup of your brain. You can only communicate through the network and only with those who you named in your contract. What were you thinking when you signed it? You are utterly alone. Occasionally a few shadows flicker on the periphery of what your restored brain considers your vision. But you can't talk to them.

Yes, you may try combatting your loneliness through art, using your trusted contacts for transfer. You can beg your relatives to post the endless garlands of your timid amateur verses to poetry forums, to hold exhibits. With time, we even got this new kind of art-brut, outsider art, creations of uncertified dead artists. However, the dead were still bored stiff. Some particularly active types listed all their social media contacts in their duplication contracts; it's a pity that sooner or later we all lose interest in someone we can't grab a drink with. Or perhaps we don't? Can you hear me? Are you still there?

Once context merging was approved, the backups of all duplicates united in creating a whole world of memories. It is quite possible that I am directing my incoherent meta notes to a place where fragments of Google Street View maps are slapped together with seams and stitches. You take a turn onto the next street over -- and it's April there.

Every dead person remembered something different about the world; after the backups united, the world of the dead became more colorful, more like the real one. The dead could finally see each other, meet new people, go to cafes; they could finally drink (thanks to a couple of duplicates whose death was caused by alcoholism, betrayed by their, or rather, someone else's, infinitely foreign, third transplanted liver -- their backups allowed everyone within a hundred kilometer radius visit any and all drinking establishments). The dead could finally open their own dead publishing houses (let the living with their endless bioprivileges try to query their manuscripts!), they could travel, explore the cities they have not visited before (these cities may be someone's collective memory, but aren't regular cities a sort of collective memory anyway?).

Next came social networks for the dead, Internet for the dead, transcontinental flights, cruise ships; the more people died and were activated in the world of the dead, the faster the dead world came into being as it was -- crystalline, fresh, radiant, as if just after a rain. A pure heavenly city, a new Jerusalem -- although I'm not sure you are familiar with this metaphor. Is it even a metaphor? The world that is exclusively made up of collective memories of those who live in it -- isn't it exactly what the Book is all about?

Memory and love; that's what ruled that world. Everyone's fear came true: the dead started getting involved with the other dead. The dead started to fall in love with each other. The living began to feel jealousy toward the dead. Some of the living disliked how their dead enjoyed the company of the other dead more than their own. This prompted a few unpleasant visits to the relatives of the dead. A widow from Texas shot a widower from Kentucky because her dead husband's duplicate had an affair with the duplicate of his dead wife (this was a carefully concealed secret until someone used the wrong chat window). A widower from Novosibirsk was looking for the grave of his dead wife's lover, also in Kentucky, because why shouldn't one get married to a foreigner and live happily ever after, even after one's death. And why shouldn't a living cuckold schlep all the way to Kentucky and spit on the homewrecker's grave? The sentiment here may not be entirely obvious, but then again, graves are necessary, even if only for this kind of consolation.

That's when I had died, in this golden interval between the creation of the Internet for the Dead and that moment when the Internet for the Dead collapsed and we temporarily took over the world.

To be precise, the real me had died. Even though I don't see any difference, or rather, I can't believe there is one. We no longer die, it is always someone else who does. We cannot even sympathize with that someone because when a biological original dies, their memory and their entire life are passed to the duplicate. And that means the duplicate is now the original.

Chapter 2: Canine Void

(Translated by Fiona Bell)

I copied myself for the seventh year in a row. It was a recommended precaution—there were regular terrorist attacks in the city. It was after the seventh time that I realized something was off: usually, whenever I got up from my chair, the staff would ask me for my name and the date (normal procedure), and then they'd ask, "And

what does that mean?" (also normal procedure). This time, they didn't ask what my name was, just: "Today is March 25th, and what does that mean?"

"It means I died," I said, as if standing on a stage with thousands of lights—but not a single pair of eyes—pointing at me. "I was copied in November. Now it's the end of March. That means I died in the middle of February and now I've been activated. A duplicate of November."

This whole procedure was regimented. I'd done it many times before the copying process.

"That's correct," the assistants responded, nodding. Of course, technically they weren't assistants anymore, just memories of them. "Go home, you'll find all the necessary documents there, forms to fill out, tips for rehabilitation. If you have any questions, give us a call and we'll explain everything."

"Reason for death?" I asked. "What happened between November and March? A flu epidemic?"

"Don't forget, everything you need to know can be found at home," they said, smiling, as they escorted me out.

I went home to fill out the forms and read the news from the past four months. The city was no different than usual, except brighter and more transparent. Memory, perception, and imagination are better than reality. I've always known that. The city wasn't very populated (so no epidemic, then) and right away I recognized which people were part of the cache background,

and which were us: dead. Or, more specifically, duplicates. I wasn't preoccupied by my death. It's hard to be upset about something you haven't witnessed.

At home I immediately activated access to my friends, daughter, parents, and husband. Everyone accepted my requests, except my husband.

Access denied! I slammed my fist down on the table and hurt myself. My brain recalled the fact that, when you slam your fist on a table, it hurts. But I knew that my brain recalled this fact perfectly well, and that this understanding, in fact, had constructed the pain. Although, dead people's perceptive faculties differ from those of the living. It felt like I was under the influence of some powerful nootropics, sedatives, and antidepressants all at the same time. I had read about this effect (when the brain is digital, rather than biological, you lose some natural hormonal chemistry), so I wasn't surprised.

I was just surprised that my husband didn't want to talk to me.

And that no one would explain what was going on. Everything was as usual: tears, video confessions, endless conversations. I was told that terrorists had tried to blow up the building where I'd worked: the eight people who'd been in the lobby died instantly. There hadn't been much left of me, apparently, which is why I couldn't become a real dead person. Those are the ones who died with their brains intact, whose brains could be copied before the death of the body, who remembered their deaths. They were said to be useful for research. There were also rumors that, in such cases, a person's bio-consciousness doesn't die with the brain, but passes on to their duplicate.

Every morning I read the news and laughed at my obituaries on social media. I cancelled the access of the five friends who'd written obituaries I didn't like. I looked at pictures of my daughter's new boyfriend and told her where to apply to college. I even drank with friends online. But no one could tell me anything definitive about my husband. And, by the way, he was the only reason I'd agreed to the procedure. He was terrified at the thought of losing me and, although the thought of yearly back-ups scared me (however rare, complications do happen), I dutifully copied myself. And now he didn't want to talk to me.

"Did Dad take a lover right after I died?" I asked my daughter. She shrugged.

"No, I mean, he's got his issues, but..." she said. "Issues?!"

“Maybe he’ll tell you himself,” she said, recoiling. “He probably gets a reminder once a week, like ‘Do you want to grant access?’”

“What if he doesn’t have access himself? Maybe his entire face got cut off and he can’t log into his profile? Or his eyes got gouged out and the iris scanner can’t read him? Or his fingers got chopped off and he doesn’t have fingerprints anymore?”

My daughter shrugged.

“You’re the one who’s in contact with him!” I screamed. “Ask him what’s going on!” She gave a cryptic answer: they hadn’t seen each other in a while, everyone was so busy everyone has their own things, you know how it is.

I threatened her: if she didn’t tell me what was really going on, I was going to stop talking to her. She shrugged again. I stopped talking to her, but then I got bored and went back. This never-ending, vicious blackmail would drive me crazy. I knew that, if I were in my normal living state, with a bio-consciousness, adrenal glands, and a hypothalamus, this would have plunged me into panic, depression, and denial. Now I just felt melancholy and a little irritated.

My friends didn’t tell me anything, either. Why did I want to know? It was his business.

He’d tell me about it later. Sit back and wait, they said, maybe he’ll die, too!

At a certain point, I started thinking that my husband was the one who’d died, and I’d just gone somewhere else, to another continent or something.

Then we broke the Deadnet. This was a long-time coming: we had fewer and fewer rights and more and more of us were appearing. The Committee for the Insurrection of the Dead had been preparing for this moment for about a year. And then one morning we woke up, and the digital borders between our worlds were gone. We could do whatever we wanted.

* * *

Much has been and remains to be written about the Insurrection of the Dead: it was an extravaganza, but a performative one, like a long-awaited Disobedience Day. The dead entered smart homes, turning them into haunted houses. They spoke to the living through shower water, steam, and smoke. Breathed through the air conditioner. Rattled glasses in the dishwasher.

Assumed the voices of digital assistants: “It’s going to rain today, you have three meetings at work, my name is Matthew and I’m going to live with you from now on because I’m bored.”

Dead artists flooded the museums, adding white noise to video art, rearranging immersive installations, and vindictively disrupting conferences on Russian cosmism. Computer games became journeys in other people’s memories. Digital publishing houses instantly swelled with new titles.

The artistic period following the Deadnet’s storming of the real world was short-lived, but remarkable. Everything was funny, cute, fun, and scary—until they deactivated us.

Of course they deactivated us.

It happened almost immediately after we hacked the backup database and uploaded digital duplicates of still-living people.

This had been the plan for a long time. Even before we broke the Deadnet, there had been an unpleasant legal loophole: it was unclear whether death was grounds for an uncontested divorce. The law stated that the widower had the right to marry and all the rest of it. But is the deceased considered single? Or are they completely emotionally attached to their widower?

Naturally, when widowed partners found replacements, the dead suffered. The most well behaved of us refrained from arranging intrigues, from whining and blackmail. These people just asked: "Why don't you send me a duplicate of yourself, from the year we spent together? It's technically possible, isn't it? That way, we can both be with the people we love, or loved. That way, we can let each other go."

Unfortunately, it was strictly forbidden to activate digital copies of living people.

But when we broke the Deadnet and hacked onto the regular Internet, we did it immediately: we stole, activated, and synced all the copies we could!

That's when I realized I had a problem. The problem that got this whole thing started.

One of the stolen copies was my husband's.

I went home and he was there. He walked up to me, hands shaking, crying. "I died, too?" he asked. "We both died? How? Why?"

"No," I said. "You're alive, you're fine. Now tell me what's going on."

Still crying, he grabbed me and kept repeating: "But how, how, how can we both be dead?"

I kept thinking it was a good thing they'd taken just the last copy, not all seven.

It turned out this was a copy from January, almost a year prior. Now it was the end of October.

And since August I'd been seeing A. That was the tragedy. He also had a wife among the living, but at least she communicated with him, unlike my husband.

A. was a real dead person, not like me. I was lucky he picked me. Apparently, he was killed by a mine in one of the wars about ten years ago. Almost nothing left of his body, but his brain stayed intact for a while. It turned out that his insurance payout was

just enough to copy him. A. remembered his death and believed that his bio-consciousness had survived and transferred to a digital form because he could remember how it all happened with the precision of a jeweler, down to the smallest grain and shadow. Of course, there's a technological gap between us. A theological gulf.

Before we met, A. and I were skeptical of the idea of love after death. But no one wants to be alone—that's understandable. Honestly, if not for the need to fight loneliness, none of this would have happened. Like him, I believed that love was a hormonal cocktail, one of the few advantages of the bio-body. I thought that a complete digital copy of the brain, no matter how hard it tried, would not be able to synthesize this cocktail again from scratch, in response to a new person. Such a brain would be the most shameless bartender in the universe, synthesizing memory cocktails that have already been sucked dry.

Still, it seemed that love after death was possible. A. thought it was because he was a real dead person, not like us. I was indignant: "I'm the same person, I remember my childhood, I'm me!"

"No," A. smiled. "It doesn't matter what you remember. You're just a digital copy and that's all."

"Then why do you love me, if I'm just a digital copy?" I said, raising my voice. "Because there's no other version of you. You're the only one!" he yelled in response.

We were actually pretty serious about each other. It was no one's fault that we met after death. I didn't steal him from his wife. What we had didn't hurt anyone.

Now everything was messed up because my husband was at home, he still loved me more than life itself, and his copy was two months younger than mine. Impossible to get any information out of him.

He didn't understand that I had died. That had been in February, but he, my husband, was a duplicate from January.

He didn't understand that the dead had taken over the communication of the living. They could deactivate all of us and send the server to burn in hell. (There was already talk of this, but then more protests, waves of indignation: "It's not our fault, you kept us here, in an immigration prison between being and non-being!")

He didn't understand that he was a stolen copy (and even more likely to be deactivated).

He didn't understand why the real him didn't want to talk to me—how could a winter copy know what would happen in spring?

He didn't know about me and A., either, and if he found out it would break his heart.

Even though there were two parts of him, one of which (the original) didn't want to talk to me.

Somehow, I explained to A. that my husband and I really had to deal with our relationship. I would go live with him for a while. This was a tough conversation. But I really wanted to figure this out.

My husband wrote angry messages to himself. At the time, we were not yet disconnected from the regular Internet and we could write anything to anyone, not just those on our list of trusted persons.

"Hi," he said over and over. "Answer me, it's me, what's going on man, why don't you want to talk to her? What happened after she died? Did you meet someone else? Is someone keeping you quiet?"

"He blocked me!" my husband said, turning from the screen, his face flushed. "I blocked myself! Son of a bitch! I thought that was impossible! How did he do it?"

"No one knows better than you! Try to imagine why you'd block yourself."

"Maybe I was scared?" he suggested. "I'm a horrible coward, honestly. Whenever I read the news, I think, 'Soon the hole will be patched, and they'll deactivate all the

duplicates of the living and I'll disappear! But I'm alive! I'm here!" He thumped his chest with his fist.

"Did that hurt?" I asked.

"Yeah, actually," he said. "I know why I think it hurt, but I'm not sure that the person who got hurt is me."

He probably did block himself out of fear. We read in the news that communication with one's stolen copy is prohibited and punishable by criminal law.

A. was jealous and started making scenes. I begged him to be patient. I thought about going to the Committee for the Insurrection of the Dead and asking the programmers to deactivate my husband, but something prevented me. After all, the copy was the only one who could help me figure out why my real husband, who I'd been with for twenty-three years, didn't want to talk to me.

"Maybe you should forget about it?" A. asked reasonably when we met in the evenings at a bar in secret. "What do you care? We're together, that's it. Forget him. He's in the past."

But does the past exist for people like us?

The past lives in my house. In the morning we read the news. We laugh in horror and cry from tenderness.

We were being shut down. Everything was falling apart. The smart homes that turned into haunted houses were disconnected from the Internet (this went down in history as the "Smart Home/Haunted House" case). Digital assistants were also deactivated. The world's network was split into tiny isolated clusters, switched to satellite and cable phone service until everything got better. These were temporary measures.

They were afraid to shut us off completely, so they tried to cut off all communication.

They threatened us with repressions. They announced that they would randomly deactivate ten thousand duplicates if we did not vacate the smart homes.

In response, we reminded them of the Second World War, the ghettos. Of refugee camps and the Holocaust.

The living took to the streets and the squares again. We watched the live streams and groaned with delight. Someone was shot by a police officer. We waited in awe for the arrival of this man's copy, but then the government announced that it was freezing the Consciousness Duplication Program until everything calmed down. Or, until we surrendered the hijacked premises.

War means war. Let everyone die—we've already been resurrected.

A few weeks later, A. gave me an ultimatum: either him or my husband. I tried to protest, but he said that if I took too long to make up my mind, he'd find someone else. After all, we had activated about ten million duplicates of the living. Or he'd tell my husband everything. I'd been hiding all this from my husband, telling A. that it was because I wanted to spare his feelings.

"He didn't spare your feelings!" yelled A. "He ignored you! Ghosting is the cruelest thing a person can do. Especially when you're a ghost."

"He didn't ignore me, his copy from two months later did! You never know what can happen in two months! Maybe he went crazy? Maybe he has schizophrenia, his brain turned to mush!"

I didn't know what I was more afraid of: A. finding someone better than me in this crowded new world, or him telling my husband everything. Don't get too attached to this husband, I reminded myself. Sooner or later, all stolen duplicates will be deactivated, since they're not dead. But my husband and I decided to sneak into the real world and get to the bottom of things.

That's how I ended up entering a dog.

* * *

When the Committee for the Insurrection of the Dead gave us permission to use service dogs, all other means of entering the real world had been disabled by the authorities. Smart homes had become mindless and stupid. The ghosts had left the sinking ship. Hug machines had become mindless voodoo dolls. Sensory suits had been given away to surfers. We were driven back to the reservation.

But we still had robot dogs. For some reason, they weren't deactivated. Too brainless.

They could open and close doors, move small boxes back and forth. We had two old generation dogs at our disposal—so-called Boston Dynamics dogs, which were used at the shoe factory for doors and boxes in the past. Their functionality was highly regulated. We mainly used them to disperse useless pyrotechnic explosives, which we managed to concoct using anything we had at our electronic hands at the candle factory. To use military dogs for civilian purposes during the war (and this was still a real guerrilla war, even if it was short-lived), you needed a special permit, but A. got one for me. He had connections. After all, he was a real dead person.

My husband and I signed different contracts. I attested that I was a duplicate without an original. He attested that he was a duplicate with an original. They took us to the Duplication Center, put these shiny latex halos on us (did I realize that all this was appearances, an imitation, a cache?), and told us to wait.

I plunged into the dog at a run, as if into an opaque pool of sunlight. Inside the dog was a gaping, flickering darkness. Outside—shivering, gossamer sunlight.

The real world, of course, is strange. I wasn't used to it. The dog was still very uncomfortable—it moved fluidly, almost unwieldy, like a clown. I envied those who

managed to get into more technological and advanced things. Maybe their return to the real world was more triumphant. Although I'm glad I didn't try messing with a dishwasher, like some did.

We put boxes on each other's backs for show—let everyone think we were mail dogs. We left the factory, got to our house, and with a sort of regal gallantry, opened doors for one another, as if we were being filmed (fortunately, most of the outdoor cameras were turned off at this point, to prevent the dead from getting into them). It was easy, working with boxes and doors as a dog. It was nice. It offered an almost forbidden, physiological pleasure. As if a dog had a brain full of hormones that was literally flooded with oxytocin and dopamine when it successfully did what it was intended for.

We quietly made our way down the corridor, looked into the living room, the study.

Silence.

We couldn't talk, since we were dogs. I sat down by the door to the bedroom. This was my way of asking: "Should we open the door?"

In sitting down, my husband replied, "I'm scared. What if I'm in there sleeping with another woman. And I've just rested my leg on her soft, flushed thigh. Good thing dogs don't get nauseous. You'd see all that and leave me. And I can't live without you."

I swayed back and forth a little. This meant: "I can't decide. I'm hesitating. I'll never make up my mind."

A red light blinked on him, as if he'd broken. I thought it meant: "Why don't you open the door for me, I'll go in and decide what to do and how to tell you what's going on."

I moved to the side and looked up at the ceiling, arching my body. The box fell from my back with a crash.

And then the dogs were deactivated. The remaining loophole had apparently been discovered. And everything I had been up to that point was gone. All that remained was me. I was still in the dog, by the way, even though they'd disconnected it from the network.

And since there was absolutely nothing inside the dog that could contain me as a person, I became a pure consciousness. Maybe the most incredible experience I'd had in my whole life (if we insist on calling this whole thing "life"). I found myself in a shining, incomprehensible world. I didn't know whether this was me or not, whether what was happening was happening, whether anything existed. I was a pure consciousness with no memory or personality. I knew nothing about myself and, at the same time, I had no doubt that I existed.

Later, A. told me that when the dogs were disconnected, everyone thought I'd fallen into a coma. I'd gone limp and sank into my chair. But my consciousness remained in the dog.

It turned out that consciousness can exist separately. This came as a shock to A., who had been treating me a little haughtily, like I was a less privileged class of the dead.

As a mindless dog, I spent hours running around the city, trotting through doorways and shying away from people and vehicles. My husband ran after me, scared. I didn't know whether he was my husband or a dog. I didn't know we were dogs at all. We just were. I realized a few days later that we were our own little gang. We scared people by jumping out at them from around the corner. We opened and closed all the doors we saw. Moved boxes from one place to another. Then we found ourselves outside the city and started moving stones, mostly taking them to the forest, where we put them in a small stream. Did I know what I was doing? Did I feel exactly like that very same stone? Then we started bringing boxes to the forest, visiting the city every day to pick them up. I don't know why we did it. We were beautiful, wild animals. I suspect I was happy, happier than I'd ever been in my life. Because I didn't understand who I was

or what I was, but I knew that I existed. And, of course, no one can deny the pleasure of opening doors and moving stones—something like heroin in the dog world I suspect.

It was a wonderful time, even if I don't remember much about it, or myself during it. The second dog was my pack, my comrade-in-arms, my sweet mechanism of mindless love. We hid from everyone, rolled in puddles, went into the rustling pine forest when there was still fog and dew. If we could have had puppies, we would have had puppies.

And then it just ended. We were crossing the road somewhere around the military range.

There was heavy rain. We were careful with our steps. We were worried because we'd been walking for miles and hadn't seen a single door or box. We were even ready to return to the stones. Suddenly I came to and remembered who I was.

I was sitting in a chair. A. and my husband were looking at me worriedly. "Do you know who you are and where you are?" A. asked.

I nodded.

"Jesus," said A. "It worked. We got an urgent call, apparently you started moving and moaning and talking nonsense. What happened? Do you remember anything? You were in a coma for nine days, even though a dead person can't be in a coma. How did this happen? Do you remember what you saw when the dogs were deactivated?"

"Have I got news for you," I said. "I was a dog. This whole time, I was a dog. I went around the city, roamed the forests. I lived a full life, as they say. I opened doors, moved stones. I didn't remember anything. For the past week and a half, I've existed as a mechanical dog in the real world. It was great."

"I have some news for you, too," said A., puzzled. "You were killed."

“They killed the dog I was?” I said, horrified. For some reason this upset me, as if we really could’ve had mechanical puppies who would carry tiny white boxes, jewelry boxes, and old cotton boxes with Christmas toys on their backs.

“No,” said A. softly. “The woman you were before you were killed, was killed. By a person. In that old, traditional way.”

“But there hasn’t been a traditional murder for ages!” I said indignantly.

“Right, exactly,” said A. “Turns out they were keeping that from us. And they tell all the copies of the people who’ve been murdered a stock story about terrorism.”

“But I’ve read articles about the terrorist attacks!” I said. “They were real!” “It’s fake news,” said A. “It’s not hard to take a few people who’d been actually murdered by another person, mentally place them on the same floor of an office or on an imaginary bus and kill them in a terrorist attack. For some reason, person-to-person murder is a prohibited form of information, I guess. So, the terrorist attack story is not just told to the duplicates, but to everyone. Only impersonal or mass murder is considered an allowed topic.”

“That’s horrible,” I said. “My husband and I should’ve stayed dogs.”

“Your husband is in prison,” said A., slapping my husband on the shoulder. “That’s why he’s the main suspect. That’s why he hasn’t been answering you!”

Too much news, I thought.

Then A. told me that someone had also killed the dog I had been, which is why I had, so to speak, come to my senses. What a nightmare, I thought. I was killed twice in the real world, both as a human and a dog.

I looked at my husband and started to weep. Because of the dog, for some reason. I felt incredibly sad that he and I had lived a sweet little life as mindless dogs and everything was destroyed in an instant. One of us had killed the other and the dog-us had been killed, too.

“No one killed the second dog,” my husband said. “It’s still running around somewhere.

And everything you just said is total bullshit. You just lived with an empty, mechanical dog, totally devoid of consciousness. It ran after you because of its pack instinct: help with the door, put the box on your back. And in the week and a half you were gone, I’ve been talking to A. I came back as soon as the dogs were deactivated. And I know everything.”

“An empty mechanical dog?” I said. “What do you mean? It wasn’t you? Just an empty little dog, totally devoid of consciousness?”

“I could kill you, I really could,” said my husband. “But I already did. Now I just have to find out why.”