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ROALD DAHL

WILLIAM AND MARY

WILLIAM PEARL did not leave a great deal of money when he died, and his will was a simple one. With the exception of a few small bequests to relatives, he left all his property to his wife.

The solicitor and Mrs Pearl went over it together in the solicitor's office, and when the business was completed, the widow got up to leave. At that point, the solicitor took a sealed envelope from the folder on his desk and held it out to his client.

"I have been instructed to give you this," he said. "Your husband sent it to us shortly before he passed away." The solicitor was pale and prim, and out of respect for a widow he kept his head on one side as he spoke, looking downward. "It appears that it might be something personal, Mrs Pearl. No doubt you'd like to take it home with you and read it in privacy."

Mrs Pearl accepted the envelope and went out into the street. She paused on the pavement, feeling the thing with her fingers. A letter of farewell from William? Probably, yes. A formal letter. It was bound to be formal-stiff and formal. The man was incapable of acting otherwise. He had never done anything informal in his life.

My dear Mary, I trust that you will not permit my departure from this world to upset you too much, but that you will continue to observe those precepts which have guided you so well during our partnership together. Be diligent and dignified in all things. Be thrifty with your money. Be very careful that you do not-… et cetera, et cetera.

A typical William letter.

Or was it possible that he might have broken down at the last moment and written her something beautiful? Maybe this was a beautiful tender message, a sort of love letter, a lovely warm note of thanks to her for giving him thirty years of her life and for ironing a million shirts and cooking a million meals and making a million beds, something that she could read over and over again, once a day at least, and she would keep it for ever in the box on the dressing-table together with her brooches.

There is no knowing what people will do when they are about to die, Mrs Pearl told herself, and she tucked the envelope under her arm and hurried home.

She let herself in the front door and went straight to the living-room and sat down on the sofa without removing her hat or coat. Then she opened the envelope and drew out

the contents. These consisted, she saw, of some fifteen or twenty sheets of lined white paper, folded over once and held together at the top left-hhnd corner by a clip. Each sheet was covered with the small, neat, forward-sloping writing that she knew so well, but when she noticed how much of it there was, and in what a neat businesslike manner it was written, and how the first page didn't even begin in the nice way a letter should, she began to get suspicious.

She looked away. She lit herself a cigarette. She took one puff and laid the cigarette in the ashtray.

If this is about what I am beginning to suspect it is about, she told herself, then I don't want to read it.

Can one refuse to read a letter from the dead?

Yes.

Well…

She glanced over at William's empty chair on the other side of the fireplace. It was a big brown leather armchair, and there was a depression on the seat of it, made by his buttocks over the years. Higher up, on the backrest, there was a dark oval stain on the leather where his head had rested. He used to sit reading in that chair and she would be opposite him on the sofa, sewing on buttons or mending socks or putting a patch on the elbow of one of his jackets, and every now and then a pair of eyes would glance up from the book and settle on her, watchful, but strangely impersonal, as if calculating something. She had never liked those eyes. They were ice blue, cold, small, and rather close together, with two deep vertical lines of disapproval dividing them. All her life they had been watching her. And even now, after a week alone in the house, she sometimes had an uneasy feeling that they were still there, following her around, staring at her from doorways, from empty chairs, through a window at night.

Slowly she reached into her handbag and took out her spectacles and put them on. Then, holding the pages up high in front of her so that they caught the late afternoon light from the window behind, she started to read: This note, my dear Mary, is entirely for you, and will be given you shortly after I am gone.

Do not be alarmed by the sight of all this writing. It is nothing but an attempt on my part to explain to you precisely what Landy is going to do to me, and why I have agreed that he should do it, and what are his theories and his hopes. You are my wife and you have a right to know these things. In fact you must know them. During the past few days, I have tried very hard to speak with you about Landy, but you have steadfastly refused to give me a hearing. This, as I have already told you, is a very foolish attitude to take, and I find it not entirely an unselfish one either. It stems

mostly from ignorance, and I am absolutely convinced that if only you were made aware of all the facts, you would immediately “change your view. That is why I am hoping that when I am no longer with you, and your mind is less distracted, you will consent to listen to me more carefully through these pages. I swear to you that when you have read my story, your sense of antipathy will vanish, and enthusiasm will take its place. I even dare to hope that you will become a little proud of what I have done.

As you read on, you must forgive me, if you will, for the coolness of my style, but this is the only way I know of getting my message over to you clearly. You see, as my time draws near, it is natural that I begin to brim with every kind of sentimentality under the sun. Each day I grow more extravagantly wistful, especially in the evenings, and unless I watch myself closely my emotions will be overflowing on to these pages.

I have a wish, for example, to write something about you and what a satisfactory wife you have been to me through the years and am promising myself that if there is time, and I still have the strength, I shall do that next.

I have a yearning also to speak about this Oxford of mine where I have been living and teaching for the past seventeen years, to tell something about the glory of the place and to explain, if I can, a little of what it has meant to have been allowed to work in its midst. All the things and places that I loved so well keep crowding in on me now in this gloomy bedroom. They are bright and beautiful as they always were, and today, for some reason, I can see them more clearly than ever. The path around the lake in the gardens of Worcester College, where Lovelace used to walk. The gateway at Pembroke. The view westward over the town from Magdalen Tower. The great hail at Christchurch. The little rockery at St John ‘s where I have counted more than a dozen varieties of campanula, including the rare and dainty C. Waldsteiniana. But there, you see! I haven’t even begun and already I’m falling into the trap. So let me get started now; and let you read it slowly, my dear, without any of that sense of sorrow or disapproval that might otherwise embarrass your understanding. Promise me now that you will read it slowly, and that you will put yourself in a cool and patient frame of mind before you begin.

The details of the illness that struck me down so suddenly in my middle life are known to you. I need not waste time upon them-except to admit at once how foolish I was not to have gone earlier to my doctor. Cancer is one of the few remaining diseases that these modern drugs cannot cure. A surgeon can operate if it has not spread too far; but with me, not only did I leave it too late, but the thing had the effrontery to attack me in the pancreas, making both surgery and survival equally impossible.

So here I was with somewhere between one and six months left to live, growing more melancholy every hour-and then, all of a sudden, in comes Landy.

That was six weeks ago, on a Tuesday morning, very early, long before your visiting

time, and the moment he entered I knew there was some sort of madness in the wind.

He didn't creep in on his toes, sheepish and embarrassed, not knowing what to say, like all my other visitors. He came in strong and smiling, and he strode up to the bed and stood there looking down at me with a wild bright glimmer in his eyes, and he said, "William, my boy, this is perfect. You're just the one I want!"

Perhaps I should explain to you here that although John Landy has never been to our house, and you have seldom if ever met him, I myself have been friendly with him for at least nine years. I am, of course, primarily a teacher of philosophy, but as you know I've lately been dabbling a good deal in psychology as well. Landy's interests and mine have therefore slightly overlapped. He is a magnificent neuro-surgeon, one of the finest, and recently he has been kind enough to let me study the results of some of his work, especially the varying effects of prefrontal lobotomies upon different types of psychopath. So you can see that when he suddenly burst in on me that Tuesday morning, we were by no means strangers to one another.

"Look," he said, pulling up a chair beside the bed. "In a few weeks you're going to be dead. Correct?"

Coming from Landy, the question didn't seem especially unkind. In a way it was refreshing to have a visitor brave enough to touch upon the forbidden subject.

"You're going to expire right here in this room, and then they'll take you out and cremate you."

"Bury me," I said.

"That's even worse. And then what? Do you believe you'll go to heaven?"

"I doubt it," I said, "though it would be comforting to think so."

"Or hell, perhaps?"

"I don't really see why they should send me there."

"You never know, my dear William."

"What's all this about?" I asked.

"Well," he said, and I could see him watching me carefully, "personally, I don't believe that after you're dead you'll ever hear of yourself again-unless… " and here he paused and smiled and leaned closer unless, of course, you have the sense to put yourself into my hands. Would you care to consider a proposition?"

The way he was staring at me, and studying me, and appraising me with a queer kind of hungriness, I might have been a piece of prime beef on the counter and he had bought it and was waiting for them to wrap it up.

“I’m really serious about it, William. Would you care to consider a proposition?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Then listen and I’ll tell you. Will you listen to me?”

“Go on then, if you like. I doubt I’ve got very much to lose by hearing it.”

“On the contrary, you have a great deal to gain-especially after you’re dead.”

I am sure he was expecting me to jump when he said this, but for some reason I was ready for t. I lay quite still, watching his face and that slow white smile of his that always revealed the gold clasp on an upper denture curled around the canine on the left side of his mouth.

“This is a thing, William, that I’ve been working on quietly for some years. One or two others here at the hospital have been helping me especially Morrison, and we’ve completed a number of fairly successful trials with laboratory animals. I’m at the stage now where I’m ready to have a go with a man. It’s a big idea, and it may sound a bit far-fetched at first, but from a surgical point of view there doesn’t seem to be any reason why it shouldn’t be more or less practicable.”

Landy leaned forward and placed both hands on the edge of my bed. He has a good face, handsome in a bony sort of way, with none of the usual doctor’s look about it. You know that look, most of them have it. It glimmers at you out of their eyeballs like a dull electric sign and it reads Only I can save you. But John Landy’s eyes were wide and bright and little sparks of excitement were dancing in the centres of them.

“Quite a long time ago,” he said, “I saw a short medical film that had been brought over from Russia. It was a rather gruesome thing, but interesting. It showed a dog’s head completely severed from the body, but with the normal blood supply being maintained through the arteries and veins by means of an artificial heart. Now the thing is this: that dog’s head, sitting there all alone on a sort of tray, was alive. The brain was functioning. They proved it by several tests. For example, when food was smeared on the dog’s lips, the tongue would come out and lick it away: and the eyes would follow a person moving across the room.

“It seemed reasonable to conclude from this that the head and the brain did not need to be attached to the rest of the body in order to remain alive provided, of course, that

a supply of properly oxygenated blood could be maintained.

“Now then. My own thought, which grew out of seeing this film, was to remove the brain from the skull of a human and keep it alive and functioning as an independent unit for an unlimited period after he is dead. Your brain, for example, after you are dead.”

“I don’t like that,” I said.

“Don’t interrupt, William. Let me finish. So far as I can tell from subsequent experiments, the brain is a peculiarly self-supporting object. It manufactures its own cerebrospinal fluid. The magic processes of thought and memory which go on inside it are manifestly not impaired by the absence of limbs or trunk or even of skull, provided, as I say, that you keep pumping in the right kind of oxygenated blood under the proper conditions.

“My dear William, just think for a moment of your own brain. It is in perfect shape. It is crammed full of a lifetime of learning. It has taken you years of work to make it what it is. It is just beginning to give out some first-rate original ideas. Yet soon it is going to have to die along with the rest of your body simply because your silly little pancreas is riddled with cancer.”

“No thank you,” I said to him. “You can stop there. It’s a repulsive idea, and even if you could do it, which I doubt, it would be quite pointless. What possible use is there in keeping my brain alive if I couldn’t talk or see or hear or feel? Personally, I can think of nothing more unpleasant.”

“I believe that you would be able to communicate with us,” Landy said. “And we might even succeed in giving 9ou a certain amount of vision. But let’s take this slowly. I’ll come to all that later on. The fact remains that you’re going to die fairly soon whatever happens; and my plans would not involve touching you at all until after you are dead. Come now, William. No true philosopher could object to lending his dead body to the cause of science.”

“That’s not putting it quite straight,” I answered. “It seems to me there’d be some doubts as to whether I were dead or alive by the time you’d finished with me.”

“Well,” he said, smiling a little, “I suppose you’re right about that. But I don’t think you ought to turn me down quite so quickly, before you know a bit more about it.”

“I said I don’t want to hear it.”

“Have a cigarette,” he said, holding out his case.

“I don’t smoke, you know that.”

He took one himself and lit it with a tiny silver lighter that was no bigger than a shilling piece. “A present from the people who make my instruments,” he said. “Ingenious, isn’t it?”

I examined the lighter, then handed it back.

“May I go on?” he asked.

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Just lie still and listen. I think you’ll find it quite interesting.”

There were some blue grapes on a plate beside my bed. I put the plate on my chest and began eating the grapes.

“At the very moment of death,” Landy said, “I should have to be standing by so that I could step in immediately and try to keep your brain alive.”

“You mean leaving it in the head?”

“To start with, yes. I’d have to.”

“And where would you put it after that?”

“If you want to know, in a sort of basin.”

“Are you really serious about this?”

“Certainly I’m serious.”

“All right. Go on.”

“I suppose you know that when the heart stops and the brain is deprived of fresh blood and oxygen, its tissues die very rapidly. Anything from four to six minutes and the whole thing’s dead. Even after three minutes you may get a certain amount of damage. So I should have to work rapidly to prevent this from happening. But with the help of the machine, it should all be quite simple.”

“What machine?”

“The artificial heart. We’ve got a nice adaptation here of the one originally devised by Alexis Carrel and Lindbergh. It oxygenates the blood, keeps it at the right

temperature, pumps it in at the right pressure, and does a number of other little necessary things. It’s really not at all complicated.”

“Tell me what you would do at the moment of death,” I said. “What is the first thing you would do?”

“Do you know anything about the vascular and venous arrangement of the brain?”

“No.

“Then listen. It’s not difficult. The blood supply to the brain is derived from two main sources, the internal carotid arteries and the vertebral arteries. There are two of each, making four arteries in all. Got that?”

“Yes.”

“And the return system is even simpler. The blood is drained away by only two large veins, the internal jugulars. So you have four arteries going up-they go up the neck of course and two veins coming down. Around the brain itself they naturally branch out into other channels, but those don’t concern us. We never touch them.”

“All right,” I said. “Imagine that I’ve just died. Now what would you do?”

“I should immediately open your neck and locate the four arteries, the carotids and the vertebrals. I should then perfuse them, which means that I’d stick a large hollow needle into each. These four needles would be connected by tubes to the artificial heart.

“Then, working quickly, I would dissect out both the left and right jugular veins and hitch these also to the heart machine to complete the circuit. Now switch on the machine, which is already primed with the right type of blood and there you are. The circulation through your brain would be restored.”

“I’d be like that Russian dog.”

“I don’t think you would. For one thing, you’d certainly lose consciousness when you died, and I very much doubt whether you would come to again for quite a long time-if indeed you came to at all. But, conscious or not, you’d be in a rather interesting position, wouldn’t you? You’d have a cold dead body and a living brain.”

Landy paused to savour this delightful prospect. The man was so entranced and bemused by the whole idea that he evidently found it impossible to believe I might not be feeling the same way.

“We could now afford to take our time,” he said. “And believe me, we’d need it. The first thing we’d do would be to wheel you to the operating-room, accompanied of course by the machine, which must never stop pumping. The next problem…

“All right,” I said. “That’s enough. I don’t have to hear the details.”

“Oh but you must,” he said. “It is important that you should know precisely what is going to happen to you all the way through. You see, afterwards, when you regain consciousness, it will be much more satisfactory from your point of view if you are able to remember exactly where you are and how you came to be there. If only for your own peace of mind you should know that. You agree?”

I lay still on the bed, watching him.

“So the next problem would be to remove your brain, intact and undamaged, from your dead body. The body is useless. In fact it has already started to decay. The skull and the face are also useless. They are both encumbrances and I don’t want them around. All I want is the brain, the clean beautiful brain, alive and perfect. So when I get you on the table I will take a saw, a small oscillating saw, and with this I shall proceed to remove the whole vault of your skull. You’d still be unconscious at that point so I wouldn’t have to bother with anaesthetic.”

“Like hell, you wouldn’t,” I said.

“You’d be out cold, I promise you that, William. Don’t forget you died just a few minutes before.”

“Nobody’s sawing off the top of my skull without an anaesthetic,” I said.

Landy shrugged his shoulders. “It makes no difference to me,” he said. “I’ll be glad to give you a little procaine if you want it. If it will make you any happier I’ll infiltrate the whole scalp with procaine, the whole head, from the neck up.”

“Thanks very much,” I said.

“You know,” he went on, “it’s extraordinary what sometimes happens. Only last week a man was brought in unconscious, and I opened his head without any anaesthetic at all and removed a small blood clot. I was still working inside the skull when he woke up and began talking.

“Where am I?’ he asked.

“You’re in hospital.’

“Well,’ he said. “Fancy that.’

“Tell me,’ I asked him, “is this bothering you, what I’m doing?’

“No,’ he answered. “Not at all. What are you doing?’

“I’m just removing a blood clot from your brain.’

“You are?’

“Just lie still. Don’t move, I’m nearly finished.’

“So that’s the bastard who’s been giving me all those headaches,’ the man said.”

Landy paused and smiled, remembering the occasion. “That’s word for word what the man said,” he went on, “although the next day he couldn’t even recollect the incident. It’s a funny thing, the brain.”

“I’ll have the procaine,” I said.

“As you wish, William. And now, as I say, I’d take a small oscillating saw and carefully remove your complete calvarium-the whole vault of the skull. This would expose the top half of the brain, or rather the outer covering in which it is wrapped. You may or may not know that there are three separate coverings around the brain itself the outer one called the dura mater or dura, the middle one called the arachnoid, and the inner one called the pia mater or pia. Most laymen seem to have the idea that the brain is a naked thing floating around in fluid in your head. But it isn’t. It’s wrapped up neatly in these three strong coverings, and the cerebrospinal fluid actually flows within the little gap between the two coverings, known as the subarachnoid space. As I told you before, this fluid is manufactured by the brain and it drains off into the venous system by osmosis.

“I myself would leave all three coverings-don’t they have lovely names, the dura, the arachnoid, and the pia?-I’d leave them all intact. There are many reasons for this, not least among them being the fact that within the dura run the venous channels that drain the blood from the brain into the jugular.

“Now,” he went on, “we’ve got the upper half of your skull off so that the top of the brain, wrapped in its outer covering, is exposed. The next step is the really tricky one: to release the whole package so that it can be lifted cleanly away, leaving the stubs of the four supply arteries and the two veins hanging underneath ready to be re-connected to the machine. This is an immensely lengthy and complicated business involving the delicate chipping away of much bone, the severing of many nerves, and the cutting and tying of numerous blood vessels. The only way I could do it with any

hope of success would be by taking a rongeur and slowly biting off the rest of your skull, peeling it off downward like an orange until the sides and underneath of the brain covering are fully exposed. The problems involved are highly technical and I won't go into them but I feel fairly sure that the work can be done. It's simply a question of surgical skill and patience. And don't forget that I'd have plenty of time, as much as I wanted, because the artificial heart would be continually pumping away alongside the operating-table, keeping the brain alive.

"Now, let's assume that I've succeeded in peeling off your skull and removing everything else that surrounds the sides of the brain. That leaves it connected to the body only at the base, mainly by the spinal column and by the two large veins and the four arteries that are supplying it with blood. So what next?

"I would sever the spinal column just above the first cervical vertebra, taking great care not to harm the two vertebral arteries which are in that area. But you must remember that the dura or outer covering is open at this place to receive the spinal column, so I'd have to close this opening by sewing the edges of the dura together. There'd be no problem there.

"At this point, I would be ready for the final move. To one side, on a table, I'd have a basin of a special shape, and this would be filled with what we call Ringer's Solution.

That is a special kind of fluid we use for irrigation in neurosurgery. I would now cut the brain completely loose by severing the supply arteries and the veins. Then I would simply pick it up in my hands and transfer it to the basin. This would be the only other time during the whole proceeding when the blood flow would be cut off: but once it was in the basin, it wouldn't take a moment to re-connect the stubs of the arteries and veins to the artificial heart.

"So there you are," Landy said. "Your brain is now in the basin, and still alive, and there isn't any reason why it shouldn't stay alive for a very long time, years and years perhaps, provided we looked after the blood and the machine."

"But would it function?"

"My dear William, how should I know? I can't even tell you whether it would regain consciousness."

"And if it did?"

"There now! That would be fascinating!"

"Would it?" I said, and I must admit I had my doubts.

“Of course it would! Lying there with all your thinking processes working beautifully, and your memory as well… “And not being able to see or feel or smell or hear or talk,” I said.

“Ah!” he cried. “I knew I’d forgotten something! I never told you about the eye. Listen. I am going to try to leave one of your optic nerves intact, as well as the eye itself.

The optic nerve is a little thing about the thickness of a clinical thermometer and about two inches in length as it stretches between the brain and the eye. The beauty of it is that it’s not really a nerve at all. It’s an outpouching of the brain itself, and the dura or brain covering extends along it and is attached to the eyeball. The back of the eye is therefore in very close contact with the brain, and cerebrospinal fluid flows right up to it.

“All this suits my purpose very well, and makes it reasonable to suppose that I could succeed in preserving one of your eyes. I’ve already constructed a small plastic case to contain the eyeball, instead of your own socket, and when the brain is in the basin, submerged in Ringer’s Solution, the eyeball in its case will float on the surface of the liquid.”

“Staring at the ceiling,” I said.

“I suppose so, yes. I’m afraid there wouldn’t be any muscles there to move it around. But it might be sort of fun to lie there so quietly and comfortably peering out at the world from your basin.”

“Hilarious,” I said. “How about leaving me an ear as well?”

“I’d rather not try an ear this time.”

“I want an ear,” I said. “I insist upon an ear.”

“No.,’

“I want to listen to Bach.”

“You don’t understand how difficult it would be,” Landy said gently. “The hearing apparatus-the cochlea, as it’s called is a far more delicate mechanism than the eye. What’s more, it is encased in bone. So is a part of the auditory nerve that connects it with the brain. I couldn’t possibly chisel the whole thing out intact.”

“Couldn’t you leave it encased in the bone and bring the bone to the basin?”

“No,” he said firmly. “This thing is complicated enough already. And anyway, if the eye

works, it doesn't matter all that much about your hearing. We can always hold up messages for you to read. You really must leave me to decide what is possible and what isn't."

"I haven't yet said that I'm going to do it."

"I know, William, I know."

"I'm not sure I fancy the idea very much."

"Would you rather be dead altogether?"

"Perhaps I would. I don't know yet. I wouldn't be able to talk, would I?"

"Of course not."

"Then how would I communicate with you? How would you know that I'm conscious?"

"It would be easy for us to know whether or not you regain consciousness," Landy said. "The ordinary electro-encephalograph could tell us that. We'd attach the electrodes directly to the frontal lobes of your brain, there in the basin."

"And you could actually tell?"

"Oh, definitely. Any hospital could do that pan of it."

"But I couldn't communicate with you."

"As a matter of fact," Landy said, "I believe you could. There's a man up in London called Wertheimer who's doing some interesting work on the subject of thought communication, and I've been in touch with him. You know, don't you, that the thinking brain throws off electrical and chemical discharges? And that these discharges go out in the form of waves, rather like radio waves?"

"I know a bit about it," I said.

"Well, Wertheimer has constructed an apparatus somewhat similar to the encephalograph, though far more sensitive, and he maintains that within certain narrow limits it can help him to interpret the actual things that a brain is thinking. It produces a kind of graph which is apparently decipherable into words or thoughts. Would you like me to ask Wertheimer to come and see you?"

"No," I said. Landy was already taking it for granted that I was going to go through with this business, and I resented his attitude. "Go away now and leave me alone," I

told him. “You won’t get anywhere by trying to rush me.”

He stood up at once and crossed to the door.

“One question,” I said.

He paused with a hand on the doorknob. “Yes, William?”

“Simply this. Do you yourself honestly believe that when my brain is in that basin, my mind will be able to function exactly as it is doing at present? Do you believe that I will be able to think and reason as I can now? And will the power of memory remain?”

“I don’t see why not,” he answered. “It’s the same brain. It’s alive. It’s undamaged. In fact, it’s completely untouched. We haven’t even opened the dura. The big difference, of course, would be that we’ve severed every single nerve that leads into it-except for the one optic nerve-and this means that your thinking would no longer be influenced by your senses. You’d be living in an extraordinary pure and detached world. Nothing to bother you at all, not even pain. You couldn’t possibly feel pain because there wouldn’t be any nerves to feel it with. In a way, it would be an almost perfect situation. No worries or fears or pains or hunger or thirst. Not even any desires. Just your memories and your thoughts and if the remaining eye happened to function, then you could read books as well. It all sounds rather pleasant to me.”

“It does, does it?”

“Yes, William, it does. And particularly for a Doctor of Philosophy. It would be a tremendous experience. You’d be able to reflect upon the ways of the world with a detachment and a serenity that no man had ever attained before. And who knows what might not happen then! Great thoughts and solutions might come to you, great ideas that could revolutionize our way of life! Try to imagine, if you can, the degree of concentration that you’d be able to achieve!”

“And the frustration,” I said.

“Nonsense. There couldn’t be any frustration. You can’t have frustration without desire, and you couldn’t possibly have any desire. Not physical desire, anyway.”

“I should certainly be capable of remembering my previous life in the world, and I might desire to return to it.”

“What, to this mess! Out of your comfortable basin and back into this madhouse!”

“Answer one more question,” I said. “How long do you believe you could keep it alive?”

“The brain? Who knows? Possibly for years and years. The conditions would be ideal. Most of the factors that cause deterioration would be absent, thanks to the artificial heart. The bloodpressure would remain constant at all times, an impossible condition in real life. The temperature would also be constant. The chemical composition of the blood would be near perfect. There would be no impurities in it, or virus, no bacteria, nothing. Of course it’s foolish to guess, but I believe that a brain might live for two or three hundred years in circumstances like these. Goodbye for now,” he said. “I’ll drop in and see you tomorrow.” He went out quickly, leaving me, as you might guess, in a fairly disturbed state of mind.

My immediate reaction after he had gone was one of revulsion towards the whole business. Somehow, it wasn’t at all nice. There was something basically repulsive about the idea that I myself, with all my mental faculties intact, should be reduced to a small slimy blob lying in a pool of water. It was monstrous, obscene, unholy. Another thing that bothered me was the feeling of helplessness that I was bound to experience once Landy had got me into the basin. There could be no going back after that, no way of protesting or explaining. I would be committed for as long as they could keep me alive.

And what, for example, if I could not stand it? What if it turned out to be terribly painful? What if I became hysterical?

No legs to run away on. No voice to scream with. Nothing. I’d just have to grin and bear it for the next two centuries.

No mouth to grin with either.

At this point, a curious thought struck me, and it was this: Does not a man who has had a leg amputated often suffer from the delusion that the leg is still there? Does he not tell the nurse that the toes he doesn’t have any more are itching like mad, and so on and so forth? I seemed to have heard something to that effect quite recently.

Very well. On the same premise, was it not possible that my brain, lying there alone in that basin, might not suffer from a similar delusion in regard to my body? In which case, all my usual aches and pains could come flooding over me and I wouldn’t even be able to take an aspirin to relieve them. One moment I might be imagining that I had the most excruciating cramp in my leg, or a violent indigestion, and a few minutes later, I might easily get the feeling that my poor bladder-you know me was so full that if I didn’t get to emptying it soon it would burst.

Heaven forbid.

I lay there for a long time thinking these horrid thoughts. Then quite suddenly, round about midday, my mood began to change. I became less concerned with the

unpleasant aspect of the affair and found myself able to examine Landy's proposals in a more reasonable light. Was there not, after all, I asked myself, something a bit comforting in the thought that my brain might not necessarily have to die and disappear in a few weeks' time? There was indeed. I am rather proud of my brain. It is a sensitive, lucid, and uberous organ. It contains a prodigious store of information, and it is still capable of producing imaginative and original theories. As brains go, it is a damn good one, though I say it myself. Whereas my body, my poor old body, the thing that Landy wants to throw away-well, even you, my dear Mary, will have to agree with me that there is really nothing about that which is worth preserving any more.

I was lying on my back eating a grape. Delicious it was, and there were three little seeds in it which I took out of my mouth and placed on the edge of the plate.

"I'm going to do it," I said quietly. "Yes, by God, I'm going to do it. When Landy comes back to see me tomorrow I shall tell him straight out that I'm going to do it."

It was as quick as that. And from then on, I began to feel very much better. I surprised everyone by gobbling an enormous lunch, and shortly after that you came in to visit me as usual.

But how well I looked, you told me. How bright and well and chirpy. Had anything happened? Was there some good news?

Yes, I said there was. And then, if you remember, I bade you sit down and make yourself comfortable and I began immediately to explain to you as gently as I could what was in the wind.

Alas, you would have none of t. I had hardly begun telling you the barest details when you flew into a fury and said that the thing was revolting, disgusting, horrible, unthinkable, and when I tried to go on, you marched out of the room.

Well, Mary, as you know, I have tried to discuss this subject with you many times since then, but you have consistently refused to give me a hearing. Hence this note, and I can only hope that you will have the good sense to permit yourself to read it. It has taken me a long time to write. Two weeks have gone since I started to scribble the first sentence, and I'm now a good deal weaker than I was then. I doubt whether I have the strength to say much more. Certainly I won't say good-bye, because there's a chance, just a tiny chance, that if Landy succeeds in his work I may actually see you again later, that is if you bring yourself to come and visit me.

I am giving orders that these pages shall not be delivered to you until a week after I am gone. By now, therefore, as you sit reading them, seven days have already elapsed since Landy did the deed. You yourself may even know what the outcome has been. If you don't, if you have purposely kept yourself apart and have refused to have anything

to do with it-which I suspect may be the case-please change your mind now and give Landy a call to see how things went with me. That is the least you can do. I have told him that he may expect to hear from you on the seventh day.

Your faithful husband, William

Be good when I am gone, and always remember that it is harder to be a widow than a wife. Do not drink cocktails. Do not waste money. Do not smoke cigarettes. Do not eat pastry. Do not use lipstick. Do not buy a television apparatus. Keep my rose beds and my rockery well weeded in the summers. And incidentally I suggest that you have the telephone disconnected now that I shall have no further use for it.

Mrs Pearl laid the last page of the manuscript slowly down on the sofa beside her. Her little mouth was pursed up tight and there was a whiteness around her nostrils.

But really! You would think a widow was entitled to a bit of peace after all these years.

The whole thing was just too awful to think about. Beastly and awful. It gave her the shudders.

She reached for her bag and found herself another cigarette. She lit it, inhaling the smoke deeply and blowing it out in clouds all over the room. Through the smoke she could see her lovely television set, brand new lustrous, huge, crouching defiantly but also a little selfconsciously on top of what used to be William’s worktable.

What would he say, she wondered, if he could see that now?

She paused, to remember the last time he had caught her smoking a cigarette. That was about a year ago, and she was sitting in the kitchen by the open window having a quick one before he came home from work. She’d had the radio on loud playing dance music and she had turned round to pour herself another cup of coffee and there he was standing in the doorway, huge and grim, staring down at her with those awful eyes, a little black dot of fury blazing in the centre of each.

For four weeks after that, he had paid the housekeeping bills himself and given her no money at all, but of course he wasn’t to know that she had over six pounds salted away in a soap-flake carton in the cupboard under the sink.

“What is it?” she had said to him once during supper. “Are you worried about me getting lung cancer?”

“I am not,” he had answered.

“Then why can’t I smoke?”

“Because I disapprove, that’s why.”

He had also disapproved of children, and as a result they had never had any of them either.

Where was he now, this William of hers, the great disapprover?

Landy would be expecting her to call up. Did she have to call Landy?

Well, not really, no.

She finished her cigarette, then lit another one immediately from the old stub. She looked at the telephone that was sitting on the worktable beside the television set. William had asked her to call. He had specifically requested that she telephone Landy as soon as she had read the letter. She hesitated, fighting hard now against that old ingrained sense of duty that she didn’t quite yet dare to shake off. Then, slowly, she got to her feet and crossed over to the phone on the worktable. She found a number in the book, dialled it, and waited.

“I want to speak to Mr Landy, please.”

“Who is calling?”

“Mrs Pearl. Mrs William Pearl.”

“One moment, please.”

Almost at once, Landy was on the the end of the wire.

“Mrs Pearl?”

“This is Mrs Pearl.”

There was a slight pause.

“I am so glad you called at last, Mrs Pearl.

You are quite well, I hope?” The voice was quiet, unemotional, courteous. “I wonder if you would care to come over to the hospital? Then we can have a little chat. I expect you are very eager to know how it all came out.”

She didn’t answer.

“I can tell you now that everything went pretty smoothly, one way and another. Far better, in fact, than I was entitled to hope. It is not only alive, Mn Pearl, it is conscious. It recovered consciousness on the second day. Isn’t that interesting?”

She waited for him to go on.

“And the eye is seeing. We are sure of that because we get an immediate change in the deflections on the encephalograph when we hold something up in front of it. And now we’re giving it the newspaper to read every day.”

“Which newspaper?” Mrs Pearl asked sharply.

“The Daily Mirror. The headlines are larger.”

“He hates the Mirror. Give him The Times.”

There was a pause, then the doctor said, “Very well, Mrs Pearl. We’ll give it The Times. We naturally want to do all we can to keep it happy.”

“Him,” she said. “Not it. Film!”

“Him,” the doctor said. “Yes, I beg your pardon. To keep him happy. That’s one reason why I suggested you should come along here as soon as possible. I think it would be good for him to see you. You could indicate how delighted you were to be with him again-smile at him and blow him a kiss and all that sort of thing. It’s bound to be a comfort to him to know that you are standing by.”

There was a long pause.

“Well,” Mrs Pearl said at last, her voice suddenly very meek and tired. “I suppose I had better come on over and see how he is.”

“Good. I knew you would. I’ll wait here for you. Come straight up to my office on the second floor. Good-bye.”

Half an hour later, Mrs Pearl was at the hospital.

“You mustn’t be surprised by what he looks like,” Landy said as he walked beside her down a corridor.

“No, I won’t.”

“It’s bound to be a bit of a shock to you at first. He’s not very prepossessing in his present state, I’m afraid.”

“I didn’t marry him for his looks, Doctor.”

Landy turned and stared at her. What a queer little woman this was, he thought with her large eyes and her sullen, resentful air. Her features, which must have been quite pleasant once, had now gone completely. The mouth was slack, the cheeks loose and flabby, and the whole face gave the impression of having slowly but surely sagged to pieces through years and years of joyless married life. They walked on for a while in silence.

“Take your time when you get inside,” Landy said. “He won’t know you’re in there until you place your face directly above his eye. The eye is always open, but he can’t move it at all, so the field of vision is very narrow. At present we have it looking up at the ceiling. And of course he can’t hear anything. We can talk together as much as we like. It’s in here.”

Landy opened a door and ushered her into a small square room.

“I wouldn’t go too close yet,” he said, putting a hand on her arm. “Stay back here a moment with me until you get used to it all.”

There was a biggish white enamel bowl about the size of a washbasin standing on a high white table in the centre of the room, and there were half a dozen thin plastic tubes coming out of it. These tubes were connected with a whole lot of glass piping in which you could see the blood flowing to and from the heart machine. The machine itself made a soft rhythmic pulsing sound.

“He’s in there,” Landy said, pointing to the basin, which was too high for her to see into. “Come just a little closer. Not too near.”

He led her two paces forward.

By stretching her neck, Mrs Pearl could now see the surface of the liquid inside the basin. It was clear and still, and on it there floated a small oval capsule, about the size of a pigeon’s egg.

“That’s the eye in there,” Landy said. “Can you see it?”

“Yes.”

“So far as we can tell, it is still in perfect condition. It’s his right eye, and the plastic container has a lens on it similar to the one he used in his own spectacles. At this moment he’s probably seeing quite as well as he did before.”

“The ceiling isn’t much to look at,” Mrs Pearl said.

“Don’t worry about that. We’re in the process of working out a whole programme to keep him amused, but we don’t want to go too quickly at first.”

“Give him a good book.”

“We will, we will. Are you feeling all right, Mrs Pearl?”

“Yes.”

“Then we’ll go forward a little more, shall we, and you’ll be able to see the whole thing.”

He led her forward until they were standing only a couple of yards from the table and now she could see right down into the basin.

“There you are,” Landy said. “That’s William.”

He was far larger than she had imagined he would be, and darker in colour. With all the ridges and creases running over his surface, he reminded her of nothing so much as an enormous pickled walnut. She could see the stubs of the four big arteries and the two veins coming out from the base of him and the neat way in which they were joined to the plastic tubes; and with each throb of the heart machine, all the tubes gave a little jerk in unison as the blood was pushed through them.

“You’ll have to lean over,” Landy said, “and put your pretty face right above the eye. He’ll see you then, and you can smile at him and blow him a kiss. If I were you I’d say a few nice things as well. He won’t actually hear them, but I’m sure he’ll get the general idea.”

“He hates people blowing kisses at him,” Mrs Pearl said. “I’ll do it my own way if you don’t mind.” She stepped up to the edge of the table, leaned forward until her face was directly over the basin, and looked straight down in William’s eye.

“Hallo, dear,” she whispered. “It’s me Mary.”

The eye, bright as ever, stared back at her with a peculiar, fixed intensity.

“How are you, dear?” she said.

The plastic capsule was transparent all the way round so that the whole of the eyeball was visible. The optic nerve connecting the underside of it to the brain looked a short length of grey spaghetti.

“Are you feeling all right, William?”

It was a queer sensation peering into her husband’s eye when there was no face to go with it. All she had to look at was the eye, and she kept staring at it, and gradually it grew bigger and bigger, and in the end it was the only thing that she could see-a sort of face in itself. There was a network of tiny red veins running over the white surface of the eyeball, and in the ice-blue of the iris there were three or four rather pretty darkish streaks radiating from the pupil in the centre. The pupil was large and black, with a little spark of light reflecting from one side of it.

“I got your letter, dear, and came over at once to see how you were. Dr Landy says you are doing wonderfully well. Perhaps if I talk slowly you can understand a little of what I am saying by reading my lips.”

There was no doubt that the eye was watching her.

“They are doing everything possible to take care of you, dear. This marvellous machine thing here is pumping away all the time and I’m sure it’s a lot better than those silly old hearts all the rest of us have. Ours are liable to break down at any moment, but yours will go on for ever.”

She was studying the eye closely, trying to discover what there was about it that gave it such an unusual appearance.

“You seem fine, dear, simply fine. Really you do.”

It looked ever so much nicer, this eye, than either of his eyes used to look, she told herself. There was a softness about it somewhere, a calm, kindly quality that she had never seen before. Maybe it had to do with the dot in the very centre, the pupil. William’s pupils used always to be tiny black pinheads. They used to glint at you, stabbing into your brain, seeing right through you, and they always knew at once what you were up to and even what you were thinking. But this one she was looking at now was large and soft and gentle, almost cow-like.

“Are you quite sure he’s conscious?” she asked, not looking up.

“Oh yes, completely,” Landy said.

“And he can see me?”

“Perfectly.”

“Isn’t that marvellous? I expect he’s wondering what happened.”

“Not at all. He knows perfectly well where he is and why he’s there. He can’t possibly have forgotten that.”

“You mean he knows he’s in this basin?”

“Of course. And if only he had the power of speech, he would probably be able to carry on a perfectly normal conversation with you this very minute. So far as I can see, there should be absolutely no difference mentally between this William here and the one you used to know back home.”

“Good gracious me,” Mrs Pearl said, and she paused to consider this intriguing aspect.

You know what, she told herself, looking behind the eye now and staring hard at the great grey pulpy walnut that lay so placidly under the water, I’m not at all sure that I don’t prefer him as he is at present. In fact, I believe that I could live very comfortably with this kind of a William. I could cope with this one.

“Quiet, isn’t he?” she said.

“Naturally he’s quiet.”

No arguments and criticisms, she thought, no constant admonitions, no rules to obey, no ban on smoking cigarettes, no pair of cold disapproving eyes watching me over the top of a book in the evenings, no shirts to wash and iron, no meals to cook nothing but the throb of the heart machine, which was rather a soothing sound anyway and certainly not loud enough to interfere with television.

“Doctor,” she said. “I do believe I’m suddenly getting to feel the most enormous affection for him. Does that sound queer?”

“I think it’s quite understandable.”

“He looks so helpless and silent lying there under the water in his little basin.”

“Yes, I know.

“He’s like a baby, that’s what he’s like. He’s exactly like a little baby.”

Landy stood still behind her, watching.

“There,” she said softly, peering into the basin. “From now on Mary’s going to look after you all by herself and you’ve nothing to worry about in the world. When can I have him back home, Doctor?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I said when can I have him back-back in my own house?”

“You’re joking,” Landy said.

She turned her head slowly around and looked directly at him. “Why should I joke?” she asked. Her face was bright, her eyes round and bright as two diamonds.

“He couldn’t possibly be moved.”

“I don’t see why not.”

“This is an experiment, Mrs Pearl.”

“It’s my husband, Dr Landy.”

A funny little nervous half-smile appeared on Landy’s mouth. “Well… ” he said.

“It is my husband, you know.” There was no anger in her voice. She spoke quietly, as though merely reminding him of a simple fact.

“That’s rather a tricky point,” Landy said, wetting his lips. “You’re a widow now, Mrs Pearl. I think you must resign yourself to that fact.”

She turned away suddenly from the table and crossed over to the window. “I mean it,” she said, fishing in her bag for a cigarette. “I want him back.”

Landy watched her as she put the cigarette between her lips and lit it. Unless he were very much mistaken, there was something a bit odd about this woman, he thought. She seemed almost pleased to have her husband over there in the basin.

He tried to imagine what his own feelings would be if it were his wife’s brain lying there and her eye staring at him out of that capsule.

He wouldn’t like it.

“Shall we go back to my room now?” he said.

She was standing by the window, apparently quite calm and relaxed, puffing her cigarette.

“Yes, all right.”

On her way past the table she stopped and leaned over the basin once more. “Mary’s leaving now, sweetheart,” she said. “And don’t you worry about a single thing, you understand? We’re going to get you right back home where we can look after you properly just as soon as we possibly can. And listen dear… ” At this point she paused and carried the cigarette to her lips, intending to take a puff.

Instantly the eye flashed.

She was looking straight into it at the time and right in the centre of it she saw a tiny but brilliant flash of light, and the pupil contracted into a minute black pinpoint of absolute fury.

At first she didn’t move. She stood bending over the basin, holding the cigarette up to her mouth, watching the eye.

Then very slowly, deliberately, she put the cigarette between her lips and took a long suck. She inhaled deeply, and she held the smoke inside her lungs for three or four seconds; then suddenly, whoosh, out it came through her nostrils in two thin jets which struck the water in the basin, and billowed out over the surface in a thick blue cloud, enveloping the eye.

Landy was over by the door, with his back to her, waiting. “Come on, Mrs Pearl,” he called.

“Don’t look so cross, William,” she said softly. “It isn’t any good looking cross.”

[andy turned his head to see what she was doing.

“Not any more it isn’t,” she whispered. “Because from now on, my pet, you’re going to do just exactly what Mary tells you. Do you understand that?”

“Mrs Pearl,” Landy said, moving towards her.

“So don’t be a naughty boy again, will you, my precious,” she said, taking another pull at the cigarette. “Naughty boys are liable to get punished most severely nowadays, you ought to know that.”

Landy was beside her now, and he took her by the arm and began drawing her firmly but gently away from the table.

“Good-bye, darling,” she called. “I’ll be back soon.”

“That’s enough, Mrs Pearl.”

“Isn’t he sweet?” she cried, looking up at Landy with big bright eyes. “Isn’t he heaven? I just can’t wait to get him home.”