

The Relativity Prison by Igor Teper

I sit at my computer, stone-still, statue-still. As the keyboard slides around under my hands, keys jump up and bang at my outstretched fingers, and characters appear on the screen. The screen shifts back and forth so that my unmoving eyes scan over it.

The words on the screen may reflect my thoughts, but, since I am aware of no causal link between the two, perhaps it is my thoughts that reflect, and anticipate, the typed words. If that is a paradox, it is a minor one, given all else that has happened.

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I was walking home from the observatory one evening about five months ago when whatever this is struck. One instant, I was moving my feet, pushing off the sidewalk with each step, and the next, I was frozen, and the pavement was drifting beneath the soles of my shoes, rhythmically knocking against them hard enough to bounce them up into the air, like some kind of a possessed treadmill.

As the ground rolled by, bouncing me along, I struggled to break the paralysis that gripped me, and tried, desperately, to form in my mind a framework in which this would make sense.

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Before any of this happened, I had, on several occasions, awakened from a dream to find myself unable to move, or speak, for what seemed like tens of seconds. I was told that this is a generally harmless condition that occurs when the mechanism that normally causes one's muscles to become unresponsive during sleep remains active upon awakening. What I'm experiencing now is very much like that sleep paralysis, and, indeed, I have more than once over these past months awakened immobile and composed myself with the assurance that it was only temporary, before remembering.

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On that first day, my condition remained unchanged, despite all my physical and mental efforts, until I was deposited at the door of my building. Whatever process had been moving me along abruptly ceased after propelling me up the porch steps.

Before I could begin to entertain the hope that I was free, my keys jumped out of my pocket and into the lock, dragging my hand with them. The door opened, and the porch knocked me inside. Being bounced up the stairs felt like running up a downward escalator, or perhaps down an upward one.

Liz greeted me when the door pulled me into our apartment. Terrible suction tugged at my mouth, and when it opened, a wave of pressure hit my abdomen, and air rushed out, past my vocal chords. I heard the sound come out and recognized it as speech, but didn't, couldn't, process it.

The floor jerked under my feet, as if someone behind me had pulled on it, which sent my arms flailing open and wrapping around Liz's waist. I saw the look in her eyes just before our lips met, and I knew, I knew, that she was also afflicted.

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For every action, according to Newton's third law of motion, there is an equal and opposite reaction, and Einstein's theory of relativity says there are no preferred frames of reference in the universe. An outside observer would thus be fundamentally unable to determine if my fingers are striking the keys or the keys are striking my fingers. Only I can know.

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My bed slides out from under me each morning. My clothes grab at my hands and envelop me. Pressure differentials between the inside and the outside of my mouth force food in and words out.

Floors and ground glide beneath me, and, when I'm pulled and pushed into the driver's seat of my car, the pedals press on the bottoms of my feet and the steering wheel tugs at my hands.

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It took weeks for me convince myself that my condition is universal, and I'm still not entirely sure. It's almost always something in the eyes, and sometimes also in the corners of the mouth. Resignation. I had to learn to look for it. Otherwise, the illusion of volition is perfect. Everyone looks as if they're just going about their business, even as their business is going about *them*.

But what if there are still some who are unaffected? They wouldn't know to look for the signs, couldn't even conceive of the possibility of what's happened to the rest of us.

And what if I was one of the last to be stricken? How long could this have been happening to those around me without me noticing? Days? Months? My whole life?

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The worst, the worst, is when our bodies, only no longer ours, make love. It is worse than rape. I hope Liz forgives me. I try to forgive myself.

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The work at the observatory goes on, uninterrupted. The stars move, the telescope collects and records the particulars of their motion, the computers process the data that comes in. The staff act as intermediaries between the telescope and the computers, much as before, only now our actions are as automated as theirs.

The laws of physics, which we believe to be universal and immutable, determine the movements of stars to arbitrary precision. Why, then, shouldn't our motions be likewise determined?

In the past five months, our research group has published two papers in *The Astrophysical Journal*, and we're working on a third.

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Twenty-five hundred years ago, Zeno of Elea claimed that motion is impossible, because it is infinitely divisible, and one cannot take infinitely many steps in a finite time. Under the circumstances, his argument has become far too appealing for me to dismiss it as the nonsense I know it to be. If all motion is an illusion, then it shouldn't matter who, or what, seems to be causing motion. Should it? I still haven't been able to convince myself, but I keep trying.

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One side effect of my condition has been a growing detachment. Once started, it is a self-reinforcing process — increased perspective on all the pettiness and arbitrary cruelty that permeates human relationships leads to disgust in my involvement in those interactions, which causes me to further mentally distance myself from them and so gain an even more detached perspective.

If humanity was to be punished for the way we have lived, I can think of nothing more appropriate than being forced to watch from a distance as our lives unfold.

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And yet, and yet, there is an awesome beauty about this kind of world that I cannot help but admire. Whereas before we each went our own way, now, the universe is balancing us all, all at once. This balance binds us to each other, truly and inextricably, and not just us humans. Every living thing on the planet now moves in tune with the rest. Is the loss of volition really too high a price to pay for the poetry of such a dance?

The equilibrium that must be maintained is infinitely, impossibly delicate. Perhaps the watchmaker God has decided to wind his watch by hand.

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Sleep is tricky. I have tried to keep myself awake at night, when my eyelids are closed. It's hard without being able to move, but I've had some success.

I've also experimented with sleeping during the day, with my eyes open, and I've persevered despite the occasional shock of waking up while driving, or eating.

My circadian rhythm is one thing I still have control over. It is a small victory, but not entirely hollow.

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There are still children being born, same as ever. I cannot imagine what it must be like to grow up without knowing free will, but then again, they may well be happier not knowing what they're deprived of.

I wonder what will happen when all of us who remember how it used to be are dead. Will the unknowing

humanity that remains be any less human?

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Perhaps this is really how it all ends, not in fire or ice, nor with a bang or a whimper, not in anything at all perceptible as an ending, but rather in the picture-perfect clockwork continuation of everything that came before. Or maybe it's only a temporary condition, and humanity's capacity for willful action will be restored as suddenly as it was stripped away. Until then, nothing remains but to wait.

I'm waiting.