

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

THE QUESTING MIND

Maybe you can help out--it seems there ought to be a good punch line to the question "What did the editor say to the former editor?" Any good lines escape me. The reality is that when I speak with Kris Rusch lately, I mention to her how busy I am ... and she laughs knowingly. Then I realized that her SF novel *Alien Influences* and her mainstream novel *Hitler's Angel* came out within months of each other, and I learned that the manuscript for *Victory*, the fifth and final volume of "The Fey" series, requires a team and a half of paper and I think that laugh of hers is more than just knowing. It's almost ominous. Fortunately, Kris is not too busy to send an occasional tale out way ...

He tries to remember. The nurses don't understand that. They think it odd that he requests audio tapes of the books he has written, videos of the interviews he has given, and photograph albums of times past. The nurses also give him three-d moving pictures of his last few years, pictures so tiny they rest in the palm of his hand. In them, the people turn like toy dolls, but he cannot feel their feet against his skin. Outside the door, he hears the nurses whispering, "Sad old man. He's got nothing left to live for, so he lives in his past."

Only he doesn't have any memories except inconsequential ones: the runny eggs he had for breakfast, the plot of the crime drama he watched the night before on the wide screen television placed at the perfect distance from his bed. He has a superficial knowledge of everything he has done, like a back-of-the-book bio sheet written about someone else:

J. REED BRASHER, novelist, playwright, and essayist, born 1920 in Camden, New Jersey to physician Paul Brasher and his wife Mary.

Published his first novel, *Golden Sunset*, in 1945. Wrote sixteen Broadway plays, including the Tony Award winning *Stations in the Sky* (1960). Published five books of essays, the last an autobiographical sketch. Married Olive Franklin in 1942, fathered two daughters, Mary and Paula. List of publications (including all 55 novels) follows.

But the memories are gone, stolen an incident at a time. He had noticed the first one missing on his ninetieth birthday when his daughter, Paula, asked him to recite her favorite bedtime story to his great-grandson. He did not remember telling bedtime stories, and said so. She reminded him of that only this morning, when he asked what day she first noticed his memory slipping.

"It's normal, Dad. The mind goes with age."

But not his mind. His mind has controlled his entire life. He knows that with the same certainty with which he knows he is male. He remembers the feeling of control, but he does not remember the incidents that triggered it.

It is the ultimate curse. His body is now so feeble that he cannot spend much time out of bed. If he does, the nurses come after him as if he were a child. "Now, now, Mr. Brasher, we mustn't hurt ourselves."

He wonders how he can hurt himself in this house he has built -- he saw the documentation in the photo album: his younger self standing over the blueprints, holding a hammer, speaking to a contractor. He chose the big brass feather bed, the ruby bedspread with matching carpet and curtains that set off the mahogany paneling. It is soothing to sleep in this room with his books and posters lining the walls, this place he has been for fifty years. It is like living in his own mind.

This morning he woke with the thought that the longer he remains passive, the sooner the thief will take his entire being. Until his daughter made her casual remark, he was willing to let his brain slip away drop by drop. But she was wrong. Age should equal wisdom, and somewhere, someone is stealing his wisdom from him. He cannot allow this to continue.

He needs a plan. A simple plan to prevent the destruction of his mind. A plan that will save the little bit he has left.

He reads until he dozes off. Each word is an effort, each sentence a battle he must fight to the end. He reads only two pages before his head lolls against the pillows. When he awakes, the side of his mouth is wet. He drools in his sleep, like an old man. He hates thinking of himself as old.

He has spoken to the nurses. They pat his arm, and refuse to answer him until he gets agitated. They say different doctors have different opinions, but no one will tell him what those opinions are.

He investigates various diseases on his own. But, as he reads, and sleeps, and reads some more, he realizes his symptoms are not neatly categorized. He can learn and remember from day to day if he tries. The information he has lost all seems to fit into part of the same whole.

He cannot remember his work, although he can remember setting pen to paper. But he does not try to write. That drive left him first, as if fleeing from a crisis about to happen.

It takes half a day before he realizes that detail is a memory. He can pinpoint the day he lost his will to create, pinpoint it without anyone else's help.

He was sitting downstairs in the solarium he built for Olive. She had been dead a year, and in that time, he discovered that the only way he could feel close to her was to sit in that overheated room she loved. He had to hire someone to tend her plants, and even then they didn't look right. But the light coming through the window, that was right and always would be, and he knew if he turned his head just one certain way that he would see her again, that she hid in the periphery of his vision like a car in his blind spot. He knew he should write

about the loss as he had written about everything else in his life, record it for some future even he couldn't fathom, but for the first time since he knew the alphabet he didn't want to make a record.

And then he had a double loss, first of Olive, then of himself.

It was only a short walk from the solarium to the bed. In six months he has become a bed-ridden drooling old man whose emaciated form more resembles a starving man in a magazine ad than the famous, well-photographed writer, robust from too much good food and not enough exercise. The loss is not related to Olive for he wrote before he knew her and he wrote after she died.

No. The loss has a physical cause, and he will find it.

On the third day of his quest, he waits until the nurses take their lunch. He can hear a soap opera at high volume in the kitchen, some hapless heroine sobbing about murder in the arms of her lover. He uses the glittering metal knob attached to the plastic headboard to pull himself out of bed. His legs are unsteady, but he manages to traverse the bedroom. The carpet from bed to door seems as long as the Sahara. He has to lean against the frame and pant to get his wind. Has he forgotten to eat in those six weeks? Or did the doctors order some low-calorie fare that failed to nourish him? All he remembers is burnt toast, cold soup and roast beef sandwiches made mostly of gristle. Whoever hired those nurses did not hire them for their cooking ability.

After a few minutes he catches his breath and staggers down the hall, as wobbly as a child taking his first steps.

Instantly he gets a picture: Paula toddling toward him, hands outstretched, joy on her pudgy face. He owns that one, and Mary too, balancing herself with one hand on the couch, the other knocking his magazines off the coffee table, Olive's three-note laugh echoing in the background. He blinks back tears, so grateful to have photographs in his head that he stumbles and nearly falls. He catches the wall to steady himself and listens for heavy nursery footsteps on the stairs, but the television blares coffee percolating music, and after a moment he realizes they aren't going to come.

When he reaches the door of his study, he stops. The area around it smells faintly of pipe smoke and he catches a glimpse of a memory before it disappears into the recesses of his brain. This room is gone from his head. If he opens the door, he will see a room he designed as if it were assembled by a stranger.

He does not know what he will find.

The thought fills him with apprehension. Even so, he reaches down and grabs the knob. It turns, but the door does not open. The knob feels strange to his palm. He pulls his hand away. This knob does not match the others in the house. It is square and has a red light pulsing in the center. He recognizes it from the magazine on his bedstand -- a private in-house security system, keyed to one person's specifications.

He lets out a silent moan. He must have bought that system and installed it. But he cannot remember doing so, nor can he remember the code.

He leans against the frame, exhaustion making his limbs shudder. The television blares menacing music that leads to another set of commercials. The show will end soon. He has to get back to his bed before the nurses find him.

As he makes his way back, hand pressed against the wall, he wishes for a cane. Something to lean on to make his passage easier. It isn't until he reaches the Sahara carpet that he thinks to wonder at the lock itself: who was he trying to keep out of his study? Until he became ill, he lived alone.

He demands to see the doctors, and the nurses drive him to cold sterile offices: the first on Rodeo Drive near all the exclusive shops. This child with bright red hair, the nurse tells Brasher, is his personal doctor, the person who has treated him for the last sixteen years.

Brasher doesn't recognize him.

Nor does he recognize the waiting room: Empty except for him, filled with blue chairs that matched the blue carpet and the white walls. No magazines lie on the table. Instead someone has installed a television set in front of each seat, and thoughtfully provided the viewer with a remote.

The examining room is even colder than the waiting room. He sits on the gurney with his clothes on, feeling naked nonetheless, wishing he could lie down, but knowing that he shouldn't. The doctor treats him like a baby, and speaks in that sing-song voice reserved for children, the mentally unstable, and those who don't speak English.

"Sometimes," the doctor says, "the mind leaves before the body does. I'm sorry, Reed. I know this is hard for you, but you have enough money. You have lived a full life. Lie back for your remaining years and relax."

The advice of the young. Brasher asks a few more questions, all about the progression of the doctor's version of Brasher's disease, and learns that it matches his memories of himself: the quick onset (rare, the doctor says), the rapid deterioration (tragic, the doctor says, but understandable, given the loss of your wife). The doctor-child's eyes have no understanding, however, and Brasher wants to demand how the doctor would feel if it were his mind, his life, being eroded away bit by tiny bit.

But he does not. He did not come for compassion. He came for answers. He has received neither.

The second doctor's office is in a clinic on the revitalized section of Hollywood Boulevard. The clinic has a large sign over the door which announces a specialty in geriatric services. The waiting room is designed for people his daughter's age: Elvis Presley blares on the speakers, books line the walls, and

photographs of Hollywood in the fifties and sixties rest beneath the glass on the coffee table. He does not feel old here: he feels ancient, as if he should have died years ago.

This doctor is a woman in her forties, the age of his granddaughter Kimberly. The woman is not attractive: middle age has lined her mouth, sagged her breasts, and flattened her buttocks. She, at least, has compassion. It appears to be what has wearied her. Since they are alone, she sits across from him in the waiting room, a file folder clasped to her chest like a shield, and tells him in a gentle voice that some people become children in their old age.

"I am not a child," he says. "I simply cannot remember my life."

They discuss his symptoms. She agrees that he has no classic symptoms for any disease which attacks the mind. But she reminds him that no one is classic, and that even now, no one understands the human brain.

"Except the computer programmers," he says, thinking he is making a joke. Sitting in this room designed to ease people younger than he is has put him on edge.

The doctor starts. She has obviously not expected his joke. Finally she smiles. "I believe the computer people are working on artificial intelligence," she says.

He is tiring visibly when they finish their discussion. She sends for his nurse/chauffeur and then touches his hand before she leaves the room. "You are more fortunate than some, Mr. Brasher," she says, that compassion enveloping him like a hug. "You at least wrote about your life. Perhaps you knew this time would come all along."

Her words send a chill through him and he remembers, oh, so briefly remembers how it felt to be young and whole and in control of his world. "No," he says to her. "I did not know this would happen, but I was afraid it would."

He sleeps, on and off, for the two days after his excursion, and each time he awakes, he curses the exhaustion that will not leave him. He wants to think, but finds it tiring and so he sleeps instead.

On the morning of the third day, he wakes with a restlessness it takes him a while to identify: it is energy. He has finally regained some of his strength.

And he has an idea. The female doctor's words have echoed through his dreams: he needs an intelligence specialist. Computer experts have studied the mind for most of his life. He will have someone make a map of the deterioration of his brain. He knows just the person to do it.

He picks up the phone beside his bed, hits the speed dial button marked with his nephew Scott's name, and asks -- no, demands -- that Scott join him for dinner. Scott's voice holds the tolerance one gives to the eccentric in the family,

tolerance touched with urgency, with the knowledge that he might not have discussions with his uncle Reed much longer. Brasher recognizes the tone: his voice has held it too, but for whom and when he cannot remember.

He closes his eyes in frustration and hopes enough of his mind will be left by dinner so that he can have a meaningful, life-saving conversation with his sister's son.

The man who eats from the tray at Brasher's bedside is not a boy, but a person who is crossing the threshold of old age. He is balding, and his features are wide and square. The cartilage in his nose has softened, flattening it against his jowly face. Only the eyes are familiar: bright and green and shining with intelligence.

The nurses have served roast beef obviously carved in a grocery store dell, gravy from a can, and mashed potatoes made from a mix. The preservatives give everything a flat flavor, except the potatoes, which have a gritty taste all their own. Scott eats carefully, flattening his potatoes so they melt into the gravy and pushing the gelatinous mess away from his roast beef. He will not look at Reed.

"It happens to everyone, Unc." Scott's right hand has lumpish knuckles and an age spot near the wrist. "We all get old."

"No," Reed says. "No one else in my family lost their mind."

"Aunt Olive did, at the end, remember?"

He remembers. But he chooses to believe that his wife's personality simply died before her body did. "We were not related by blood," he says, gently.

Scott smiles and for the first time, Reed sees the boy he remembers trapped in the man's body. "I know that. But they think now that sometimes things like this happen because of environment. You two went everywhere together."

Reed shakes his head. "This is different. I've been reading --" he sweeps his hand at the bookshelf "-- and my symptoms are unique." He clears his throat, runs his hand through his thinning hair, feeling the baldness pattern that is an advanced version of his nephew's. "I need your help. I want you to do a map of the deterioration of my brain."

Scott's eyes widen, and for a moment, color brushes his cheeks. He sets his fork down, brings the linen napkin to his mouth, and wipes. His hand shakes. Then he says in an oddly strained voice, "Unc, I haven't done any programming since college."

Reed frowns. "But computers are your specialty."

Scott shakes his head. "No. I play with computers, but I use other people's programs. Besides, this would take knowledge I don't have."

Reed slumps against his pillows. Even the thought that his knowledge of Scott comes from the memory of a boy instead of the reality of a man does not make him feel any better. Reed stares at the sheet, folded against the thick red comforter, the white cotton smudged with a dab of gravy.

"It feels as if a shadow is creeping across my brain," he says. "If we can shed light on it, then perhaps it will go away."

Scott puts his tray on the floor and buries his face in his hands. Reed glances at his nephew. They were close once, when Scott played with Reed's children at all the family gatherings, but there seems to be little closeness between them now. Not enough to cause Scott's reaction. Finally Scott brings his head up, his eyes hooded and unreadable, an expression so like Reed's father that Reed starts.

"All right, Uric," Scott says. "I know a man who can help you. I'll send him over tomorrow and we'll see what he can do."

The man's name is Cielo Rodriguez, but he speaks no Spanish. "My mother chose the name," is all he will say, which puts his birthdate squarely within a five-year period that began in 1966. He is tall and slender, with wavy black hair and piercing blue eyes -- a bit of cielo, he says--but Reed is uncertain whether the man means the sky or heaven. Rodriguez wears white to set off his dark skin. Thick corded muscle runs up his arms and into his shoulders, as if working with computers has made him very strong. He answers Reed's early questions as if he has answered them a thousand times.

They meet in the solarium because Reed does not want a stranger to see him in bed. The warmth is a comfort for his old and aching bones. The nurses have put a stool in front of his favorite chair so that he can rest his feet. Even in his white shirt and lightweight pants, Rodriguez looks hot. Sweat beads on his forehead, an occasional drop falling off his brow onto his pristine clothes.

Reed does not like the small talk and doubts he ever had patience for it. He leans forward, his shoulder brushing a fern, and tells Rodriguez the brief history of his deterioration, then requests the map.

Rodriguez wipes at a trickle of sweat that has fallen onto his cheek. "Frankly," he says, "I am surprised you have come back to us."

Reed feels a little chill in the pit of his stomach. "Come back?"

"We did this five years ago," Rodriguez says with the cautious tone Reed is coming to recognize. "Both you and your wife. It was a big deal. The first successful mapping of the activities of the working, intelligent human brain. Made the cover of Science News and Scientific American."

And I can't believe you don't remember. That is what his tone said. How could you ever forget? Reed's breath is coming in small gasps. No wonder Scott looked

so upset. The first time they probably sought him out. The second time, he sought them.

"If I'd known you were having troubles, I'd have come to you," Rodriguez says. "Just like we did for your wife."

"You made a second map of Olive?" Reed's voice rasps. His throat has tightened against the words.

Rodriguez shakes his head. "She wouldn't let us touch her again."

Reed doesn't move. He can feel Olive's presence all around him. The warmth envelops him like a hug. Sometimes things like this happen because of environment. You two went everywhere together. Or shared the same experiment.

"Could this be happening to me because of the map?" Reed asks. He does not look at Rodriguez, focusing instead on the small hothouse rose blooming on the third shelf to his left.

"No." Rodriguez leans forward into Reed's line of vision. Rodriguez places his face so that his piercing gaze meets Reed's. "We have done this technique a hundred times since and have used it as a diagnostic tool. No one else has had this problem."

Reed cannot look into that tiny bit of cielo. He turns away. "You sound awfully certain for a man who is experimenting."

"You used to like my certainty," Rodriguez says.

The words make Reed start. Another thing lost? He cannot tell.

Rodriguez stands. He pats Reed's shoulder with a familiarity that strangers should not have. "Come to Cedar Sinai tomorrow at nine A.M. and report to Neurology. We will have your new map in no time."

"Tomorrow," Reed whispers. The promise hangs in the air long after Rodriguez has left. The heat has become oppressive as if, in its weight, lingers Olive's disapproval.

They begin with old-fashioned technologies, X-rays, an MRI, a PET and an AAL. Then they take him into a room he believes he has never seen before. This test has no acronym. He is placed on a divan, one of three in a room the size of his master bathroom. A technician places a device shaped like a hairdryer in a 1950s beauty salon over his head. His neck is held in place by a soft cushion. He is encouraged to close his eyes, but he is asked not to sleep.

He cannot sleep anyway. The room is air-conditioner cold, the kind of dry chill that seeps into his bones and brings goosebumps to his skin. Two people monitor him from the booth above--both women. He has not seen Rodriguez all morning.

All night he dreamed of Olive as she had been when he met her, her black hair held in rolls by ornate combs, her lipstick thick and red on her narrow mouth, her eyes snapping with a vitality that drew him like a thirsty man to water. At first he was happy, because he had found another untapped memory. They made love in a private rail car as it bumped and thudded along a steel track, their moans lost in the clatter. Then everything went dark, and he heard her voice, faint and quivering with age: It's wrong, Reed. Please. Don't ask me again.

As he closes his eyes now, he hears that voice, gone now almost two years and still buried inside him. Don't ask me. Please, Reed. Please. He has a sense of disquiet, as if the dreams have told him something he should understand. He allows his mind to free associate, as the technicians have told him to.

He is not asleep, but he is not awake, either. Finally the answer comes to him, firmly and with strength, his mind speaking with confidence for the first time since this ordeal began.

The visual memory is gone, but the audio remains.

He has been trying too hard. He needs to remember with his body, not with his mind.

This test is done, and the techs take him to another room, attach him to another machine. He barely notices; he is too engaged reviewing his small store of memories. The wobble of his legs brought back the children; the warmth of the solarium brought him Olive. Other memories are subtler: the taste of canned gravy brought the years of his young marriage and the boy Scott to his mind; the expression in Scott's eyes reviving for a brief instant Reed's father. The body is a link to a secondary store of memories, one he accesses in a different way than simple recall.

They complete two more tests before lunch. After lunch, the techs warn him, is the frightening part. They assure him he will feel nothing.

They take him to another white room, this one with a lounge and a series of wires hanging over it, like an old-fashioned dental chair. A young woman straps him in, explaining in a cheery voice that he has been through this once before. He has minute scars to prove it. Then she uses a tiny needle to inject a solution into his skull.

She is right; he feels nothing. Occasionally he makes an involuntary movement -- a toe wiggles, a finger twitches -- but otherwise he seems to be in control of himself. Over lunch, the techs tried to explain the process to him, using words like Virtual Imaging and Composite Mapping, but the jargon passes him too quickly. He will have Rodriguez explain, later.

When she finishes, she takes him to a room and lets him sleep much needed, dreamless rest. He does not see Rodriguez until the following morning.

Reed is still exhausted. They meet in Rodriguez's office, a cramped room piled

with print-outs and curling photographs, X-rays, and photographs of the brain. Computers hum on three desks. Framed degrees proclaim Rodriguez a medical doctor as well as a computer scientist. Magazine covers hide the part of the wall not covered with bookshelves. If Reed squints, he can see the Scientific American cover with the map of his brain.

The same map rises from the surface of one of the desks. A holographic projection. Reed half-smiles. An old memory must have led him to expect the map on one of the computer screens. A similar map rises from another desk. Rodriguez stares at them as if they hold secrets he cannot fathom. The light from the maps reflects on his face, making his dark skin as pale as his clothes.

"I have never seen anything like this," he says.

Reed has to fight to concentrate on the words. The exhaustion and strain have made him dizzy. He leans forward, ignoring the complaints of his back.

"Look." Rodriguez swivels the two models so that they face Reed. "You're right. You are losing information, but the loss is not starting in the corner of one lobe and moving in the other direction. Instead it follows pathways as we would follow a road, as if it is searching for particular kinds of information. It is as if these areas are washed clean."

He turns and faces Reed. The light from the maps shines over Rodriguez's shoulders, giving him a halo. "If this is a disease, it is unlike anything we have ever seen before."

Reed frowns. "Are you saying I'm all right?"

"No." Rodriguez temples his fingers. "Something is clearly wrong. The links remain -- you can relearn things, but the knowledge you've stored is gone, and that knowledge seems to be specialized. With more time, we can figure out what areas are being affected."

"Today?" Reed asks.

Rodriguez shakes his head. "You're too tired. A week from now. Will that work for you?"

Reed nods. Then asks the question he has been thinking since the day before. "Is this what happened to Olive?"

"We don't know." Rodriguez wipes his hand on his pants. He turns slightly, so that he can look at the screen instead of Reed. "She would not let us map her brain before she died, and she insisted that no one touch it after. You cremated her so that we would all comply with her wishes."

Reed stares at the revolving brains before him. The second is webbed with thin lines not in the first, as if someone has poured a dark liquid into the blood vessels to touch up the shadows. It is as if Death has shuck inside him and is

snuffing out his life, inch by painful inch.

He sleeps for another two days. The sheets in the bed are damp from his sweat. His pillow feels hard and once he dreams he is trapped in an old CT machine, a room-sized monstrosity that sucks him dry.

On the third day, he awakens with a sense of loss. He runs through his feeble store of memories and stumbles. When he wobbled down the hall days before, he uncovered a memory, but now he can no longer find it. His head hurts with the strain of looking for it; his mind plays with the emptiness like the tongue plays with the space left by a missing tooth. He even gets out of bed and wobbles a bit, hoping the memory will return. But it is gone, like the others, perhaps forever.

A terror shudders through him, quick as alcohol on an empty stomach. He should not lose memories he has struggled to recover. Even Rodriguez said his brain was fine. The new memories should stay.

With a shaking hand, Reed reaches for the phone and calls Rodriguez. All Reed gets is Rodriguez's automated voice, urging him to leave a message. Which he does. All garbled and fear-filled, sounding more like a hysterical old man than he has ever sounded in his memory, as paltry as it is.

Then he gets out of bed, determined to try the hall again, to see if recreating the same circumstances will bring the memory back. He grips the plastic headboard and pauses for a moment. His taste is not that bad. A brass bed should have a brass board. Someone must have changed it. He does not know why.

As he crosses the Sahara carpet, each step is slow and uncertain. Even though he feels he has made some progress with his mind, his body's deterioration continues. His hands, outstretched before him for balance, are thin and bony, their flesh loose and lined with oversized blue veins. When he reaches the door's threshold, he grips it and leans into the hallway. The television blares below: the CNN news theme this time. If he were to cry for help, the nurses would never hear him.

He turns back to the hallway itself, wide enough for a wheelchair, filled with polished occasional tables and framed art that once had meaning for him. Keeping one hand firmly pressed against the dry wall, he takes small baby steps, then stops.

This was the place he had the memory. He remembers the moment of recovery, the joy that ran through him, the feel as if he had recaptured part of himself. Odd that he can recall remembering but the memory itself is gone. He inches closer to the wall and rests his head on the back of his hand. Little shudders run through him. Someday it will all be gone and he will be a great hulking empty shell of loose skin and brittle bones.

As Olive had been. She left before her body did, but where she went he had no idea. A tiny thread of despair fills him. She never left him before without

telling him where she was going to go.

Another memory. But he knows it is not the same as the one he has lost. And this new memory has come through his body again, through the tactile image of a vacant shell. He cannot see Olive's dead body, but he remembers how it felt--like a beloved robe tossed on a bed--threadbare, worn, full of memories, but empty without its owner.

"Mr. Brasher?"

He starts. A nurse is beside him, her large breasts pressing against his arm, her uniform smelling of perfumed laundry detergent and sweat.

"You need to be in bed, Mr. Brasher."

He glances at her -- rounded cheeks and chocolate eyes. She is younger than he realized, perhaps twenty-five, but already set in a middle-aged body. Her voice has a warmth she does not have to fake, and her breath is laced with garlic. He has succumbed to this gentle persuasion before.

Then he looks down the hall. Only a few feet remain to his study. The red light on the door knob blinks. "I know," he says, "but I need to do this more."

He pushes away from the wall and almost loses his balance. She places a firm hand on the small of his back to steady him. He walks without support now, embarrassed by his old man's gait. After he walks a few steps, he hears a sharp intake of breath. She must have realized where he is going.

"Mr. Brasher, sir, you can't go in there."

He stops in front of the study door. The faint aroma of pipe tobacco brings up a wistfulness in him. He gazes at the tiny blinking light reflecting off the translucent skin of his right arm. "If I can't go in there," he says, "who can?"

She apparently has no answer. He closes his eyes and grips the knob. The corner bites into his skin. The metal is cool beneath his palm, except in the center, where the light blinks. He has felt this before. His own voice speaks in his head and he repeats the words, the quote he chose to release the lock: "'Go then! Go to the moon, you selfish dreamer!'"

And he hears not his own voice, but a raspy female voice in a room tinged with whiskey, the words echoing across a stage, and sees a young girl, dressed in white, the spotlight on her hand, cupping a broken unicorn from her glass menagerie. And he knows then what he has lost: that magic, that music perfection could raise in him: the tears he cried when he first saw Ibsen and Williams and O'Neill performed upon the stage, the glimmer of inspiration that made him want to do the same things. He remembers the feel of the velvet-covered steel theater chair, the collective gasp of the audience, the instinctive grasping in his soul that made him want to achieve uniformity of emotion in a hundred people sitting in the dark. He is so lost inside himself that he does not notice as the knob

slips through his grasp. Only the cool hand upon his arm brings him to the present.

"Come inside, old man," says a voice he recognizes. "It's time we talk."

It takes a moment for his eyes to focus. As they do, he finds himself gazing at skin so flawless that it lacks the visible imperfections of open pores or bristly whiskers. The lips are smooth, a rosy hue he has never seen outside of commercials; the nose a flawless aquiline missing the slight bump it had had since a skiing accident; the eyes white and green in perfect contrast, untouched by exposed vessels or deep circles in the lid below. Only the hair seems familiar, dark and black and thick, smooth in the front and slightly upraised in the back as if hands have been running through it in a nervous gesture.

He has not seen that face in sixty-five years--except on jacket covers, retrospectives and the wedding photograph that hangs above the mantle in the library on the first floor.

For a moment, he can't breathe. The lump in his throat is so thick he can barely swallow. He can only stare--up--at the man he once was.

And it all clicks into place. Even though he doesn't remember, he knows.

"I shouldn't have to invite you in," the replica of his younger self says and steps back.

But Reed cannot move. The voice is half a step off--that odd timbre the human voice makes when recorded, when not heard from within and without. The man -- the boy -- before him is the age of his greatgrandchildren, from an age when the body is lithe and beautiful, unmarked and unmarred by time.

A flush warms him. How odd it feels to look at his former perfection, to know that the broad-shouldered, slim-hipped body before him became this bowed, broken and bent thing that can barely stand on its own.

"Please," the boy says.

Reed glances back at the nurse. She is watching with her hands pressed together in unconscious imitation of prayer, her fingertips pushing against her chin. He cannot bear the look of pity and concern on her face. He steps inside and closes the door.

The room brings up no memories in him, although the pungent scent of tobacco makes it feel like home. A large oak desk dominates. Its position beneath the floor-to-ceiling windows makes it the center of the room. Papers are scattered across its surface, next to a dust-covered typewriter. The primary workstation appears to be the couch, where a laptop hums. Small swinging doors lead into another room, and he knows without looking that it houses a small kitchen with an even smaller bedroom beyond.

Artwork and photographs are scattered along the floor as if someone meant to hang them up. His books, plays, and other published works fill the bookshelves, and the bookshelves dominate, running from floor to ceiling. Over and over, his name appears, in Times Roman, Geneva, and Palatino; in gold, blue and bright green: J. Reed Brasher. A constant reoccurring image to remind him who he was.

Richard Nanes's Nocturnes of the Celestial Seas plays softly in the background, the rhapsodic, richly chorded Nocturne in C Major evoking a melancholy in him he hadn't realized he is feeling.

He built all of this and he remembers none of it.

"Did Cielo Rodriguez help design you?" he asks, his back to the boy.

The boy laughs. That sound, at least, is familiar. It is his father's laugh, down to the last ripple. "Cielo Rodriguez merely laid the groundwork. He knows nothing of the project. You hired RoboTechs to make me, and had them work with a designer in Hamburg, and a young woman whose work shook the world of artificial intelligence. Seventeen tries to come up with me."

Seventeen sounds like too few to create the perfection before him. Too easy. He staggers to the couch and sits beside the laptop. He brushes the keyboard, finds the keys molded to the shape of his fingers. He knows he created all of this so that he would be immortalized, so that he would not die at the end of a normal human life span, but somehow, now, it seems vainglorious.

"And Olive?" he whispers.

"She died before the project was finished."

Reed looks up. This -- boy -- is the only person who does not speak to him in that sing-song voice of tolerance. He answers the questions as if they are normal, as if he has anticipated them.

"You are stealing my memories." The words rush out of Reed in a gust of anger he does not know he has. His mind has controlled his entire life, and now this artificial person--this thing--is taking his mind from him.

"I do not know how a man can steal from himself," the boy says.

Reed looks at the boy, really looks at him. He is Reed and not Reed. The lump on the nose that Olive used to trace with her finger, the scar beneath the lower lip, the hint of acne that bothered him until he was thirty-five, all missing. The boy's knuckles have lines, but his hands do not--not even the tiny wrinkles Reed used to create by arching his fingers backwards as far as they would go.

"You are not me," Reed says.

"No," the boy responds, "but I will be when the transfer is done."

His dream was prophetic then--or memory perhaps--the bed as a CT or some other kind of scan, leaching his life from him tidbit by tidbit, idea by idea.

Reed's breathing is labored. He understands his own rationale. His mind controls, so move the mind and he will continue to live. He hates this old man's body, hates its lack of mobility, its constant pain, its systematic failures, but it is his body, and trapped within it are the indelible imprints of a life well lived. He clenches his fists and holds them in his lap.

"You can't kill me," the boy says. "They'll just reactivate me when you leave."

Reed swallows. His mouth is dry, his tongue pasted to the back of his teeth. Kill the boy? Destroy the machine that holds all of his memories? Surely he didn't expect himself to be as crazy as that?

Still, the anger has nowhere to go. He is an old man whose body shakes when he stands. He licks his lips, wishing for strength in his limbs. "You should never have let me in here," he says.

The boy sits across from him, the body long and easy in a chair that never housed anything so young. "Had to," he says. "There are bugs in the system."

Reed runs his fingers across his balding pate. He does not want to help this usurper self, this idealized version of the person he once was. His mistake was to think that the boy's future would be his future, a thought he cannot even remember having, but knows he had. Still the questing mind, ever his savior and his betrayer, forces the question from his lips: "What sort of bugs?"

The boy reaches back, gathers papers off the messy desk top, and hands them over, like a young student awaiting his teacher's approval. Reed takes them, his own hand curved and shaking, skin wrinkled and spotted and pocked, without a trace of perfection. He knows where the drive has gone now. They were smart to implant that first.

He glances at the pages, then reads, curious to see what his mind has created without him. The words are smooth, the rhythm and style his. He feels the logic of the grammar, recognizes the vocabulary. But the emptiness shocks him. He saw better papers when he taught the occasional writing class.

The boy leans close and watches Reed. Bugs in the system. Reed sighs. Yes, of course. He would have wanted everything. Continued life and continued success.

But there can be no success with only pretty words. Doesn't the boy understand that? There are no characters, no emotions. The heart Reed was praised for is missing as if it never had been.

He gazes up at the boy and sees not distress in those green eyes, but a curiosity, as if the boy believes Reed can give him the piece of the puzzle that will make him whole.

"I need to study these," Reed says, and stands. His legs wobble beneath him and the boy reaches out, catching Reed as gently as a man would catch a child. The memory returns: Paula, stumbling as she almost reaches him, her baby legs shaking and uncertain. His hand--scratched, scabbed and callused but young--reaches for her to steady her. Not quite what he had in the hall: close, but different.

He has to get out of here. Now. He rolls the papers and staggers forward, more a drunk than a baby, lurching toward the door. He will not go back to the bed. Finally he understands the plastic headboard. This leaching of memory will have to quit. And be reversed. If they can pull the ideas from him, they can put them back.

"Please," the boy says, and there is a desperation in his tone. "Please. If you leave now, you won't come back."

Damn right, Reed almost says, but doesn't. Confusion makes him dizzy. This is his project after all. He understands the logic of it: brain cells die when deprived of oxygen. An information transfer of this magnitude could not occur after death.

But he never guessed how it would feel -- or that it would fail.

He stumbles and the boy catches him with a tenderness he does not expect. The toughness from earlier must have been programmed in, a planned response to questions Reed thought he might ask. The boy's hands are cool and smooth, not quite human, but he eases Reed back to the couch as if Reed were more precious than gold.

"Please," the boy says again. "What am I doing wrong?"

That, at least, is right. The questing mind which has never left him. Never left him, yet is replicated in the boy. An idea blossoms, but he ignores it, allowing it to rise to fruition without the help of his conscious brain. Instead he touches the boy's cheeks, feels the down of invisible hairs, the jut of the cheekbones, the oddly perfected nose. After a moment, the boy brings his hand up and touches Reed's face, fingers tracing the wrinkles and grooves carved by time. Reed cannot tell the boy what is missing, because it has taken Reed until this moment to realize what is there: the mind is more than the brain, more than chemicals and neural pathways carved in gray matter. Memories live in each cell, branded as deeply as time has branded his skin.

Reed can stop the theft as easily as he started it -- and he will. For he can never recreate himself. He was right about seventeen being too few--and he has not time for hundreds. Even then, the mind will not be whole. It will not know, really know, how Olive's skin felt beneath his fingertips or how her voice resonated in his ears. The scent of pipe tobacco will not bring with it the smell of home, and the brush of fingers against the arm will not recall his co-mingled joy and fear at his first child's first steps.

His body holds those memories and his brain is the link, not the repository.
Without his body, no trick of science can pull them free.

He lets go of the boy's face, and glances at the laptop. It is not his, even though it is made for him. He eases off the couch and heads for the desk, pulling the heavy, dusty typewriter toward him. His hands shake no longer, and, as he rolls a sheet of paper into the platen, he smiles just a little. For the drive has returned, along a different pathway, inspired not by the passions of someone else's life, but by the passions of his own. Passions no one, not even the perfected figure in front of him, will experience in the same way again. Passions recorded in the books on the wall. His passions, his life, in his words, already transferred from the deepest parts of his being, from the wounds and the scars no doctor has ever seen.

His daughter, the doctors, his nephew, they are all right. It is normal to lose the old. But the loss will not be his. It will be theirs. Someday he will follow Olive to a place he has never seen.

He looks at the boy, and now the quizzical expression in the boy's eye pleases him.

"I can't teach you how to put your heart and soul on the page," Reed says, his voice firm. "I've never been able to teach anybody that. But I can show you how it's done."

His fingers fit on the dusty keys, but he does not type. The boy can type. Instead Reed tilts his head back and feels the ideas come together. A surge of adrenaline fills him as it always has at the instant of creation. The boy looks over his shoulder, waiting, but Reed does not explain. He does not have to. He has never written to teach.

He writes for the sheer joy of placing himself on the page.

In memory of Kathryn Rusch