

TABULA RASA

E01: IT'S A BOY!

ZOHEB MASHIUR

"Close your eyes and forget your name, Step outside yourself and let your thoughts stray."

—Slayer, 'Seasons in the Abyss'

It was a bizarre little ad, and one Paul Wickens wouldn't have taken seriously if the press hadn't been covering Tabula Rasa so obsessively. Ever since the proposed technology had been announced all those years ago there'd been a storm of controversy and backlash from all sorts of ethical and religious groups worldwide, so it was a miracle that the government had finally given the company permission to test it out on volunteers. Paul judged from the enthusiasm of the interviewer that he was likely the first to have applied.

He'd brought along all the necessary documentation (passport, birth certificate, driver's license, etc.), and answered a number of highly personal questions: as the interviewer explained, it was all to build a better picture of Paul Wickens. It painted Paul as a loser who'd never held a job for more than three months (indeed he was presently unemployed), had a mere vestige of a family that he never talked to, was friendless, and owed a few months' rent to a long-suffering landlord. It was a depressingly good likeness.

"Do you have a wife, Mr. Wickens? Partner, lover, anything of the sort?" "No," was Paul's reply. Shauna had been quite clear on that.

The interviewer, whose name was Smith, made a sympathetic noise. "You live alone?" "Just me and the dog."

At this point a secretary entered the room and handed Smith a few computer printouts along with Paul's documents. Smith smiled as he glanced through them, informing Paul that everything appeared to be in order and that he was qualified to participate in Tabula Rasa's beta test.

Smith swiveled to face his PC. "Now, how about you tell us a little about how you'd like the new persona?" "Outgoing, happier, he'd be a people person, the successful sort, good with women..." Smith checked several boxes on the screen and typed away. "Actually, that last bit is really just a byproduct of some of the other qualities..."

"Can't make him better-looking than me, I'm guessing?"

"Haha! Well it's really about how you present yourself. I can add a little more fastidiousness in grooming, a healthier, more active lifestyle... that

should cover it as far as attractiveness goes. I wouldn't recommend adding anything else, Mr. Wickens, it's best not to try to change nature too much. This hardware is delicate," Smith pointed at his own head. "We wouldn't want any wear and tear."

The man fiddled with the computer a little more, and his secretary returned with a release form for Paul.

"Now, in order to craft a new persona that'll fit seamlessly, we have to run a quick but detailed scan of your brain. I must warn you Mr. Wickens, your entire life and everything you've ever thought and done will be known to us. There will be nothing we won't be privy to. If you understand and accept this, please sign the document and we may proceed."

Paul did understand and he did agree. They scanned his brain and sent him home, promising to call him back again in a month.

A month passed and then some, and every day Paul waited for the phone to ring. Mr. Hopkins was after him almost daily about the rent, and he'd actually stopped looking for a job because he had been so confident he'd get chosen for the beta. During that time he thought of Shauna a great deal.

The call came eventually, and it was Smith talking to him again. "Good news, Mr. Wickens! The new persona is almost

WORDPLAY

*I do not love you with a promise
 Nor with a lover's words to a beloved;
 I love you with a silent tongue
 And a world open to wonder -
 Traversing eons on rifts of sunken ships
 and skies torn asunder,
 Stepping on wishing wells of shimmering hope
 and through lives sewn together.*

*I love you not as a lover to woe
 But as a renaissance of imagination
 of conversations and silence,
 of lonely nights and empty words
 Eternally bound together.*

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complete and we'll be able to have the operation very soon."

"How soon?"

"Say a week? Until then, sit tight. Oh, wait no, damn it! I almost forgot! We called to ask if you'd thought about what his name might be?"

"Oh. I didn't think I had to name him."

"You don't *have* to, we could make one up for you like."

"Hmm... wait, no: how about Anthony? Anthony... Blake?" It was the first thing that came to mind. He didn't know why, but it seemed appropriate.

"Sure, why not. We'll call you back when it's time."

Smith hung up. Paul used his foot to scratch Milo's tummy and looked forward to the end. Milo looked up at him from the carpet: he had no concept of Paul Wickens, he only saw his master. Would he notice that anything had changed?

He was back at Tabula Rasa less than a week after that, sipping coffee and listening to Smith excitedly telling him all about the arrangements they'd made. It was all fixed with the state records: Anthony Blake would have been born on his birthday, gone to his school and college, worked the same jobs he had, and would have been living in his apartment for the past three years. And all of that would go into effect as soon as he

signed the new document Smith's secretary had brought out.

Paul frowned with sudden worry. "But Blake will only exist after I have the operation. But you're going to tell him he's always been around. What happens when he finds out the truth?"

Smith smiled: he'd anticipated this question and was surprised Paul had taken so long to ask it. "Yes, and no. Anthony Blake will be fully aware that he originated in our labs in the year 2023, but he will also have memories and records of being alive since 1996."

"He'll know he's a newborn but will also think he's 27?"

"Very well put, Mr. Wickens. Yes, that's how it'll be."

"How does that even work?"

"Mr. Wickens, I could explain, but it'll take rather a bit of time. Let's just say that adult humans are better at handling contradictory info than we'd be proud to admit. And anyway it shouldn't bother you, it will be his problem to deal with and not yours. Indeed, if you sign here, nothing will ever again be your problem. It'll all go away."

And that's what Paul had wanted to hear all his life. He signed.

They took him to the lab, strapped him to a bed and placed some sort of helmet with cables on his head. He couldn't see out of it at all, and started to feel his first moment of panic. He was surprised to feel someone's hand clutch his, and Smith whispered that it would be alright. Paul relaxed.

The helmet began to hum, and he knew it was finally happening. His brain was being formatted. Wrapped in darkness and holding a stranger's hand, Paul Wickens died. When the helmet was removed, it was Anthony Blake who looked into Smith's beaming face. Blake grinned as well: it was good to be alive, and very soon he'd go to meet the dog he'd owned for the past three years.