

Memory Mask

I sat at the small table at the front of the restaurant, staring blankly at the plate in front of me, disoriented. If not for the small dot on my arm by the inside of my elbow, I'd have gone mad by now. I had memories, so many memories, that were rubbish, fantasy, useless. At this point, the only thing of which I was certain was my name: it was not Simon Miller. Unfortunately, I had no idea what my real name was, so I'll just stick with Simon Miller.

Fake memories are odd. They seem so real, even when there are inconsistencies. I'm sure it's all a Mask, but it doesn't matter. When I hear someone say "Simon" (just now, on the radio, the DJ mentioned that name), it's like they called my name. I'm sure I'd pick it out from a spoken conversation across the room, while at the same time someone might be calling my name, my *real* name, right behind me and I'd just ignore it.

"Is this seat taken?"

I looked up. The voice belonged to a small-framed, young woman of middle eastern origin, judging from her dark hair, dark eyes, and olive complexion.

"Please, sit," I said.

After a moment, I realized I had been staring. After another moment, I realized my moment of hopelessly searching for lost memories would be interpreted as me staring at her.

Before I could apologize, she sat down and said, "You're out of phase."

She saw my puzzled look and said, "Out of phase. With this time zone. You're here. You have a plate of mostly uneaten food in front of you. It's an hour past lunchtime, yet you look as if you have no idea of what time it is or when you last ate. You must be *very* new here."

"Yeah. I guess you're right," I admitted. After a moment, I blurted out, "But there's more."

Perhaps I should be more careful and not trust the first pretty face I see, but on the other hand, if I'm going to pick someone at random to confide in, a pretty face isn't exactly a drawback.

“I don't remember much of anything,” I began, “or rather, the things I remember are mostly corrupted, fake memories. Not mine.”

A waitress approached and, without missing a beat, my dining partner ordered a coffee and sent the waitress away with a smile. She then turned back to me and asked, “What do you mean?”

“I think I've been Masked,” I said, as if I had just discovered my wallet was gone.

“Masked?” she asked quizzically.

“You know about Memory Transfer?” I asked.

“A little, I suppose. What I've read. Nothing technical, of course. I thought it was mostly a curiosity. Donors, mind *and* body, are hard to come by. And I've never heard of problems, like corrupted memories. Usually, it's the opposite, a perfect transfer, and the recipient never doubts that the memories were always theirs.”

I nodded. I forgot (maybe?) what people generally know about Memory Transfer. I took a sip of my coffee absently, as I reviewed it in my head, before launching into a little lecture.

“Memory Transfer—permanent Memory Transfer—is what you described,” I began. “And you're right. It overwrites the mind and memories of the receiver, all of it, with the new memories. And it's a destructive transfer for the sender. It destroys the mind, which kills the body. It's only been done a handful of times, for rare cases. And brain-damaged cases can't be used as recipients to save the terminally ill.”

The technique, discovered during research into the causes and treatments for certain types of mental illness, had been a firestorm of controversy from the start. The medical ethicists uniformly condemned it. But it had opened the door for new possibilities, ones that could be less problematic.

I continued. “That's Transfer. Other techniques that followed the trail blazed by Transfer were developed. Very different. Three things distinguish it from the old techniques. 1) The sender isn't killed by the process. 2) The memories can be stored and transferred to multiple recipients. And 3) The recipient's memories are only temporarily replaced. Covered up. The

original ones return when the new ones leave. That's why it's called Masking. And it can cover all or some of the original memories.”

“But this technique doesn't always work?” she asked.

“Exactly. One of the differences between Transfer and Masking. The mechanical storage is basically incompatible with the way memories really work in the brain. At least that's the theory. So the memories are incomplete or inaccessible or wrong. But because of that, they eventually get sloughed off and the original mind returns.”

“And all the memories with, or in, the mask?”

I smiled. She was good. I replied, “They go away with the mask too. Everything that was in the Mask, and memories made while the Mask was in place.”

“Then what makes you so sure?” she asked, with an undertone of triumph, as if she had found a flaw in my logic.

“This,” I said, extending my elbow and showing her the inside of my forearm, and pointing to a spot near the inside elbow.

“A freckle?”

“NO!” I snapped at her, “it's a tiny blood spot, and it's right by a vein. It's from an I.V.”

“So you *think*,” she said slyly.

“So I think,” I said with certainty. It occurred to me that she had been paying a bit too much attention to me. She had been listening patiently for a reason. I'm sure I hadn't done much to convince her I was sane.

“Why are you here?” I asked her.

She looked at me for a few moments. Then she sighed and smiled. She must be desperate.

“You're right,” she said, “I came here for a reason. And it has nothing to do with fake memories.”

She told me that two men had been after her, following her ever since she had left her hotel. She read my “So what?” expression and explained that she couldn't go to the police. Not just because they had done nothing to her, but because she had done something the police didn't like. She had filmed a bunch of the corrupt ones taking bribes and made it public. She had recently filmed some more incriminating things (she didn't say what, but my guess was it related to drug deals) and the cops asked their “friends” to stop her before she could air their dirty laundry. For some reason, she thought I would be more protected if I knew nothing more about the film, including its content, medium, or location. But, now she also needed help, my help.

I only thought about what she said for a few moments before I offered my hand and said, “I suppose I should introduce myself. My name is not Simon Miller. So just call me...Simon Miller.”

She smiled, shook my hand, and said, “For now, you can call me Razia.”

“My pleasure,” I said, and meant it. “The first order of business is to escape from here and go to...” I looked to Razia for an answer.

“The media will be helpless and under surveillance. I need any place with a network connection, the less obvious, the better. My shadow, and maybe by now yours as well, will know to watch the network cafés,” she said. “I'll probably need 15 minutes of uninterrupted network time, though a fast connection would drop that by 75%, easy.”

I looked around the restaurant—only two exits: the front and the back, by the kitchen. “Right now,” I said, “they're after you. They might watch me, especially when I leave, but it's you they want. I've an idea. It's not great, but it might work, if they're not expecting it. You leave first, to the restroom. I leave you high and dry. Then...” I quickly sketched out the rest.

From the outside, I hoped it looked like we were disagreeing. Then a quick end to the argument. Perhaps a threat from her? She heads off towards the toilet. Once she is out of sight, I throw down some money and quickly leave, passing one of the goons. He's talking to his buddy at the back of the restaurant by some earpiece and tiny microphone. At that moment, hell breaks out in the kitchen, or more specifically, the sound of dishes and pots knocked over. The goon in the back runs into the kitchen. The trail of chaos leads to the downstairs storeroom. Clearly someone was in a hurry to get through. Perhaps he even notices the Ladies' Room door is ajar, as

well. He relays this to his buddy. That's the distraction I need. A few quick turns, merge into the crowd, pop into a store, leave through a different entrance wearing a different jacket and cap, take a bus to a different part of town, and that's it, I've ditched my trail.

But what about Razia? If it worked, the goon will run downstairs to the storeroom, and his buddy out in front will join him through the quickest path, in other words, through the restaurant. Perhaps they'll spend a couple minutes looking for her down there, at least 30 seconds. That's long enough for the busboy to wheel a cart of trash out to the dumpster, and for Razia to escape out of that cart. As a final touch, the busboy will look as if he was knocked over as she fled, but he'll be facing the wrong direction, sending them off down the back alley the wrong way. That'll buy another minute (that last part was her idea). For the equivalent of \$50 and low risk to them, the restaurant staff should be happy to oblige. But I've no idea if her part will really work or not. I head to our meeting spot, a book store, and wait.

I wander through the bookstore, absentmindedly looking through books, as I review the plan in my mind, again and again, thinking of all the ways it could fail. Time seems to drag on until I hear my name quietly spoken, which breaks me out of my reverie (damn it, it's **not** my name). It's Razia, standing next to me, looking through a copy of *The Devil's Dictionary*. She's wearing a nondescript gray sweatshirt and baggy cargo pants.

“Did it work?” I asked hopefully.

“Good enough,” she said with a shrug. “It only required one or two bits of improvisation. All in all, that's pretty good.”

We headed over to an appropriately quaint reading room in the bookstore with old, uncomfortable seats, designed to look welcoming, but after 15 minutes or so of sitting, encourage customers to buy the books and leave. “Over here,” I motioned towards an off-balance table surrounded by three wooden chairs. “We should be able to get a signal from the apartment building across the way. At least one should be unsecured.” Another 'fact' I knew or a 'memory' I had. I couldn't risk the trap of self-doubt. I had to believe I couldn't be wrong all of the time. Otherwise, I'd fall into an almost bottomless pit. I didn't want to think about what lurked at the

bottom, waiting.

Razia took a compact out of her pack. A hell of a time to fix her makeup. When she opened it, I realized it was a small hand-held computer. She spent a few moments staring intently at it. Then she raised her dark eyes from the device to me and after a moment, flashed a quick grin. “It works, Simon. I started the transfer. It will take some minutes.” After a moment, she added, “Simon...it is odd calling you something that is not your name. But no matter, it works.”

She paused again, gathering her thoughts, before she continued. “So why are you so certain you've been Masked? Even if that freckle—” She saw my dark look and smiled briefly. I realized, too late, that she was just teasing me and I had taken the bait. “...that freckle-like mark is from an I.V., how can you know you were Masked? Clearly, you don't remember the procedure, or any procedure. Couldn't it have just been some drugs: psychotics, narcotics, hypnotics, or whatever they'd call it?”

I shook my head. “There'd be weird dreams or broken memories. I'd know who I was. It would be different. Even hypnotics wouldn't be able to build up such a consistent long-term history.”

“OK,” she said slowly, “it's less than a week old. So what do you remember about the last few weeks? Oh, and you do know the date today, right?”

“Yeah, it's the fourth,” I said, and then admitted, “I saw it on a newspaper, while I was browsing. Time's been a bit blurry for me recently.” Her question forced me to focus on the miasma of the memories in the middle of my mind. It wasn't physically painful, just disturbing, since it felt so wrong. Like trying to read when your eyes can't focus. The best you can do in that situation is to just describe the shapes and forms you can make out, even though the words can't be discerned. And that was all I could do.

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and began. “My memories—Simon's memories—go back all the way to childhood. Normal stuff. More recently, I've...he's been working as a materials engineer. Call it a research chemist. Some of the work is sensitive, new ways to make stuff, possibly big money for the company, if it works. A little is dangerous, like explosives, or things that can kill you in painful ways if you're not careful. But that's not the purpose of my group's work, that's only the risk if you're not careful. We're careful. It's a relatively small lab, part of a

bigger company. This time, I'll spare you the risk of knowing too much, and won't name names."

"The last few weeks were uneventful. Slow, but steady progress at work. We'll be running experiments for another three months and then spend that much time or more analyzing the data we collected. Outside of work, there's the occasional get together with friends. Go to a bar, see a movie, the usual. At the moment, there's no lady in my life. Lisa and I split almost eight months ago. Nothing remarkable. We had been together for a little over a year. That's the older memories. For the more recent ones..." I stopped and shuddered. "Things start to get a bit more muddled in my mind."

"Stuff started happening, stopped making sense. I...I'm not even sure of the sequence of events. Just disconnected events. I couldn't get to work. I couldn't find my car. I don't know where I was. I took a cab to work, but nothing was at that address. Never had been. Just an empty lot.

"And the access codes?" she asked.

"Those didn't work either, it set off an alarm," I replied.

My head snapped up and I looked at her with a mix of surprise, fear, and anger.

"Keep describing the memory, while you've got it. Ask me questions after that," she said, calmly.

She was right. It was a disconnected memory. Always there, but like an island in my mind, floating isolated with no way to get there without the right reminder. But once there, it was connected to several other similar isolated island memories.

"An alarm went off." I stopped and backtracked. "I was in the lab. No idea how I got there or if it was before or after what I just described. Anyway, I was in front of a secure access keypad by a locked door, I.D. card in hand. This...this wasn't my lab. I don't know which lab I was in or where I was going, but neither were familiar. Like I said, it's a big facility."

"A big facility..." she echoed.

"Yeah. Lots of buildings, lots of labs, though each lab is fairly small. People tend to keep to their own lab. Anyway, I felt...I felt stress as so many things had already gone wrong. But this

was bad, very bad. It was like... like..."

"*Your cover was blown,*" she suggested.

"Yes," I whispered, barely audible.

"There are...other things...running...fleeing...driving, flying, all a blur. Faces, places, signs. Then...here, in this town. I think I wandered around for some time. Then I noticed a clock and the time. I should get lunch, and I did. First place I could find, first main dish on the menu. Then, at some point, you came in."

I thought about the whole situation I was in. "If I knew who did this to me," as I tapped my forehead, "I'd..."

Razia focused her gaze on me, through me. "You'd hurt them? Make them pay? You? I don't think so."

I sighed. "Yeah, that's true. Not physically. But I'd do whatever it takes to see they're punished. Put behind bars. Whatever. I won't let this go. But..." My face shifted as the confidence fled. I think she read the meaning.

"But what?"

"But...I can't be sure I'm just some victim. I think...I think I might have been a willing volunteer." It had been on the edge of my consciousness, nagging me for some time now. The I.V. mark was the *only* sign. No bruises from restraints, no pulled muscles from a struggle, no side effects from a tranquilizer or muscle relaxant. She posed the obvious questions about new drugs or techniques that would eliminate the need for restraints or noticeable drug side effects, as well as the possibility that my overall mental soundness might simply prevent me from remembering anything useful.

"Anything is possible," I admitted, "but I can't start doubting and double-thinking everything. Besides, that's not the worst part." I waited a moment to gauge her reaction. She kept her gaze on me, unwavering.

I continued. "If I *was* part of this, a willing agent, then what's the point? I mean, think about it. What's the point of doing a memory transfer like that? To interview someone? Truth serum

is more effective. And this technique has too many holes, gapes, blind spots. For surveillance? The new memories disappear with the Mask, so anything learned is too short-lived. Masking. That's the whole point. It's a mental disguise to allow someone to get into someplace and *do* something. Once inside, the Mask can come off. Maybe it's timed, but more likely it's from situational triggers. And once the Mask is removed, the *real* person is underneath, with the *real* mission.”

“Like what?” she asked.

“Maybe steal something. Maybe damage something, destroy something. If it relates to the lab, there are a lot of valuable things there.”

“Maybe rescue someone,” she offered. It seemed a bit too benign, to go to all this trouble. She read that in my eyes and then quietly said, “*Maybe kill someone.*”

She had named the beast that sat at the bottom blackness of my pit of self-doubt. I had no idea who the real me was. And it felt like there was a good chance that he and I wouldn't like each other. But there was more. There was some kind of trigger, there had to be, that would remove the Mask. The more I thought of it, the more certain I was. And behind the Mask there was purpose. I knew I would have to find out. I could fail to achieve this purpose in so many ways, but I would know my Purpose.

“I helped you,” I said to her. “Now, would you return the favor? If there's more you need to do, fine, whatever it takes, we'll take care of your business first, but I need to know if I'm on my own or not.”

“I won't kill anyone, steal anything, hurt people...” she began.

“No...nothing like that. I want help in knowing my Purpose. After that, I'm sure I'm on my own.”

“You helped me out of a spot,” she said. “Once I've finished the upload and sent a note to my contact, I'm willing to do anything reasonable. As long as we lay low and don't risk the police or their enforcers spotting us.”

I nodded. It was all I could ask. “Now my question for you. The 'access code' and 'blown cover'”

comments. Just inspired guesses?”

“The way you were describing things, all cloak and dagger and secret, high-tech labs. It just seemed natural. One other question to you. If you have the mind of a chemist who was never involved in Memory Transfer, how do you know so much about it?”

“The Mask represents the memories, attitude, and personality. But there can be other things placed there at the same time. General knowledge on certain topics or perhaps to be used as excuses and alibis. The occasional skill. And triggers, to activate certain behaviors, remove parts or all of the Mask and more. Perhaps escape when things didn't work. I suspect my 'clever' escape plan for us was one of those.”

“And they gave you background knowledge of Masking, so...”

“So I wouldn't go insane.”

The plan was simple. Get back to the lab and get into the secure area. Only, I had no idea where it was. I suspect the Escape Trigger, when the alarm went off, peeled away those parts of my memory. Maybe to protect me or the Purpose, if I was captured. So now the trick was to play detective, figure out where I had been, and do what I had failed to do when I knew more about the original plan, presumably.

I said it was a simple plan, not a good, clever, or even remotely viable one.

My pockets contained nothing useful. No receipts, notes, addresses. No telltale marks on my clothing or mud on my shoes that would let us pinpoint my previous location. We could only come up with two ideas on how to proceed. The first was to check the newspapers and network for a report of an attempted break-in at a chemistry lab. The second was to check with the police. Knowing that I could have traveled very far, both options were long shots. Razia was particularly opposed to the second plan. So to the library we went.

We spent a few hours at the public library, but to little avail. No reports of a break-in. But

then, why would there be a report? I remembered an alarm, but that doesn't mean the police were involved. It was a dead-end. Eventually, Razia asked me about the name and location of the company, overriding my insistence that the memories were useless. I told her about taking a cab in southern California, only to arrive at an empty lot in a sketchy neighborhood. The lab had never been there.

“Going there is the only way to discover the Purpose, and unless you tell me where you *tried* to go, we're stuck here,” she stated.

I needed to know. I thought of the address I had given the cab driver. And somehow the memory of standing in an empty lot in a run-down residential neighborhood in L.A., while the taxi driver honked his horn at me to get back in the cab peeled away like sunburned skin.

“I have to get there,” I said solemnly, “to Michigan.”

“You remember the location of the lab?” she asked.

“Of course I do. It'd be a pretty stupid Mask if I had no idea as to where to go.”

Razai looked at me strangely and put a hand on my arm. “Wait,” she said. “Are you saying you *hadn't* forgotten its location?”

“I wouldn't forget a thing like that,” I reassured her. She did not seem at all reassured. In fact, she seemed more concerned, staring intently at me.

“Tell me what we were just talking about, how we spent the last few hours.”

Since it seemed important to her, I described our plan to find my Purpose, to make our plans to go to the lab, how we had met, how I had helped her out.

“And the library?” she demanded.

“What library? Look, I'm not following the question,” I was getting impatient. She made no sense. ‘And the library’ wasn't even a proper question.

“We're in one now. How did we get here?”

I looked around. I admit, I had been focusing on her (who can blame me?) and hadn't really thought about where I was. Blind spot. I had no idea how I'd gotten here, how *we* had gotten

here. It was probably so we could figure out how best to get to the lab. “You don't know either?” I asked.

“Don't worry about it,” she said quietly, staring into the distance. “Tell me where we're going, so we can get going and get you to your lab.”

That made sense. The longer I stayed here, the longer I delayed discovering my Purpose.

The trip to Detroit was uneventful and a bit boring. We took a bus. Actually, the bus was after we got into the U.S. It was slow, but made it easier to be anonymous.

I guess my understanding of Masks is not as thorough as I may have thought. There are definitely trigger points that allow a Mask to be removed (or perhaps insist that it be removed). What I hadn't known was that Masks can be layered, one on top of another, and that each Mask doesn't have to cover up the entire mind. There can be special purpose Masks, Mini-Masks, that provide special knowledge or skills for a particular circumstance, and is covered by a higher level mask. If needed, it can be activated, even though it might only affect a small number of things. Similarly each can be “disarmed” (sometimes) if a lower level Mask is removed. Unfortunately, or fortunately, memories of times when a particular Mask is active go away with that Mask.

Apparently, I've gone through a few in the last week, much to the consternation of my traveling companion. I guess the worst part is that the partial masks only take limited memories. An Escape Mask takes the escape plan with it, but not too much else. I can't be trusted to remember anything, nor guaranteed to forget conversations, or secret confessions, during that period. I also don't want to keep asking her the same questions over and over again, which apparently I've done on several occasions. So that kind of limits conversations.

One thing hasn't changed: my need to discover my Purpose, what lies below the final Mask. The inconsistent patchwork quilt of my memory only makes it more urgent. Once the final Mask is gone, this memory game will end.

DOW Chemical has some offices in a business park in a suburb of Detroit. Razia asked if we want to be armed. Even with all the mystery and intrigue, I don't think I could handle a gun, and realistically, could only attack someone in defense: self-defense or defending Razia. A gun would just make a lot of noise and I'd miss the target.

We parked the rental car a couple blocks away. This was far enough, I didn't want to drag her into danger or something as stupidly futile as this. I told her that if it works out, I'll meet her back here. She chuckled quietly to herself once. She's wearing a black running suit. While not formal, it's a nice last image. I'm pretty sure I'll never see her again. I just hope she manages. She's more than repaid the initial favor. (And yes, I still remember it all.)

I walked the two blocks to the building. I could feel, almost as a compulsion, that I was on the right track. I walked up to the front gate. I swiped my ID card and typed the same access code as I had before (I think) and walked through the front entrance, past the security guard, without incident. There was a map in my mind. I headed to a familiar building and went up a flight of stairs. I passed "my" lab, glancing through the window, recognizing the lab techs there. They may or may not recognize me. I'm about the same height, build, and complexion as Simon Miller, and I'm wearing my hair the same way, as well. Razia had remarked that I looked like the picture on my ID card. *Like* the picture on the card, but upon close examination, not exactly. With luck, it'll be enough to get me by long enough. I'm wearing a white jumpsuit, not for the chemical protection, but only in hope that it lets me blend in with others. I'm trying to buy as much time as I can, and another 30 seconds of not attracting attention might make a difference.

I know I'm close. I see the door to the lab. This time, when I slide my badge and type the access code, a small green light illuminates on the keypad, and I hear a "click" as the door unlocks.

I walk through the empty lab. This was the one I had tried to get into previously and failed. Notes on whiteboards. I read them and understand. Interesting, but only as a curiosity. It will take months of work before anything comes out of what they're working on. I look through a window at the material in the isolation room. Cool stuff, but I really don't care. I note all the pipettes, supplies, and equipment lying around the lab, as well as the fire suppression systems and chemical sniffers. Good, industry standard protection. Also useful for distractions. And they

can be disabled, modified to serve other purposes. Something else peels away in my mind, as I categorize and rank their usefulness.

I walk down the hall, passing a break room. At the end of the hall is the manager's office, with the secretary's desk in front of the manager's door. She was in the break room getting coffee. I poke my head into the manager's office and look at the paper's on his desk. It's upside-down, but still easily readable. It's a printout from the secretary, listing today's visitor schedule. A lot of bigwigs are around today. That's why hardly anyone is around: most are at meetings. The sheet lists names, companies, locations, purpose of visit. I stare at it for another moment.

Purpose of visit.

Purpose.

Suddenly everything comes into focus.

There is a lot of noise, a lot of confusion. People running around. Lights flashing. This makes it easy to slip away in the aftermath. Even for Detroit, this is a lot of sirens and flashing lights. I pass various crowds of people as I walk away. People yelling names in different languages. I am wearing a business suit, the protection suit has long since served its purpose, several of them actually. No one would mistake me for a tech. After a moment, I realize a woman in a black running suit has been yelling "Simon" in my direction. I turn to give her a "fuck off, bitch" look, when I recognize her.

"You found your Purpose, the Mask is off," she says in a matter-of-fact way. "This," she says, glancing over her shoulder, "is your doing, I assume?"

"Got to cover my tracks," I say with a smirk. "It is kind of stupid to attract this much attention, just to avoid attention, but if there are enough bodies, or body parts, they are not going to reconstruct the cause of death for all of them."

"But it's the same cause for all of them: you," she says grimly.

“I did what was necessary. If a simple bullet will not work, and it is important enough to bring me in, then I will do whatever it takes. CEOs can have pretty good protection when they are out and about. Better than many foreign dignitaries.”

“And the Memory Mask?”

“I must have lost, what, two weeks of my life? I am not thrilled about that. The compensation had better be worth it. And the guy with the intravenous needle...he better hope he does not run into me again.”

“Something must have gone wrong. One or more Escape Masks were invoked,” she says.

That would explain the delays. The escape plan would take me far away, through a predetermined route. I guess it worked, though I would never know what fucked up the plan in the first place.

“So,” she says, “do you know my name?”

“Of course not.” She looks at me, looks right through me with those black laser eyes. I know my lies are useless on her.

After a moment, she nods, satisfied. “Good. That would be grounds for you to be on the receiving end of one of these assignments, Joseph.”

“There is only one thing I call you,” I say, as we walked towards our driver in a piece-of-shit five-year-old Oldsmobile that would never get a second look. “Boss.”