



PARIS AT NIGHTS

Today was rice day, fifty-pound sacks of white rice in trucks bearing an elephant logo. The same happy elephant appeared on the bags, its head raised to the sky, the trunk curved like an S.

“Elephant,” Todd said.

He said it because a laborer was staring at it intently. Which meant he wasn’t working.

“That’s right,” the man said. “I couldn’t remember the word.”

He was the only other human at the loading dock this morning. The man didn’t have a name, just a number, like the rest of the robots.

“Let’s get back to it, 8831, okay?”

“Yessir,” the man said.

That could be me, Todd thought as he watched him work side by side with his silent mechanical counterparts, lifting, carrying, and dropping bags of rice from the back of the truck to the warehouse. A bad car accident, a bad fall from a ladder, and that could be me.

Or a bad memrip.

AT LUNCH, Todd thought of things he could sell. Everything he owned of any value, he could touch: his grandfather’s watch, his grandmother’s wedding ring, a gold necklace belonging to some forgotten relative. His car, too, but that was out of the question as he needed it to work.

He got up from his chair and scanned the floor below, the robots still working away, a sea of metallic shoulders rising and falling in unison, strangely beautiful in a way. Over by the forklift sat 8831, his eyes as blank as the piece of bread he was eating.

Two weeks from today was Todd’s thirtieth wedding anniversary, and even if he were to pawn the watch, the ring, and the necklace, he knew he wouldn’t even come close to

having enough for Paris. That's where Sue had wanted to go for as long as he could remember. They didn't have the money to honeymoon there, but that was okay because back then, there had been plenty of time. They were young, both healthy and working, so they would save a little here and there and in a couple of years, they would be walking up to the Eiffel Tower at night arm in arm, find themselves underneath the arch and look up at the beacon that shined on this city of lights.

But then came two sons and three recessions and a second mortgage. A hysterectomy for her, a double bypass for him, and now here he was, nine years short of retirement, supervising a team of robots and a retarded man, thinking about folks who could sell things they couldn't touch, like stocks and bonds and whatever else he couldn't even fathom, people with money who would pay to experience another's most cherished moments.

Silly. That would be Sue's word for it if this were a story she'd overheard. *For a trip, a goddamn trip, what a silly thing to do.*

But it was more than a trip. It was their life together. There was life and there was death, and it seemed to Todd that if he waited any longer, there wouldn't be a difference between the two.

He opened the filing cabinet and rifled through the folders. In all the years he'd been here, only a handful of human workers had come and gone. All of them were handicapped in some way; they came through the city welfare program, and 8831 was no exception.

Name: Lopez, Manny

Age: 46

Tax Status: Married

Disability: Neural Trauma

Neural Trauma. It was worth a shot.

Manny's wife picked up on the second ring. Todd told her who he was, and after he assured her that her husband was not hurt, he was fine, he was a great worker, he asked her what he wanted to know. She listened without interrupting him, then there was a lengthy silence.

"Why?" she asked.

"Does it matter?"

"I can report you."

"I know."

More silence.

"He did it because he loved me. Loved," she said,

hardening. "Not loves."

"I heard you."

Then she hung up on him, and for the rest of the day, Todd replayed the conversation in his mind. Should he have lied to her, made up some story about a sick mother, a dying child? He wasn't good at talking, especially on the phone. People thought he was unfriendly, hostile. A woman once told him his voice sounded like broken stones rattling in a cage.

The horn blared at five, time for the two humans to go home and the robots to be reconditioned and put in standby.

Todd was walking out to his car when Manny touched his shoulder.

"Boss," he said, sounding uncertain. He held out his phone. "My wife, she wants to talk to you?"

THE HOUSE was quiet when he returned, and it seemed to Todd that he wanted to keep it that way. Take small, measured steps, like a thief. He carefully pulled the door shut, holding onto the doorknob and turning it by hand until it locked.

Above, the floorboards creaked, Sue's footsteps as she walked from their bedroom to the bathroom. Then a flush, and the trill of water climbing up to refill the toilet tank. And now the muffled voice of the late-show host on TV, the encouraging laughter of the studio audience, the one-two punch repeating until they cut to commercial.

Todd sat at the dining table and peeked inside the microdome, at the plate Sue had made for him. Pork chops, a bunch of broccoli spears, a hill of mashed potatoes with a well of gravy. He touched the REHEAT button and watched his plate spin slowly, the inside of the dome steaming up.

One thing for sure, my clients never tire of wedding proposals.

The man Todd had met after work was funny, friendly, utterly normal. It didn't seem possible that they were talking about something that could land both of them a minimum of two years in prison.

I'm not going to lie to you, Todd. There's a risk to this. People do get hurt, like your friend Manny. But keep in mind that Manny didn't follow our simple yet extremely important directions. We told him over and over again that he wasn't to consume any alcoholic beverages twenty-four hours before the procedure. We even hired a Portuguese translator to make sure he understood what was required of him. See, this is why Mrs. Lopez still led you to us, because she knows we do good work. Her cousin's a regular sourcer, comes in once a month, has been for years. We don't mess up, Todd. It's the sourcers who mess up. And I can see we'll have a smooth ride,

because you're a smart guy.

Though he introduced himself as Richard Gibbons, he also immediately admitted that it was an alias.

In my opinion, Todd? In my opinion, I think it's something the government should regulate. Because let's face it, everybody's doing it. But think how long it took for marijuana to become legalized. Hell, it's still not legal in Alabama.

Todd opened the microdome and took out the plate. The pork had gotten a little tougher, but it still tasted wonderful, his wife's signature flavors of mint and garlic in every bite.

The way I see it, you're getting peak value for something that is going to eventually disappear. I'm not just talking about Alzheimer's. Once you go past sixty, memories fade at an alarming clip. It's what happens because the brain can only retain so much. Like all of our other organs, it's about usage. When was the last time you thought about your honeymoon? Honestly? The less you use, the more you lose. It's the foundation of how our bodies work. The health benefits of memripping, they're not some urban legend. You're cleaning house. You're taking out the garbage and putting it out on the curb, but here's the difference: you're getting paid for that trash.

It was a painless, quick procedure. All you had to do was remember what you wanted to have ripped while the machine was plugged into you. The surgery was completely automated and technologically sound.

Memory is free. Not for our clients, of course, haha! But for you, Todd. Think of all the new memories you'll create with the money you'll have. Our government wants to equate our enterprise to organ trafficking, but nothing could be further from the truth. You grow memory like a crop, and when you want to, you harvest it. Are there people picketing against farmers every time they cut down a bushel of corn? Of course not. It's natural. It's life.

"Todd?"

Sue met him at the sink. She reached for the dish towel hanging off the hook, but Todd angled his body to block her.

"It's just one dish," he said. "You can let it dry."

"You had a long day."

Todd wiped his hands on the towel and turned around to face her. Even though she looked prettier with her makeup on, he also liked seeing his wife like this, right before they went to bed, because only he saw her like this. Nobody else in the world knew this Sue, only him.

Though it was possible that wouldn't be true after the

memrip. But was that a bad thing? Was it so terrible to share his love for his wife with someone else?

Todd waited to turn off the kitchen lights, for Sue to switch on the lamp at the landing of the staircase. It was their unspoken routine to retire to their bedroom. There were many other small routines like that one, and now, as he climbed the stairs with her, Todd thought how wonderful it was to know another person so well, that this was comfort, that this was home.

TRIANGULAR BOXES. That was the shipment that waited for him when he arrived at work the following morning. There were blue ones and red ones and yellow ones and green ones, and each contained a like-colored chair from a Korean designer. Todd couldn't see how a box like that could hold a comfortable chair, so he opened one up and sat in it.

"Jesus Christ," he said.

Four auto-adjusting palm-shaped prongs supported him in ways that seemed impossible: his lower back, his love handles, and his neck. If he had his way, he would sit here forever. But he couldn't, as the whistle blew and the robots came to life.

He thought the oddly-shaped boxes might pose a challenge for them, but they didn't miss a step. The robots saw the way the boxes were stacked inside the truck, right side up and upside down, staggered to maximize space, and they replicated the exact pattern in the warehouse.

Manny worked in perfect tandem with his mechanized brothers as the morning turned into afternoon. Like yesterday, he went back to the forklift to eat his lunch, and Todd wondered if perhaps he used to run one of those. He considered asking him but changed his mind. If Manny did so before, he certainly didn't now, so what was there to talk about?

In his office, Todd dug into the brown paper bag of his own lunch and thought that today was very much like yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that. But tomorrow would be different because tonight would be different. If the memrip went according to plan – and he had no reason to believe it wouldn't, because he hadn't had a beer in the last twenty-four hours, hadn't washed his hair this morning, followed everything Gibbons had told him – tomorrow he would call up that travel agent who advertised in the paper and tell her to book the platinum romantic getaway to Paris for two.

For a trip, a goddamn trip, what a silly thing to do.

He could almost hear her say it. But she would be telling him as they were flying over the Atlantic in first-class seats. They'd never sat in those large leather chairs, only walked past them on their way to the narrow discomforts of

coach.

Sue had made him the perfect egg salad sandwich, just enough mayo to keep the egg bits and chopped slivers of celery together. As he ate, he took out his flexphoto to watch the twelve-picture slideshow from Uncle Patrick's wedding. Gibbons had given him the paper-thin disposable device, which was programmed to turn on just once. According to Gibbons, the worst thing a sourcer could do was overprepare, try to remember too much and turn an emotional memory into an intellectual exercise.

My client has been waiting seven years for this, Todd.

Each picture only stayed on for five seconds, but it seemed much longer than that when the first one came up. How was it possible that they were both so thin, so young? Sue was in a blue sleeveless dress. She was in attendance because she was a friend of Uncle Patrick's sister. She was nineteen years old, and Todd was twenty. In the picture, they were both in the frame, sitting down at adjacent tables as dinner was being served. They had yet to meet, and somehow that made the moment even more special.

Love at first sight. People say it, but they rarely mean it. My client has gone through sixteen memrips and still has yet to find a real one. That's why he's willing to pay big.

He and Sue dancing, his left hand clasping her right hand, his right arm around her waist, their youthful faces glowing like a pair of full moons.

I know the risk is more on your side, but you have to understand, the destinator also faces dangers. Emotional dangers. The disappointment can be so crushing that they often need to seek psychological and spiritual guidance. This client who'll be installing your memrip, he's got one therapist and two holistic advisors on permanent payroll. So needless to say, he's counting on you.

Their first kiss, and the angle showed Sue's surprise and delight. She was slightly drunk and so was he, but Todd remembered that moment more than any other, the warmth and wetness of her lips, the way they parted as the kiss transformed into a smile.

I know you'll do your best. That's all we ask.

The flexphoto blinked off, and lunch was over. "READY?" Gibbons asked.

They were in a dentist's office, and from the looks of it, not a very successful dentist. There was a leak in the corner of the ceiling, turning half of the tile brown, and the muzak that flowed out of the speakers was at times staticky.

Todd sat in the chair, his head tipped back and immobilized inside an octagonal metal cage. He couldn't see

the machine anymore, but he knew it was there, a black cylinder with a silver arm. At the end of the arm was a clear tube too thin for the naked eye to see, which would enter through his left ear, travel through the auditory nerve, and make its way to his brain.

"You're not gonna feel a thing."

"Okay," Todd said, and soon there was a whirring in his left ear.

Indeed, he felt nothing as the tube burrowed inside. The pills Gibbons had given him were working, too, making his eyes a little dry but calming him.

"And we're in," Gibbons said.

Gibbons slid a flexphoto into a slot in front of the cage, filling Todd's view with blackness. Then the slideshow started again, and this time Todd held nothing back. Uncle Patrick's wedding, thirty-two years ago, meeting his future wife for the first time. Realizing he'll never again remember this moment filled him with regret, and for a second he felt an intense desire to scream, that he didn't want to do this, that his memory was his and no one else's, but then the feeling passed.

Just buyer's remorse, Todd thought, and went back to the task at hand, which was to remember.

At some point, Gibbons said, "The buffer's getting full, so it's going to scrape."

Scrape.

Todd didn't think there were words that could describe it. Clean? Was that what it was, that he felt clean? But it wasn't like washing his hands or taking a shower. Suddenly there was a lightness in him, fresh, impossible pockets of air inside his mind. It wasn't an unpleasant sensation because it wasn't a sensation at all. That was it: whatever this was, it was the antithesis of something, but it wasn't exactly nothing, because the concept of nothingness existed in relation to a somethingness before it. What the scrape did was more than just remove his personal history; it removed the concept of history itself.

This should hurt, Todd thought. Something like this should be painful.

The next photo came into his vision, he and Sue at the bar, waiting for their drinks, but what had he been thinking about just before?

"Don't back up, just see forward, Todd," Gibbons said. "Let it go."

There were two more scrapings, and then they were done. The whirring in his ear stopped, and Gibbons unlatched the harness around his head. Todd rotated his neck left and right

and back again, stiff from two hours of stillness.

On the top of the memrip machine was a round clear disc, a petri dish, with just a smidge of gray matter.

PARIS WAS stubborn. While other cities around the world were busy upgrading concrete with organic alloys and replacing old street lamps with compact photon bulbs, this city looked no different than the way it did a hundred years ago. The stone bricks, the gargoyles, the wrought-iron fences, they looked like they'd always been here.

"Are you sure we're going the right way?" Sue asked.

Paris, at night. It was what she had always wanted, wasn't it?

Wasn't it?

These questions, these doubts. If only he could make them disappear.

"I think so," Todd said, walking past signs he couldn't read.

For a while things were fine, and then they weren't. Gibbons found a neurologist who was willing to examine Todd without notifying the authorities. Just bad luck, the doctor had said. You can never tell how these things will go. That's why it's not legal.

Memory is like a million little houses. Taking one out is like lifting a house from a community. Not a big deal, because you can just build another in its place. The community remains unaffected.

But some memories are like skyscrapers. If you're careful, you might be able to take away the first floor of a tall building and leave it standing, but never for long. Sooner than later, walls start to crack. Ceilings leak. It's just a matter of time until the structure groans and loses integrity.

You still have lots of houses, though, Todd. A strong, stable community. That's why you're capable of doing everything else, like your job, like walking and eating and enjoying a movie. But your wife will remain problematic. Even new memories you form with her, they're going to reference this skyscraper because the damage was so extensive.

I'm so sorry.

Just one more street, Todd thought. When he glanced at Sue, he saw the way she was favoring her left leg. Why was that?

He didn't know.

If only they could find their way. How could they be lost, trying to find the tallest structure in the city? It was stupid. It was infuriating.

"Oh my," Sue said, pointing.

And there it was, finally, having hidden behind a row of buildings on this side street. There was no buildup to their encounter: the tower was not there, not there, and then...just there, in its entirety, tall and strong and sharp.

And still far away. It would take another fifteen minutes for them to reach the Eiffel Tower, where Todd would stand with the woman he was supposed to love underneath the arch, holding her hand, and listen to the wind whipping through the girders