

Machine

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I didn't think it had worked. Although the machine had given me a thorough shake, there's no way it could have been successful. As if the jigsaw puzzle I was made up of, had been smashed to pieces and had been put together again with those same pieces. As two nurses came in to dry me off, I tried to catch a glimpse of my reflection, but the moisture of the boiling liquids that had exited the cabin next to me steamed up the two-metre-tall mirror like a poisonous fog. Pink and acid green vapour prevented me from seeing my own reflection. Would it show in my face whether I had changed? Memories raced like clouds along the summit of my consciousness. I tried to get a hold of an odd one, but seemed to be reaching into thin air; not able to focus, too disoriented to get a grip on my own thoughts.

I tried to call to mind what the patient information leaflet had said. I remember it had said something about painful joints, migraine, but what about mental side-effects? Had it said anything about that?

I leant heavily on the nurses who led me to the exit of

the cabin room. When the door automatically swooshed open the cold of the waiting room was welcoming. The background music and the artificial, yellow-ish light engendered a feeling of sleep, as if I was stuck in the vague moment before my first, concrete observations after a night's sleep.

'You can recover here for a bit,' said one of the nurses as I was lowered onto a bench. A blanket was draped around my shoulders, a bottle of water placed next to me. She smiled at me like a mother who sees her child arrive home with a graze: sympathetically, but not surprised.

The idea was to not only strip away all kinds of negative memories and thought circuits, but also to upload some positive associations and behaviours. The latter was a new feature developed by the Head Brain Office. The procedure had cost me a lot of money, but because it was so expensive I figured that it would work. That it would finally give me what I needed to take the next step in my career, perhaps even in my life. They always say: write about what you know. I had been doing this for years now, and somewhere along the way – possibly after my third book, maybe even as early as my poetry collection –, I noticed that what I knew was making me ill. Time and again this inward-looking drivel. Everything was so morbid. Interviews turned into tearful confessions about all the traumatic things that had happened to me when I was young, as if this would give my work more depth.

The sweeping, gripping stories failed to materialise; the grand poems, a magnum opus. I craved for new perspec-

tives, change, an evolved knowledge that would ensure that my next work would not only provide more insight into life, but could also be innovative in terms of style, rhythm, references. I had been fantasising about this during the Head Brain Office assessments, so badly that I already visualised the new word combinations and metres of my poems to-be, printed on paper in striking, fascinating ways, chanted by choirs or bombastic soundscapes, projected in the metro, reworked in paintings. They just weren't there yet. This would help, I'd decided. It had to.

What they do at the Head Brain Office is very simple. You are supposed to wear a device that looks like a small headset for a month during the night. As you sleep your subconscious is scanned. All your recurring dreams, thoughts, memories, the people and things you think of most, all this is processed in a file. Turned into data, percentages and numbers. This much of your thoughts is taken up with money. This much with food. About fifty times a day I was found thinking about the guy I had seen a year ago for the last time. Out of those fifty times, a dozen or so may have been me consciously considering how things might have turned out differently. They present these kind of readings to you in black-and-white in a folder, making the average candidate feel pretty humiliated. Even top scientists who took part in the first experiments with the Head Brain Modification Machine turned out to be thinking more about the most basic things than about quantum mechanics or political science. There are no exceptions. The interpretation of all these thoughts, however, the details, their specific

content, does vary from person to person. This is what the doctors are interested in. The Head Brain Pattern Machine then uses the content to map a unique, personally determined thought pattern. These maps are amazing: all sorts of colours, coils, circles, spirals and straight lines criss-cross each other like the lines on a map of the underground. I got to see my mother's once, during the early years of the Head Brain Modification Machine. A lot less well-developed than the current maps, but it still was a beauty. Lines running parallel. Large and small drops of unconnected intuitions. Meandering memories that had knotted themselves around associations. And there was that big black circle. This made me very sad.

When mine came back I saw a heap of spirals. This means I was part of the risk group, and was therefore pre-eminently suitable for treatment. Changing my living circumstances as a writer was not possible, but because I was poor and creative and showed mild mental instability, the Head Brain Modification Machine might help me to reconstruct my thought patterns and allow me to think in a linear or problem-solving way. Unnecessary traumatic experiences could be moved to a different part of the memory store and the free space reduced to prevent any occurrence of negative associations. The doctor had asked me which positive associations I would like to have more frequently and I wrote down a few: the time I brought my first dog home, finishing my best poem, that one amazing day in Rome, those kind of experiences. These would be moved more into the foreground. It was like analysing a failed recipe

and, using the machine, giving it a new twist which made it suddenly delicious.

Having been left alone in the cool space I began to feel a bit better. Perhaps something had already changed. I was very hungry, still not able to think clearly, but at least I was having less of an impression that my entire body was a cloud of dust stuffed into a bottle. I looked at the bare, beige wall opposite the seat I was sitting on. What was entering my mind? What would be the first thing I would be thinking that was now being processed differently in my brain? Perhaps I shouldn't focus too much on that, let it take its course. Just when I had wrapped the blanket a bit more tightly around me, one of the doctors entered. It was the woman who had phoned me to tell me I had been approved for the treatment.

'How are we feeling?' she asked before I got a chance to speak, sitting down next to me. She placed a hand on my shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze.

'Good, I think,' I said. 'A bit confused.'

'In what kind of way?'

'As if I'm very stoned.'

'That's normal. You will feel like this for a few more days, but that's part of these treatments. When your brain has calmed down again and got used to its new state, the rediscovery of your thought processes can start. A whole new you.'

I looked up briefly and she gave me an encouraging smile. This way it sounded rather celebratory. Like those shows in the past in which they gave people make-overs. I nodded at her to signal I had understood.

'We advise you to eat healthy for the first five to seven days: lots of vegetables, fruit, fish rather than meat, and preferably organic, fresh rather than supermarket. Drink plenty of water, avoid overstimulation with coffee or psychedelic drugs and under no circumstance drink any alcohol.' She handed me a folder with the necessary information.

'And then?'

'As a doctor I would advise you to live like this all the time, but I want to be realistic. You can go back your old habits,' she said, smiling broadly.

I shook her hand and got up. When she had closed the door, I started to get dressed again. Putting on my old clothes felt almost like a defilement of the new me. I had to buy some new things on the way home. As an exercise. A decent pair of jeans, a new jersey. I was already curious about what I would go for. Before the treatment I liked red.

I walked back the way I had come through the narrow corridor, past all kinds of closed doors, to the reception lobby where a receptionist with her Head Brain Office hat was scrolling through a Head Diary, her silver-coated fingertips stroking the smooth surface of the floating screen. There was an intimate quality to how assistants, business types, receptionists and other people managing Head Diaries played with those sparkling nails on screens, as if they were touching the keys of an old-fashioned piano without actually playing it. I said goodbye to her and stopped in the hall to catch my breath. It was not until the door of the main entrance slid open that I noticed how hard it was raining. It pelted down mercilessly on the pavement and on the glass

roof of the metro tube. I turned up the collar of my coat and breathed in the smell of rain. My first, fresh sensation of a new life: the smell of looming thunder.