

File 3471a/b

Elizabeth Shove, Caroline Shove and quite a few others

The crisp white sheets were so tightly tucked around my frail body that it was an enormous effort to reach the locker. I knew I didn't have long to live. The time had come to hand over the key and the terrible secrets of my life. My grandson bent down close so that he could hear my hoarse whispers. He flinched as I pressed the cold key into his pudgy hand. 'This is the key to ... the key to the hospital basement, you know where that is.' I looked him in the eye. Marcus is not smart, not like his father was before the incident, but there is not much I can do about that now. I had to concentrate on my words. 'When I am gone you must use this key to unlock the door. Go down the stairs and turn left. When you find File 3471a you will find your destiny.'

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I gazed at the grey lino floor. What was Grandpa Ivan babbling about now: a file, a basement and my destiny? I put the key into my pocket and sighed. I'd never felt comfortable in Grandpa's presence, and especially not since father disappeared. But family was family. I turned back to the wizened old man with the sunken eyes. 'Yes, Grandpa, I will do as you say'. I knew the door he was talking about. It was just a few metres from the apartment in which we used to live, and close to where I played football with dad, before he went mad.

Six weeks after Grandpa Ivan's funeral I made my way over to the site. I have to admit, I was curious. The main part of the hospital had been abandoned a decade ago and the grounds were overgrown. I pushed the brambles aside. The key made a satisfying click as it slid into the lock. The door opened and I edged my way in. The bare concrete walls of the post-soviet style structure were rough to the touch. A flight of stairs led down to what must be the basement. There was a penetrating smell of damp and something else, rank and mouldering.

Shafts of light from the ventilation grilles revealed patches of what looked like dark red graffiti but I couldn't make out the words. Ahead, a rusty metal door opened onto a long corridor. I turned left, as instructed. There were banks of identical greenish grey filing cabinets on either side and a light switch on the wall. I tried it and to my amazement an ancient fluorescent strip flickered into life.

I went over to one of the filing cabinets and pulled out a drawer. It contained neat rows of identical buff-coloured folders. I selected one at random and started to read.

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File 2841a

Surgeon: Ivan Wite

Donor: Stefan Sade, mathematician

Recipient: Gregor Bialy, labourer

Report: We are coming close to perfecting the brain switching procedure. The donor died, as is usual, but the recovering recipient shows significant signs of improvement in the area of mathematics and cognition. We are hopeful that the recipient's offspring will carry the implanted genes across future generations. Recipient returned to normal life, unaware of the procedure. Donor liquidated.

There were notes on the recipient's family situation, previous religious and political affiliations and copies of school reports followed by several pages on the donor's background. Inside the front cover

there were grainy black and white photographs of Stefan and Gregor, presumably taken before the operation.

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I opened another file. And then another. I began to feel sick. I knew my grandfather, Ivan Wite, was a surgeon and I knew he worked on a top-secret programme in this very hospital, but I had no idea that he was transplanting brains and experimenting with genetic modification. The donors' deaths were meticulously documented, but this was mass murder on an industrial scale. There must have been at least fifty files in each drawer, ten drawers in each cabinet, and hundreds of cabinets stretching down the corridor.

By the time I reached the serial numbers starting with 347, I was trembling. I was fast approaching what Grandpa Ivan called 'the truth'. I pulled out 3471a, and stared at a photograph of a man I knew: my father.

Surgeon: Ivan Wite

Recipient. Alex Wite, student.

Donor. Brian Sadek, physicist.

Outcome. Complicated. I took the file over to the light. At first it seemed that the procedure went well, especially the gene implantation. But there were complications when wiring in the donor brain. Instead of turning into a brilliant scientist, Alex became convinced that he was an antelope. I was born not long after my father was sectioned. I began to put the pieces of the story together. This was the family secret that had been so carefully guarded. Grandpa's botched operation had turned his own son into a beast and grafted on a genetic code that now ran through my body.

I was about to put the file under my coat when the light went out. I heard footsteps approaching, from the left and from the right. There was nowhere to go. It was a trap. I froze. 'We know you are there Marcus. No one escapes from the basement. Some try, but they don't get very far. A few traces of blood on the walls, a bit of a stain here and there and the lingering whiff of death. Your Grandpa Ivan gave you the key to your destiny alright! He knew I'd relish the chance to have another go. I promise you Marcus, I can do it'. My father gave a sickening, echoing laugh.

He wasn't dead. He wasn't an animal. He was here. I crouched down, shaking with fear. I didn't resist as two large figures in white coats put me on a hospital trolley and wheeled me through a maze of corridors. We went past more filing cabinets, past shelves and shelves of bottled brains, past the bricked-up entrances of what must have been the morgue, and into a modern operating theatre. The surgeon was putting on his gloves and mask, but I could swear he looked like dad. Could this be the man who thought he was an antelope? My father, or perhaps it was my father's clone, injected the anaesthetic into my veins and everything went black.

Apparently, I recovered well. Somewhere in the basement there is now another file - 3471b.

Surgeon: Alex Wite (Mark 2)

Recipient: Marcus Wite, student

Donor: Brian Sadek, physicist (defrosted brain)

Outcome: provisional success but expect significant problems in the next generation.

I don't know what happened to the key to the basement door. Memories of my previous life are hazy and to tell the truth, I am not sure who I am. I sometimes tell my university colleagues a few white lies about my family background but these days no one really cares, not even my son.