“In-House”

I remember coming alive. Human warmth did it, the tongue specifically. The friction from scratchy, tiny bumps softened the paper holding me together, relieving me of my confinement. I sunk into some tissue beneath the muscle, and then almost immediately entered the veins. I made it in.

Training must have been a lucid dream before my inception. My pre-birth thoughts are quite blurry. I had only learned how to form them a few days ago. The Centre randomly distributes inclinations, characteristics, and levels of intelligence to each collection. Luckily my numbers all marked above average.

Around one hundred pebble-sized tabs like me populated the room, all cut from the same batch. “Tabs! Don’t waste my time.” A deep, wise voice commanded the class. I don’t remember what the instructor looked like, but he introduced himself as Hoffman, a pseudonym for sure. I imagined he resembled a black scrunchie, with the voice booming from the center space. “Congratulations on your inevitable and brief existence. You are pivotal points for these humans. You represent that it is possible for humankind to alter their mental state. Be careful, my peers. Do not take your existence lightly. They chose to let you live.”

The voice walked through the agenda for training: the start of life, the common pathway, the trouble with memory, and the exit. I beamed with excitement and could feel similar auras around me. Hoffman spoke a meager two sentences about the start of life, assuring us we’d all be fine within seconds of birth.

“You will then enter through the cerebral cortex, where you will find a special serotonin receptor. Speed up when you see it, and hit it at an unexpected angle. Intentionally try to miss the center. This will force the receptor to close over you, like an eyelid. It will enclose you, and you’ll feel unnerved and on-edge, as if you’re suffocating, but no need to worry. It’s only momentary. The owner of that receptor will greet you and then guide you through various parts of the brain.” I guess the human anatomy had been pre-programmed into us, too, because I understood these terms and vividly pictured each neurological structure Hoffman mentioned.

“Now the fun part,” the voice oozed. “Memory is always where we encounter the most issues, but also the most impressions. The human memory is incredibly sensitive. It holds onto scenes and moments, ones that strongly impacted your host. You, as tabs, have the power to extract these memories and implant them into the human’s current view. Resurrection, essentially. With your touch and your optional distortion, the human will re-experience that moment.” A tab in the back sniggered. “Do you have something to say?” Hoffman demanded.

“You said we can distort the memories. How?” I could hear the smugness. Poor human, whoever absorbed her.

“Distorting occurs when you enter the actual memory. You won’t know it’s happening at the time, and when you’re inside the memory, you won’t realize you’ve left the common pathway. If, on the off chance, you are coherent in and not consumed by your environment, you can do as little as imagine a change and those thoughts will alter both the characters and their surroundings.” Every tab listened intently. “For example, many of you will see visions of love. Past, current, or hopeful relationships. You’re in the memory and look at the man, who smiles ear to ear while he gazes at his significant other. He’s delighted, infatuated, smitten. We can elongate that smile, though, and make his mouth stretch outside his shape, maybe give him more pearly whites, attach a zipper, and close him shut so he can’t speak anymore.” Gasps erupted from the crowd. The Centre clearly distributed a high percentage of compassion in this batch. “That’s a mild example, but you get the idea. Does that answer your question?” Hoffman called to the back.

“Yes, Sir. I’ll be sure to try it.”

“Sure you will,” Hoffman snorted.

“What happens when it’s over?” A shivering voice asked.

“You’re gone, dear.” The instructor must have felt the weight of the room. A lot of allocated concern, too. “You live to enlighten. You’re able to hyper-connect this fortunate brain together. You may dissolve once your work is done, but your impact will last. As always, look for the light. It will lead you best.” The voice clicked, and an automated signal took over.

“Tabs, your training has concluded. You will now be packaged up.”

Fluid drowned me as I searched for the open, V-shaped receptor. The brain smelled like black beans, and its overwhelming amount of liquid muddled my vision. I didn’t like this journey so far. My other senses darted in a constant 360-motion until a mild pulse caught my attention. This must be it, I thought. I channeled my energy into my momentum and hurled myself at the off-center target. I stuck and started to sink again.

A brilliant hexagon-shaped neurotransmitter greeted me with uneven arms. “Hi, I’m Sara. Welcome! We are happy to have you. Lucy, right?” I nodded. “We had another Lucy about a year ago. She did great. I think she was your equal.”

“My distant cousin, ma’am.”

“Right. You’ve completed the same training?”

“Yes, ma’am. It was quick, though.”

“Please, call me Sara.” She stood with a clipboard perched on what would be her hip area. With the pressure, though, her outline folded in on itself and created a dent in her side. While I studied her and her irregular structure, she also studied me. “You’re less colorful than the first Lucy,” she noted, strolling around my crystal-shaped profile, “more orange than yellow, and not as, um, radiant. However, the hints of blue should be interesting.” She reached out to touch me, and instead of feeling a limb like mine, her flimsy arm seeped through my neck, and I felt a cool, vibrating movement travel through me, almost matching the pulses from the brain. “Just checking your vitals, dear. Everything seems fine. Please follow me.” A check mark wrote itself on her board.

I moved through the fluid behind Sara.

“We are inside the central nervous system of a young man called Bennett. Today, based on our data, he is happy, optimistic, and eager. He also has traces of depression. It’s completely normal for the host, actually quite common. Luckily, he has had a positive experience in the past, and we hope to continue that trend.” She narrowed her eyes toward me.

“I—I completely agree, Sara,” I responded. “I’ll do my best.”

She led me through some folds, and then the frontal and parietal lobe, explaining their functions to pass time until I started to feel myself about to burst. Hoffman told us based on our human, that unmistakable feeling would activate within an hour and a half. It must be soon.

“So now we’re entering the Temporal Lobe,” she narrated.

“The memory,” I gasped. It’s now.

“What’d you say, Lucy?”

“The memory,” I repeated. “It’s what we concentrated on most in training.”

“As you should’ve,” Sara nodded, thinking deeply about her own I presumed. I guessed she has one, as do I. Mine is more linear, nothing to the extent of the human memory. It doesn’t capture depth as well, rather surface-level, black-and-white blandness.

She motioned for me to come closer to where she stood, by what reminded me of a clouded window. A window? In the brain? It hid itself in a mesh flap, an oval piece of see-through material that held a variety of colors. The layout resembled an M&M cookie. I looked closer. What I thought was an image turned out to be more like a Georges Seurat painting, thousands of shuffling dots coming together for a muted visual. I put my hand on the oval and felt uneven vibrations. The dots scattered in every direction. The oval blanked, now a dark shadow.

“They’re alive, you know.”

Around me were more of these shaded window-like concave crevices. By a pulling curiosity, I moved toward this small fracture in a fold. I couldn’t see much, but there was so much color, so I shifted closer and immediately felt enraptured. A woman with cherry wood hair cut a couple of inches above her shoulders leans up against a rusty car. We’re in the desert somewhere. I think the state is called Arizona. The ground resembles hardened clay and little green plants spout from cracks in the earth. I opened my mouth and there’s barely any moisture to speak. She starts running backward, hands outstretched toward me (me?). Her sweater flows back against her body. Oh god, look at her, she’s so happy. She wants me to join her, and I run, too. I run fast, catching up to her and wrapping my arms around her waist. She laughs and gives me warmth. Better than the beating, dry sun above us. Sustainable warmth, the kind I think you only feel from another human.

I keep holding her, arching her beautiful face up to me. I look at the floral prints of her sweater and they start to mesh together, as if forming one giant rainbow flower. The stigmas congregate together and create a sly crescent moon while the petals surround it, like a lion’s mane. I can’t quite make out the image, but I think it’s growling at me. A drum without rhythm beats in the background. Was that the growl? Her body moves away, and she dances in the middle of the open land, hands above her head, swaying back and forth as if wind guides her movements. She follows the off-beat of the distant musical cadence. When she pauses, she resembles a cactus, and as soon as I think that, her skin starts turning green and prickly. It’s gentle at first, almost flattering, and then it darkens and darkens into an uninviting forest canopy, making her look monstrous and ill. I rush over and touch the color, but the skin feels the same as it did before. She smiles, ignorant, and takes me by the hand. I’m dancing with her rough green body, careful to position my hands around the points, both of us flopping around like toddlers learning how to walk. My thoughts vaporize with her touch, and somehow we’ve left the reddened desert.

We’re walking on concrete now, at the edge of a city. I don’t know which one. A massive white boat with a red stern sits in front of us. Golden cylinders populate the center of it, and two masts hold up colored flags on either side. The flags wave like oscillating heartbeats and they grow longer with each gust. We sit down on large cement steps, and for the first time, I notice it’s colder. The clouds mute the heat from the sun. I’m wearing a winter jacket, and so is she. Her skin returns itself to its natural hue. She has on cropped blue jeans and pink sneakers without laces. Our knees tilt toward each other; they touch, and anticipation floods through me. I reach for her hand, intertwine my fingers into hers, and position our small, beautiful knot on my thigh. Two points of contact, and I want more. As if she hears my thoughts, she nestles her head on the outside of my shoulder and sighs, exhaling a long, heavy breath. I can taste apple cider when she exhales. I wonder if she’s upset, and I realize I want to kiss her. A few moments pass, and she hasn’t moved. I forget what the sun felt like in Arizona. I look at the undulating flags. Their ends have grown to almost reach the water, the ripples from one side extending into the other.

She looks up at me, finally, but before she moves closer—and I want her to move closer—she screams, throws her hands around my neck, digging her thumbs into my Adam’s apple, and then abruptly dissolves like dust, a mini tornado wheeling away from me. I only catch her eyes as she evaporates, sad and lost and pained, as if I had done something unforgiveable. I release my hands to the cold concrete. Why’d she go?

I’m back looking at the wiry lines of the brain. I didn’t even realize I had left. Hoffamn was right. It felt so normal. A strong, vigorous orange glow emanated from my outline.

“You’re scintillating, Lucy,” Sara said, calmly, and tried to place part of her figure on my shoulder. It sunk through me.

“Why didn’t she stay?” I asked. Misery overwhelmed me, the glow fading. I felt the blue parts of me expanding. “What did I do wrong?”

“Lucy, no need to be sad. Snap out of it,” her calm voice disappeared, replaced by one of urgency and force. “We’ll keep moving. I’ll show you the six layers of the neocortex to ease your color.”

Training warned me about this, I remembered. I control the state my owner right now. Look for light, Lucy. Look for light. I can be the light. “I’m sorry, I need to go back inside.” I turned around to start my hunt.

I rushed to find another cove of folds, all emanating various colors, some rich purples and canary yellows, others lavender and pasty whites. I chose a nuanced fold, whose shape mirrored that of a cashew, its skin a blend of neon green with highlights of pencil lead. I touched it and let myself melt into human magic.

An older woman, not the cactus woman, sits on a living room floor folding piles of laundry, cotton t-shirts mostly. A graying bun styles the top of her scalp and a red stained apron bunches along her waist. I move toward her and become eye-level; I must have sat down. Reaching out for her hand, I feel happy, but unexpected tears trickle down my cheeks. They form small puddles on the hardwood that begin to dance. She tilts her face to me, smiles knowingly, and starts to cry, too, dropping the clothes mid-fold back on the floor. Her hands cup her mouth, containing the oncoming sobs, and I hold her close to calm her breathing.

She snaps and grasps my wrist, then turns my face to stabilize eye contact. The veins in her eyes bulge and swirl around her dilated pupils, like vultures waiting to feast. She holds her pointer finger at me and says something I can’t understand. Despite her vicious eyes, I think it’s positive.

It is. It’s motherly love. The band from her left ring finger loosens itself and floats to me. It seems like hours pass before I catch it in my palm and close it tight. She wraps her hands around my fist, transferring an overwhelming heat. It feels like her daughter’s. Her daughter. The warmth begins to walk over my eyes, an orange crust creeping in from either side. I’m losing sight of her mother, but I want her to know how thankful I am, how excited I am, how much love I can give.

She’s gone (a silk flower closed around her topknot and lifted her to the skies), and I’m now with her child—her beautiful, glowing, mystical child—in wooden cabin surrounded by feet of snow. The snow piles halfway up the log-paneled window and Mother Nature gives no sign of ceasing. It’s loose and glistening, a white of the heavens, one that matches the color of the dress that the daughter wears so elegantly. She sits on the floor like her mother and has a red apron bunched at her waistline, finding comfort in the cool, wooden ground. She’s eating ice cream, loads of it, scooping her spoon into bowls that never seemed to empty; before she started eating, she unzipped half her gown. Leaning against the doorframe, I cross my legs and watch her in pure bliss. I’m madly in love. I think of flavors like strawberry sunrise, peanut butter frenzy, and marshmallow banana blitz, and they appear before her eyes. She’s mesmerized. Noticing my gaze, she pulls back her spoon and flicks a chunk of ice cream toward me. It ballets in the air, sprouting wings and antlers, and wraps around itself into a swirled cone. I take it in my hand, and we hold each other’s gaze until a window breaks. The mounds of snow funnel inside and cover us. I can’t breathe, but I’m oddly not worried because I feel her hand intertwine with mine. The air stops flowing into my lungs, replaced with ice and frost, and the memory darkens until I’m thrust back into the sinewy tract.

“You shouldn’t have done that, Lucy,” Sara cursed. “It’s too close to your departure to become so attached. What if he’s already lost her? You could throw him into an episode.”

I hung my head and trailed behind Sara, feeling myself retracting. The blues inside me emitted a soft glow. I felt depressed with an unwavering to desire to live in these dreams. I knew my exit neared and thought back to Hoffman. What if I ruined Bennett? What if his love left him, or died? I can help him bring her back.

We paused near Sara’s home receptor. In a monotonous and insincere voice, she thanked me and congratulated me on such a euphoric trip. “The dancing cactus, I’ll remember that one forever,” she laughed. I nodded, my muscles struggling to form a grateful smile. She turned and retreated to her fold, leaving me to wander until expiry.

I drifted with the pull from the cerebrospinal fluid, like an inner tube floating along a lazy river. In a haze myself, I hit a bump and glanced at the culprit. A throbbing teepee-shaped structure with sporadic air holes. It looked like a hut of injera. Out of curiosity, I used my remaining energy to nudge myself closer. Oh, god. It was the entrance to the visual cortex, an off-limits place for tabs. Gasping and physically fading, I pushed my eyes to its narrow opening, to see what Bennett could see. Through squinted vision, I saw her—the woman with cherry wood hair, smiling, enamored, right at me. I smiled back and drifted off.