



A meld of mind and machine, perhaps Professor Panini is too clever for his own good.

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- I could not get into it
- It was okay
- I enjoyed reading it
- I would recommend it
- I loved it

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Before my many years' service in a restaurant, I attended a top science university. The year was 2023 and I was finishing the project that would win me my professorship. In the end, it resulted in my becoming a kitchen employee.

My forty-second birthday had made a lonely visit the week before, and I was once again by myself in the flat. Like countless other mornings, I ordered a bagel from the toaster. 'Yes, sir!' it replied with robotic relish, and I began the day's work on the project. It was a magnificent machine, the thing I was making - capable of transferring the minds of any two beings into each other's bodies.

As the toaster began serving my bagel on to a plate, I realized the project was in fact ready for testing. I retrieved the duck and the cat - which I had bought for this purpose ñ from their containers, and set about calibrating the machine in their direction. Once ready, I leant against the table, holding the bagel I was too excited to eat, and initiated the transfer sequence. As expected, the machine whirred and hummed into action, my nerves tingling at its synthetic sounds.

The machine hushed, extraction and injection nozzles poised, scrutinizing its targets. The cat, though, was suddenly gripped by terrible alarm. The brute leapt into the air, flinging itself onto the machine. I watched in horror as the nozzles swung towards me; and, with a terrible, psychedelic whirl of colours, felt my mind wrenched from its sockets.

When I awoke, moments later, I noticed first that I was two feet shorter. Then, I realized the lack of my limbs, and finally it occurred to me that I was a toaster. I saw immediately the solution to the situation - the machine could easily reverse the transfer - but was then struck by my utter inability to carry this out.

After some consideration, using what I supposed must be the toaster's onboard computer; I devised a strategy for rescue. I began to familiarise myself with my new body: the grill, the bread bin, the speaker and the spring mechanism. Through the device's rudimentary eye - with which it served its creations - I could see the internal telephone on the wall. Aiming carefully, I began propelling slices of bread at it. The toaster was fed by a large stock of the stuff, yet as more and more bounced lamely off the phone, I began to fear its exhaustion.

Toasting the bread before launch proved a wiser tactic. A slice of crusty wholemeal knocked the receiver off its cradle, and the immovable voice of the reception clerk answered. Resisting the urge to exclaim my unlikely predicament, I called from the table: 'I'm having a bit of trouble up here, Room 91. Could you lend a hand?'

'Certainly, sir. There's a burst water pipe on the floor above, I suppose I'll kill two birds with one stone and sort you out on the way.'

The clerk arrived promptly, leaving his 'caution, wet floor' sign in the corridor. He came in, surveying the room in his usual dry, disapproving fashion. I spoke immediately, saying I was on the intercom, and requested that he simply press the large button on the machine before him. 'This one, sir?' he asked, and before I could correct him, the room was filled with a terrible, whirling light, and he fell to the ground.

A minute later he stood up again, uncertainly, and began moving in a manner that can only be described as a waddle. The duck, meanwhile, was scrutinising the flat with an air of wearied distaste. I gazed at the scene with dismay. Suddenly an idea struck the clerk, and with avian glee he tottered towards the window. I spluttered a horrified warning to no avail. He leapt triumphantly from the balcony, spread his 'wings' and disappeared. I would have wept, but managed only to eject a few crumbs.

Hours of melancholy calculation and terrible guilt gave no progress, and left me with a woeful regret for the day's events. Determined not to give up hope, I began to burn clumsy messages into slices of bread, and slung these desperate distress calls through the window. I sought not only my own salvation, but also to account for the bizarre demise of the clerk, who must no doubt have been discovered on the street below. I soon found my bread bin to be empty, and sank again into a morose meditation.

A large movement shocked me from my morbid contemplation. Before me, having clambered up from the floor, stood my own body. It regarded me with dim cheer.

'I have been upgraded,' it announced in monotone. The room was silent as I struggled to cope with this information. Then:

'Would you like some toast?'

The truth dawned on me, and I wasted no time in seeing the utility of this revelation. I informed the toaster, which was now in control of my body, that I wished it to fetch help. It regarded me warily, then asked if I would like that buttered. Maintaining patience, I explained the instruction more thoroughly. I watched with surreal anticipation as my body of forty-two years jerked its way out of the flat. It rounded the corner, and there was a hope-dashing crash. It had tripped up on the 'caution: wet floor' sign. To my joyous relief, however, I heard the thing continue on its way down the corridor.

Minutes passed, then hours. I entertained myself flicking wheat-based projectiles at the cat. On the dawn of the third

day, I concluded that the toaster had failed in its piloting of my body, and that help was not on its way. Gripped by the despair of one who must solve the puzzle of toaster suicide, I resigned myself to my fate.

Pushed on by a grim fervour, I began igniting the entire stock of bread. As the smoke poured from my casing, and the first hints of deadly flame flickered in my mechanisms, I began the solemn disclosure of my own eulogy.

Suddenly the fire alarm leapt into action, hurling thick jets of water across the flat, desperate to save its occupants. A piercing wail erupted from all sides, and a squabbling mixture of annoyance, relief and curiosity filtered into my mind.

Once the firemen had visited and deactivated the alarm, I was identified as the fault, unplugged and hauled away to a repair shop. The staff there, finding nothing to remove but a faulty speech chip, apparently put me up for sale. I only know this because, on being reconnected to the mains, I found myself in a shiny, spacious kitchen. Missing my electronic voice, I could only listen to the conversation of the staff, discussing the odd conduct of their new cook. The end of their hurried discussion heralded



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his arrival. I gazed at the door in silent surrender, as my body stepped proudly on to the premises, displaying its newly designed menu. At the top of the list I could discern 'Buttered bagel'.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Hugh is currently studying for a degree in Chinese Studies. He writes short stories in his spare time and also critiques regularly via Critters. He practices and appreciates the art of flash fiction. His favorite short story authors include Orson Scott Card, Fernando Sorrentino and Hanif Kureishi.

