



Going Back

an intense short story

Harvey Stanbrough

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To provide the reader with more of a sample from the actual story,
most of the traditional front matter appears at the end.

Going Back

for Jack Williamson

A few minutes after 10 a.m. four short days after Martin Andersen turned 76, he confidently approached the Age Exchange.

He reached for the door handle, then frowned. He stopped and stepped back. He'd expected something impressive. Maybe a heavy hand-carved mahogany door, or maybe something sterile and clinical, like brushed stainless steel, but certainly not this.

This was a weathered wooden door with a large window set in it. At some time in the past, the door had been painted green, but the paint was chipped and peeling.

He looked away for a moment to reset his mind, then looked at the door again and read the hand-lettered sign on the window. It still read Age Exchange. Then he glanced up at the stylized bronze number on the wall above the door: 119. It was the right address. The 9 was dangling and crooked. He shook his head and turned the door knob. When he entered, a small bell rang on the inside of the door. Quaint.

A young receptionist looked up from her desk. "Yes?"

"This the Age Exchange?"

"Yes sir. Do you have an appointment?"

"Oh... well, I called and... yes... yes, I have an appointment. Ten a.m." He began fishing through his pockets. "I walked from home so I might be a little early." He grinned. "Or maybe a little late. Oh, the name's Andersen with an E... Martin Andersen."

"Middle initial?"

"No. None. And I have the Longevity Affidavit here somewhere." He finally located the folded sheet of paper in his left rear pocket. "Here it is." He pulled it out and passed it across the desk.

The girl unfolded it and glanced at it, then swiveled around and stood. She opened a cabinet behind her desk and pulled out a manila envelope, turned and handed it to Martin, then gestured toward a pen holder on her desk. "Okay, I'll need you to take a pen and go ahead and fill these out. You can use that desk over there." She pointed across the room at a small desk and chair beneath a window.

As he moved away, she said, "I know it looks like a lot, but do me a favor and go ahead and be sure to read everything. It'll take awhile but it's really important." She turned and put his affidavit face-down on the combination copy machine and emailer, hit 1 and then pressed a wide green button labeled Send to Agency.

Just over an hour later Martin finished reading and signing papers. He put the papers back in the envelope, slid his chair back, stood and approached the receptionist's desk. He laid the envelope on the leading edge of her desk, then pointed at the door behind her. "Through there, right?"

She indicated the guest chair in front of her desk. "Not quite yet. I'll need you to go ahead and have a seat." As he sat, she picked up the envelope, slid out the stack of papers, and flipped through them slowly. Occasionally she nodded, and now and then said, "Okay." Finally she reached the last page, looked at it carefully, then looked up. "All right. Good job."

Almost imperceptibly, Martin shook his head. Good job? That was exactly the kind of condescension he was trying to escape.

She pushed her form-fit chair away from her desk and stood. "I'll need you to go ahead and stand up for me, thanks." When he did, she looked at him for a long moment, seeming to appraise him, then turned and reached into the cabinet again, retrieving a thick plastic package. She turned around and offered it to

Martin as she gestured toward a door with her chin. “Okay, see that door over there? Do me a favor and go ahead and change into this for me.”

Martin frowned. “What? But why?”

“In the back, when you go ahead and... well, you know... you have to be as comfortable as possible. That means no restrictive clothing.” Her gaze shifted to his clothing. “So no belt or suspenders, no restrictive waistband, no shoes... things like that. It’s easier for us to go ahead and provide this monosuit for our clients. You can just leave your clothing on the shelf you’ll find in there. So if you could go ahead and do that for me, that’d be super.”

He took the package, crossed the lobby to the small door and went inside. The room was little more than a large closet. The smell of age was in the air, as if the room hadn’t been used or even opened for a good while. On a shelf at chest level a label read Martin Andersen Clothing. His registration number was printed below his name.

Bracing himself when necessary by holding onto the shelf, he removed his boots, then his clothing. He quickly put on the monosuit, then carefully folded his clothing and put it on the shelf. Timidly, he opened the door and peered out. Everything looked as it had before. He pushed the door open and walked out.

The girl looked up and smiled, then went back to her paperwork.

“I... uh, left my clothes in there like you said, so....”

She put down her pen and looked up. “Okey doke.” She gestured over her shoulder with her left thumb in the direction of a formidable wooden door. In her right hand she held aloft his affidavit. “Okay, I’ll need you to take this. You’ll need to give it to the doc. Okay, so you can go ahead and go on through. Thanks, that’d be great.”

He took the affidavit and stepped past her desk but paused before the heavy door. He looked down, closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then he turned the door knob and peered in.

The room seemed dim, but Martin thought perhaps that was because he’d just come in from the well-lit front office. The scent was clean, not of antiseptic, but as if the room were devoid of odors and even dust.

A large screen imbedded in the back wall was flanked on either side by three smaller screens, arranged vertically. Beneath the bank of screens was a console, comprising a broad horizontal touchscreen keyboard with a few dials on either side of it.

In front of the console was a small form-fit chair. The only other adornment along the back wall was a potted silk rubber plant in the left corner. The right wall was barren of furniture or decoration, as was the left.

He gazed at the massive monitor on the back wall, wondered at the console beneath it. He was in the presence of a god-machine. Perhaps the entire room was a god and he was now a part of it, inside it, about to be absorbed. God in the machine? Man in the god-machine?

He’d avoided looking at the object in the center of the room, which he was certain must be the head of the triad, the core of the god-machine. It was the thing itself: the transference chair.

The chair was the color of a ripe pumpkin and smelled of leather and pine. It was shaped like a drawn-out lounge, with the leg rest, seat, back and headrest all one piece. Those were well-padded and almost a foot thick. Arm rests, also padded, rose elegantly from each side. Several pairs of wire leads retracted from the sides of the back just above the seat and just below the head rest. The whole thing was centered on what appeared to be a silver podium about a foot in diameter and a little over a foot tall.

He stared at the chair. Seeing it made everything else real.

He held his breath as if he expected it to speak.

When it did, he flinched.

“May I help you?” Unnoticed, the attendant had been sitting near his small desk to the right of the door in another small form-fit chair. He’d been reading the local news delivery on his MentaScreen. He glanced up and smiled, touching his temple to pause the program.

Martin started, but continued to gaze at the chair. He gestured with his chin. “That chair there... that’s it, isn’t it? That’s the transference chair?”

Still smiling, the attendant nodded. Calmly, he said, “Yes, that’s it. Will you be staying?”

Martin finally tore his gaze from the chair and looked at the attendant. He frowned. "I'm sorry, what?" Then he felt the door knob in his hand. "Oh... sorry."

He looked down, pushed the door open a bit farther, and stepped into the room. He released the door, which swung almost closed before the pneumatic controller took over and eased it shut. "I'm Martin... uh, Martin Andersen. I had an appointment for ten."

The attendant stood, his smile still playing around his eyes. "Of course you did. Back here I never worry about the appointment times. That's all front-office stuff. I'm concerned only with the actual event. If Malika sent you through, then you should be here. And how do you feel, Mr. Andersen? Should you be here?"

Martin frowned. "I'm sorry?" Then he grinned. "Oh, got'ya. Yes... yes, I definitely should be here." He gestured, then emitted a nervous laugh. "Well, and I am here, so that worked out pretty well."

"All right. I'm Dr. Morrison. You may call me Philip." He offered his hand and Martin shook it. Philip gestured toward the chair. "Please, make yourself comfortable."

Martin looked at the chair again with a kind of reverence. "It's kind of a big deal, isn't it? So I just sit down?"

Philip laughed lightly. "Yes, you just sit down. I realize it's a kind of threshold for you, but it also really is just a chair. Look at it as a place for you to wait while the procedure takes place." Martin nodded, and as he was settling into the chair, Philip said, "And you have something for me, yes?"

Martin looked at him and a light frown wrinkled his brow. "Something...?"

"Your affidavit? You were to show it to Malika so she could record it, but she should have returned it to you."

"Oh, sure... sure." He fished in the breast pocket of his jumper and offered Philip the folded sheet of paper. "Here you go."

Philip took it, unfolded it, peered at it. "Twenty-four years?" He looked up, his brow furrowed. "You're sure this is right?"

Martin shrugged. "It's what the doc gave me. Cool, eh? Who am I to argue?"

Philip looked at him again for a long moment, then smiled and shrugged. "Forgive me. Not often we get a fellow over 70 whose doctor will sign an affidavit for more than 10 or 15 years. I've never even seen one for 20 before."

Martin laughed. "Hedgin' their bets, probably."

"Well, people are living longer nowadays. Most of them simply enjoy those years for what they're worth. So... you're sure you want to—"

"Oh, I'm sure. Let's do it."

Philip nodded. "Okay... well, there are nine adjustable micropressure points in every square centimeter of this chair. That means it will actually adjust to you. It will even recline to what your body tells it is the perfect position, so all you have to do is relax. Through a series of leads, it will micro-adjust to every reaction it senses in your body while simultaneously monitoring your progress.

"Late in the procedure it will send signals to rejuvenate your body—or rather, to make your body believe it's been rejuvenated—but I'll talk more about that a bit later. For now, as I said, relaxation is the thing. Ever been hypnotized?"

Martin shook his head.

"Okay. Well, if you're the type who needs something to do, you can concentrate on relaxing each muscle in your body. You can actually feel them with your mind. Have you ever done a relaxation exercise before?"

Again, Martin shook his head. "No... never had the need I guess."

"Aha... well, it's really quite pleasant. If you want to try it, first close your eyes, then take three deep breaths. Inhale as much air as you can take in, and then release it slowly, through your nose, until you feel your lungs are completely empty. Do that two more times, and each time you exhale, empty your mind. As you exhale, visualize your thoughts moving down into your lungs and going out with the exhaled air.

"When you've done that three times, focus on the muscles at the top of your head or the bottom of your feet and relax them. Then move to the next set of muscles and relax them. Continue that way until you've

been through your entire body. Then start again. Soon you'll feel as if waves of sound or waves of warm water are moving through you as you relax.

"The important thing is to relax your muscles in sequence as much as possible. Let the relaxation in one part of your body flow into the next part as you concentrate on relaxing it and so on. In your body, as in the universe, everything is attached to everything else. Okay?"

Martin nodded.

"Questions?"

Martin shook his head. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Okay. It's all right to listen to the sound of my voice as you're relaxing. In fact, you can make my voice part of your focus and it will make things easier for you. I'll also be attaching the leads, and we'll go over a few questions. Just last-minute, pre-procedure stuff. It's all right to answer while you're relaxing. Just keep your voice calm. Oh, and you might feel a tingling sensation at times through the electrodes. That's completely normal and it won't last long."

Martin opened his eyes. "Oh, do I need to take off this outfit or...?"

Philip laughed. "No, that's all right. It's a special fabric. The sensors work right through it. That's one of the reasons we provide it. Any other questions before we begin?"

Martin shook his head.

Still smiling, Philip said, "Okay. Now that I interrupted you, you'll need to begin again with your relaxation. So take your three deep breaths and so on."

Martin closed his eyes and nodded. "Okay." He inhaled a long, deep breath, then released it slowly through his nose. He took another.

Philip hooked several pairs of the torso-level sensors with one hand and began attaching them. He placed three in an arc between Martin's left breast and his sternum and one more just below it. The electrodes seemed attracted as if magnetically through the suit to the skin underneath. An image of Martin's heart appeared, beating rhythmically, on the small monitor at the top left above the console.

He attached two more sensors over Martin's right lung, then two beneath his left arm to monitor his left lung. In a calm, quiet voice he said, "Now, you signed all the forms, right?"

He attached two sensors near the top of Martin's abdomen. A lung-function graph appeared on the center-left monitor, a stomach-function graph on the bottom left monitor.

Martin nodded slightly. "Yep. There were a bunch of 'em too."

In the same calm voice, Philip said, "Yes, we try to cover every contingency."

He positioned another pair of electrodes, one on either side above and toward the back of Martin's hips, and a kidney function graph appeared in the bottom right monitor.

On the large monitor in the center, Martin's body was slowly appearing. Most of the electronic sketch was glowing green, but parts of it were a light amber. Philip adjusted a set of slides on the console, increasing the power slightly to some electrodes and decreasing the power to others, until the entire sketch was green. Quietly he said, "So... you're aware the procedure can't be reversed, right?"

Martin nodded. "Right. But I can't imagine why anyone would want to reverse it."

"Right." Philip slightly adjusted one more slide on the console while looking at the monitor, then turned back to the chair, which had raised another foot and reclined a bit farther. He hooked some of the lower leads with one hand and began attaching them, one to each ankle, one to each calf, one inside each knee, one inside each mid-thigh, and one inside each upper thigh.

Martin's blood pressure and pulse appeared on the center screen on the right as his arteries and veins began to fill-in on the large monitor. Healthy areas of the vessels were a pleasant green. Where they were constricted was indicated with a light amber.

Philip adjusted a slide, then pressed a small joystick, releasing a substance transdermally through two pairs of the electrodes. The substance appeared pink on the large monitor. He manipulated the joystick, guiding the substance to the constricted areas. In a moment, those areas were glowing green. "And you know that once we begin the procedure, we can't stop it or alter it in any way, right?"

"Right, but why all the questions? I mean, I signed all the forms."

"Signing forms is easy, Mr. Andersen. People sign forms all the time without reading or understanding

them. The forms protect me and my company legally, but it's also important to me personally to know that you're informed and sure about what you're doing. Okay?"

Martin nodded. "Sure... but haven't we already begun the procedure?"

Philip attached the last of the lower electrodes to Martin's hips, studied the monitor for a moment, and adjusted another slide on the console. "Well, no. This is all just preparation. You can change your mind right up to the moment I throw the switch, so to speak. I'll ask for your final go-ahead just before that."

"Ah, okay."

After a few moments, Philip laughed lightly. "So the biggie... you know how all of this works, right? You know you get only half the years on the affidavit when you're on the other side?"

Martin nodded, but he said, "Y'know, it couldn't hurt to go over it one more time."

"Right. Well, for example, your affidavit certifies that, barring any accidents, your life expectancy is 24 years if you continue in the current time frame. You're 76, so that means your doctor expects you to reach 100 years of age here, on this side. Of course, you could live even longer. There's no expiration date on a natural life expectancy.

"Now we're taking that full amount, 24 years, off your current age, so after this procedure you'll be 52 years old for all practical purposes. However, your time—and you—will expire in half that time, 12 years later... when you're 64. So you understand that, right?"

Martin hesitated, then laughed nervously and nodded. "Right. Yes, I understand."

* * *

Over the past several months, Martin's major concern about undergoing the procedure had finally boiled down to that one factor: the difference between his expected longevity on this side of the transference and the certainty of a truncated life expectancy on the other side.

But even if he could live to be 100 or older on this side of the transference, what would be the quality of those years? He'd struggled with that question for months.

Would simply breathing for a longer period of time be worth the seemingly endless aches and pains that come with aging? Would he be able to endure the softening and eventual disappearance of his mental faculties? And he'd always been a proud man, owning up to his own mistakes and shortfalls and forgiving them in others. Could he abide the condescension and disdain, intentional or otherwise, that he saw and heard increasingly in the attitudes of others?

On a more intimate and personal level, he also wondered whether he was man enough to handle with grace the inability to act upon the natural desires that begin at puberty and follow a man to his grave. It seemed a joke on a cosmic scale that the sometimes stringent desire remained long after the physical ability had flagged.

In the old days there were only two choices: he could live a life of intractable mental, emotional and physical suffering as his manhood and his mental faculties flaked away, or he could seek the solace of suicide. He would never have chosen suicide—that was the last door closed by a coward—but now it was a brave new world realized, one in which he could trade his old self for a younger, more vibrant self.

And what was he really losing? He'd feel 52, but he'd actually be 76. When his time expired, he'd feel 64, but he'd actually be 88. His eyes still closed, a smirk curled the corner of his mouth. *Besides, who's to say I'll expire when they say I will?* He grinned. Without opening his eyes, he murmured, "Y'know, Doc, maybe you could slip me a few more years."

"I wish I could, Mr. Andersen, but I really have nothing to do with it. The whole thing is between you and your maker, as it were."

"On this side, sure, but on the other? Over there it's all just part of the program, isn't it?"

Philip shook his head. "Not really. Remember earlier, I said late in the procedure the chair will send signals to make your body believe it's been rejuvenated? Thing is, it hasn't actually been rejuvenated.

"We aren't turning back the clock, Mr. Andersen. We're just borrowing a little time. Your liver and kidneys will still be 76 years old, for example, but at the cellular level they will believe they're only 52. Same for your heart, lungs, all other major organs. Same for your muscles, tendons, ligaments, and bone.

"The point is, all your cells will function as they did when you were twenty-four years younger. That, in part, is why the program works the way it does. You trade-in your life expectancy—in your case, twenty-

four years—in exchange for half of it because, in the simplest terms, the increase in cellular activity causes them to wear out twice as quickly. Understand?”

“Yes, I get that. The only thing I wonder about is... well, can they really know the cells will shut down exactly halfway through the number on that Longevity Affidavit?”

“Well, no. They can’t know that, of course, and they don’t know it. That’s where the government program takes over. The tradeoff is an approximation.” Philip emitted a quiet sigh. “As you’ve probably noticed, the government doesn’t deal well with approximations where their programs are concerned.

“Everything’s impersonal, precise and unfeeling as a machine. For example, you forfeit your remaining social security payments on this side, and on the other you won’t be able to start drawing them again. You’ll be allowed to work again, to earn a living, but you have to pay an additional 10% Extended Life tax.

“Oddly, that was marketed and sold to the American people as a tax to help support hospitals, as if you’re being younger somehow makes you more likely to need a hospital instead of less. So—”

Martin nodded. “I remember that. Dumbest damn thing I ever heard. I thought surely nobody with half a brain would buy that stupid notion, but man was I wrong!” He shook his head. “That’s about the time I finally gave up any hope for our country.”

“Well, just so you know, I agree. The thing is, Mr. Andersen, when you showed up earlier with your affidavit, it went live. We have a copy for our records, of course, but all the entities above us have it as well. That’s why this procedure can’t be reversed. Once we enter the actual transference, the countdown, for lack of a better word, will begin.”

Martin hesitated. “I think I understand.”

“We do know that thus far nobody has self-terminated before they reached half the value on the Longevity Affidavit.”

“Self-terminated? So I get over there and then— I mean, at the end of my time I have to... you know, self-terminate, as you put it?”

Philip looked at him for a moment, and then his eyes grew wide. “Oh, no! No, nothing like that. No, we neither condone nor support suicide, much less encourage it. I suppose they call it self-termination because you’re voluntarily participating in the transference, which eventually leads to the termination.” He waited. Finally he said, “So... we should continue?”

So there’s no requirement for suicide, yet somehow Martin would self-terminate... but self-terminate, so no government hit men, no drones popping up over a sand dune on a beach, no laser from their spy satellites. An idea was beginning to form in his mind. “Oh, yes... sure. Y’know Doc, I’ve been over everything in my mind so many times already, and you answered the only question I had left. Let’s do it.”

Philip smiled. “Okay, only a few more sensors to attach.” He moved around behind the chair, above Martin’s head. “You’re going to feel me touching your face and head now. These sensors will feel a little different since they’re directly on your body instead of going through clothing, but the sensation will be about the same.”

“Okay.”

Philip gathered four leads in his left hand. He used his right hand to attach them, one each above Martin’s right eye, on the front and rear of his right temple and just behind his right ear. Then he gathered four more and placed them in the same positions on the left side of Martin’s head. A continual-scan image of Martin’s brain appeared on the small monitor at the top right.

Finally Philip picked up two more leads that ended in larger sensors. *I do hate this part. They all think they have it beat.* He placed one lead on the crown of Martin’s head. He placed the other at the base of Martin’s cerebellum. Then he put his finger on a small green button on the console. “Okay... we’re ready to initiate the transference sequence. Any final questions?”

Martin shook his head.

“Last chance, Mr. Andersen. Go or no go?”

Martin flashed a thumbs-up with his right hand. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “By all means, go Doc. Go.”

Philip had seen that smile before. He shook his head. “Okay, just relax. Soon you’ll feel like a whole new man. You might feel just a tiny pinch.”

Remembering what Philip had said earlier about using his mind to relax the muscles in his body, Martin closed his eyes more tightly, then caught himself and relaxed his eyelids. Then he thought of his toes, concentrated on relaxing them. He moved up to his feet, relaxed them, then his ankles, his lower calves, his upper calves and shins.

As he continued thinking his way up along his legs and torso, he drifted off.
He hardly felt the pin prick at the base of his skull.

* * *

Martin's brain handled the perceived regression through dreams and visions. But these were not the drab, muted shades of grey that usually presented whatever his subconscious was trying to work out as he slept. These were vibrant, filled with overlapping sensory information repeatedly folding back on itself and through itself, undulating, bubbling, pulsing.

All the colors of the prism in every hue looked, smelled, sounded, tasted and felt different from each other in billions of combinations.

In swirling streaks and splotches and stipples and clumps, faces and figures and films and pianos and cars folded into aromas and textures and squeals and squalls, laughter and black frowns, chuckles and sobs and giggles, flying fists, grenades, explosions, flowers and a crucifix effected with an automatic nail gun.

Vertigo took him as he rose and fell, stretched and shrank, peered at paintings and was covered in paint.

He melted into a charcoal drawing, a sketch, dried into chalk on a green board in a compulsory sentence being repeated a thousand times. Soft, broad, dark-grey flannel smoothed him into dust. He was clapped off the eraser, filtered into color, settled into tempera, and watered into clay.

Molded and squeezed around the latch on a door, he rudely received a blasting cap and exploded into silent, seamless space. He gaped in awe at the stars, knowing some of them were him, and smiled in the wholeness of it all.

Somewhere during his expansion his toes peeled away and his feet. Then his ankles stretched and drifted back into the stardust, still part of him but separate, becoming part of all but separate.

He fell and was propelled, grasped the leading edge of a light beam into comfort, warm and safe in the lap of the chair, but comfortably and continually inside-out in an endless descent, accelerating and regressing as if through a never-ending cushion of clouds.

His knees fired, jettisoned his calves, and they fell away, tumbling, melted back into the swirl of colors and sounds. All was beauty and flow, music and vision accompanied by the calmest sounds.

He forgot everything, remembered everything, was everything and was nothing.

He relaxed too far, remembered the chair. The chair was everything, the threshold to wonder, the bridge to his body. The chair was his body. The doc said to relax his body.

He would relax his body. He would start at the bottom and he looked past his waist and his expectations froze his mind solid. The tattered remains of his thighs were streaming out behind him, flapping like threadbare pennants. Penance? And a horror crept up them dragging the jagged fragment of a fleeting thought: They're going to scream!

He turned inside out.

Boys don't scream! his father said when Martin had found his pet collie lying on the front porch, her life draining away, her belly laid open by a cruel man's knife.

Safe in the chair Martin muttered, "Boys don't scream...." Never, even when it's clearly your turn to scream....

But I never taught my legs, my thighs. I never taught them, and they're going to scream. They're going to scream.

But they didn't scream. They read his shame, looked balefully at him and slipped away in shreds, mute and dissolving into the melange of his wake.

Then his hips started to go and the scream was suddenly his own. It clawed from his testes up through his abdomen and he needed something to grasp, quickly. Something, anything, to which he could cling. Something real that he could claim and keep forever, but there was nothing more than himself.

He hurtled through space among stars and bits of stars, his lower torso stretching away into the glowing, undulating flow behind him, and he clasped both mental hands tightly over his mental mouth and held on as his rational mind created Stop and Don't Stop. He flashed through Stop, shattering it into a million fragments. The fragments took on names, physicalities, and brought on the paradoxical fear of a sudden, jarring, explosive impact divided by a continued descent through gossamer fibers with no impact at all, ever.

Then his hands dissolved away from his mouth and silence ensued as his arms, shoulders, throat and head spun through a cloud of liquid nitrogen and splintered into microscopic shards.

Another himself, physically whole but fashioned of gossamer, plunged straight into a cloud, but far, far too deep and he began to suffocate.

Another himself fell and fell, accelerating, burning away without atmosphere, toes, feet, ankles, calves, knees, thighs, hips, fingers, hands, abdomen, chest, neck, and decreasing in size until—

The head turned.

The left eye winked.

And the whole thing blinked out of existence.

Millions of him were going everywhere and nowhere, shredding and exploding and shattering into ice crystals and burning into vapor and being slashed away and crushed into the ferns on a forest floor and crumpled like so much tinfoil. The fears swirled, folding into each other until any outcome was the only outcome.

With all else gone, he searched frantically for his mind, just his mind, and found it still there. Focus. Focus. Something.

He mentally closed his eyes, better able to concentrate with his eyes closed. Something. Something was in the forms. About focusing on a single object. But something outside. He strained to remember, focused all his strength in one direction, did a chamber by chamber, lobe by lobe search.

Finally, huddled in one corner of a mind preoccupied with fright, a small paragraph:

Focus on something external.

When you've released your physicality, there is only you and the universe. To avoid experiencing the extremes—a thinning and expansion of yourself into Everything or a warp contraction of yourself into a pinpoint beset on all sides by Nothing—and to know something else is out there, focus.

We recommend numbers.

Numbers! That's it! Time. Rational. Focus.

Numerals began to fade in from the blackness as others began as pinpoints of light, rapidly expanding and contracting as they drew nearer, then flashed past and receded. Some stretched through time, some squashed, compressed into planes or cubes or triangles. He practiced snatching them up as they passed, practiced calculating.

He grasped at a two and a four, formed a 24, designated it a period of years and went on. Twenty-four years. Eighteen years times 365 days. *That's 6,570 days.* Six years of 366 days. *That's 2,196 days.* So 8,766 days. *Okay, give or take. Okay.*

Okay, now hours. Eight thousand, seven hundred sixty-six sets of 24 hours. *That's 209,000 and— No, 210,000 and— Damn.*

But he had to get the minutes too, the seconds. So many passed without him even noticing.

His spirit faltered, struggled, strained and slumped. *No. I can do this. I can—*

Frustration flooded through him with a new fear. If he couldn't figure it out, he'd be alone, lost. Already the numbers were thinning out, fading, seeming to drain the colors with them, and the music swirled as if going down a drain. If he hit silence, it would be too late.

But there was no way to figure it out. His heart was pounding.

The problem. The problem itself was too evasive. Maybe because it didn't exist. Maybe.

Either there's something to find and he wasn't capable or... or there was nothing to find.

His mind filled with a sigh. *I'll hit or I'll miss. I'll be or not be. Am or never was.*

Much of him was already gone, after all, having peeled or flailed or burned or sluiced away during the descent. There's nothing left, but it's all right.

Calm settled through him. This must be what it's like when you know you're going to die. Must be what it's like when everything's finally okay. *Maybe lost is where I'm supposed to be. Silly, trying to think my way across the universe.*

Bigger than the universe. Much bigger than the universe. All empty, all falling, nothing to stop him, nowhere to land, nowhere to be.

Then he remembered the doctor. Philip had been there to see him off. *Gotta say goodbye to Philip. Must be light years away by now.*

Still, he rocked back his head and yelled. Yelling was all he had left. The sound of his voice would filter through the universe and somehow, someday, the doctor would hear it. *Doc, it's okay. I just... I couldn't figure it out. I'm gone. I'm gone.*

A tremor shuddered through his body in a rush and all the colors of the universe were back in every hue, swirling in endless combinations of aromas, sounds, and flavors, folding and warping into and out of each other in fluctuating, undulating planes and orbs, lines and arcs and circles and points and smears, blurring then sharpening to the paradoxical clarity of a perfect void in which there is nothing to see.

It shuddered, the tremor, and it slowed. And it slowed. And it slowed.

It slowed. And it stopped.

* * *

"It's all right, Mr. Andersen. It's okay now."

He heard me! The doc heard me! No... no, that can't be right. He's a million light years from here... a million light years from here... from everywhere.... Maybe he's God!

He shook his head, decided to try again. *Doc? It's okay... everything's okay. Doc? It's* "okay now. It's okay, Doc. Doc?"

Martin heard his own voice, opened his eyes wide, the tips of his fingers almost imbedded in the arms of the chair. "Doc! Doc?"

The chair was upright. Philip had removed all the leads. They were dangling from their positions on the chair.

Philip was smiling at him. "Well, look who's awake."

"Hey, Doc." He frowned. "I— I thought maybe you were— I was falling, Doc, and I thought maybe I wasn't gonna land and, funniest thing, all I wanted was to say goodbye to you. I'm sure it's because you were the last person I saw before I— well...."

He lifted his hands, looked at them, turned them over. "So I'm still here."

Philip nodded. "You're still here."

"But I don't feel any different. How long was I under?"

"Oh, not long really. Just long enough for the chair to establish your rhythms, clear up a few minor problems—kind of a quick tune-up—and send the appropriate instructions to your cells. The effects have begun, but they come up slowly. By tomorrow morning, you'll be 52 years old again."

Phillip hesitated. "Mr. Andersen, if I could presume to offer some advice—"

"Sure, Doc. Anything."

"Well..." Philip's voice grew soft. "Mr. Andersen, I've been doing this procedure for a long time. I've seen a lot of men in this chair. Just... don't try to beat this... the system, I mean. You're about to have twelve very good, very strong years, in exchange for twenty-four years that would have been at least degraded and might have been far worse. Understand?"

"Sure, sure. Hey, thanks, Doc. You probably see all kinds, but I won't do anything stupid, I promise. Hey, I consider this a gift." He rose from the chair and stretched. "I feel younger already." He grinned and offered his hand. "Well, guess I'd better get on with it."

Philip nodded, and they shook hands. "Take care, Mr. Andersen. See Malika on your way out, please."

* * *

As he exited the back office, Martin nodded to Malika and smiled. "Doc says you have something for me?"

“Oh, yes. I'll need you to go ahead and step into the room again,” she said, and she pointed to the door of the room where he'd left his clothing. “There's a change of clothing and a few other items in there for you. It's all set up. You can go ahead and keep the monosuit too if you want.”

He just looked at her.

She pointed. “In the room again for me? That'd be perfect. Thanks.”

As he opened the door to the small room, a light came on.

On the shelf was an oversized gym bag alongside neatly folded clothing that matched the style he was wearing when he came in: a pair of pre-washed jeans, a loose-weave cotton belt, a t-shirt, a button-down shirt, a dark brown ball cap, socks and what turned out to be the most comfortable pair of boots he'd ever worn.

After he got dressed, he unzipped the gym bag. Inside were his old clothes, cleaned, some other extra clothing and a small envelope. He opened the envelope. It contained five thousand dollars in several hundreds and some smaller denominations.

He stuffed the monosuit inside and zipped the bag shut, then looked around. The last time he'd been in this room he was 76. Now he was 52. He shrugged, hefted the gym bag, and opened the door.

Malika glanced up from her desk and smiled.

He raised the gym bag. “Hey, thanks. Anything else?”

“Nope. That's it. Have a nice life.” She returned her attention to a stack of papers on her desk.

Martin crossed to the front door in two strides.

The jangling of the quaint bell was muted when the door sighed shut behind him.

* * * * *

YOU'VE REACHED THE END!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Harvey Stanbrough is an award-winning writer and poet. He's fond of saying he was born in New Mexico, seasoned in Texas, and baked in Arizona. After 21 years in the US Marine Corps, he managed to sneak up on a BA degree at Eastern New Mexico University in Portales in 1996. Because he is unable to do otherwise, he splits his writing personality among his personas: Gervasio Arrancado writes magic realism; Nicolas Z “Nick” Porter writes spare, descriptive, mainstream fiction; and Eric Stringer writes the fiction of an unapologetic neurotic. Harvey writes whatever they leave to him.

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