

Wall of Delusion

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Scott Hague couldn't feel the microscopic nanobots tunneling through his brain, but he noticed their effect. Every once in a while it was like a flashbulb had gone off in his small cell. He would jump, startled. The brightness would fade, leaving the gray-blue walls, wires, and medical equipment. Sometimes he could hear noises that he knew were not there. Voices from the past. His mother, his father, an occasional old friend, and ... his dead wife. One sound that happened over and over, torturing him, was his wife's laugh. It was right in his ear --- he could even feel her breath. He would give an involuntary start, and turn to see only the unblinking eyes of the monitoring equipment.

The way Dr. Kline explained the nanobots and what they were doing, they sounded like happy little Disney creatures --- like microscopic dwarves singing "Whistle While you Work" as they tunneled their way through his brain, leaving sparking trails of connections. They were building a spider's web network so Dr. Kline could plug him in and peer into his memories. After they were finished they would die, or go away --- Scott didn't know, that part hadn't been explained to him. All he knew was that his brain would become compatible with Dr. Kline's computer network, and Scott would be reduced to a peripheral.

Of its own violation, his arms or legs would suddenly give a jerk. Out of nowhere, Scott would give a single hiccup. Once his vision froze, like his mind had taken a snapshot picture and that's all he could see. Before he could worry about it the picture was gone, replaced by normal vision. It was annoying, but Scott always tried to look on the bright side. There was a good 30% chance this would kill him. That would be such a relief. Scott felt he was the living dead anyway, he had ended his life as he knew it just a little over two years before. He had needed three shotgun shells, but fate had only given him two.

#

The clues that something was wrong kept appearing, sad

little warning signs that Scott had tried to ignore but never forgot. A broken shoelace on the bedroom floor that did not belong to one of his shoes. A blue bandanna between the bed and the wall --- where did that come from? Terri washing the sheets when she'd just washed them the day before. Why? Checking under the bed because he couldn't find his shoes, discovering a disgusting, dried up used condom. They hadn't used condoms since he'd had his vasectomy. Could it have been there that long?

Terri worked nights. Scott worked days. They had four hours a day together plus weekends. Scott never saw a problem with it until the sad little clues started chipping away at his willingness to ignore them. He didn't consciously admit to himself the reason why he took a day off from work and didn't tell Terri about it. He got up that day and prepped as usual, ate breakfast with Terri (it was her dinner), kissed her goodbye and left. Scott drove five blocks, parked, and walked back. There was an old 1950's car parked in his driveway, shiny and lovingly maintained, and Scott knew exactly whom it belonged to. It was an intern that worked with Terri at the trauma center, a cocky jerk named John Wahler. That quick? Scott thought. John must have been sitting in his car waiting for me to leave!

He crept into the house feeling like he was floating, feeling light and full of air. Like he was dreaming. He was detached, calculating, suspended in utter disbelief. Terri was cheating on him? Terri? A side of her he didn't know, his own wife ... they shared everything with each other, they told each other everything. He loved her with a conscious single-mindedness that he felt was pure and joyous. It had never occurred to him to mistrust her, to be jealous of her ex-boyfriends --- Scott simply accepted and loved her. She was it, his woman, his wife, and his life partner. How could it be otherwise with her?

The bedroom door was open a crack and he peeked in. He heard noises, and expected to see him on top of her. It was a shock to see them side by side and upside down to each other, pleasing each other orally. All he saw was Terri's black hair and John's hairy legs.

It was like a dark mask was pulled down over his face. The light seemed to go dim and his vision pulsed and flickered, the scene lit by flames. His chest hurt. Scott spun on his heel and rushed with terrible purpose to the hall closet, yanked open the door, and pulled out a long gun case. The sound of the zipper ripping open filled his whole head. He pulled the long, heavy gun out and then fumbled with his free hand for the box of shells on

the top shelf. It rattled as he picked it up. There were only two shells. He didn't think about it, he just chambered them with a reflexive motion and walked back down the hall.

"Scott?" It was his wife's voice. It sounded scared and startled. "Is that you?"

He heard scrambling sounds and rustling cloth as he pushed the door open. John Wahler was hopping on one foot, trying to get into his pants. "Was it worth it?" Scott said to him. He let go the first shell, a shocking explosion in a small room. Fire blossomed out the muzzle of the long barrel, and skin and blood sprayed apart from John's hairy chest. It slammed him into the wall, his eyes bulging. Scott didn't see him fall. He turned the gun on his wife, who was on the other side of the room, naked, her mouth wide open. She was trying to scream but couldn't get enough air into her lungs.

"Was it worth it?" Scott had to shout to hear his voice through the loud ringing in his ears. "Was it worth it?" He put the barrel right into her pretty face.

A few seconds after he pulled the trigger, the horror of what he'd done wiped away the rage of her betrayal. He turned and became violently ill across the gore-spattered bed sheets. Lying there, shaking, finding it hard to breathe in the smoky room, he bitterly cursed fate for only giving him two shotgun shells.

#

Scott pleaded guilty and asked for the death penalty. The judge called it a crime of passion and gave him 20 years. For the first few months in prison all he could think about was how to kill himself. Having all that time on his hands and a single thought going through his head was worse than death. I deserve this, he thought.

None of the guards or his fellow inmates ever gave him trouble. Everyone knew why he was there. It was as if the local gang leaders and the warden herself felt badly for him. It was the warden who approached him about the medical experiments. When it was explained to Scott that there was a possibility the procedure would leave him lobotomized or dead, Scott agreed to do it. The warden nodded to herself, as if it confirmed what she'd been thinking.

#

The FMA Center in Livermore was a long, four-story glass and brick building built in a semicircle, curved around a park with a fountain. From his cell window Scott could see the fountain; it was usually surrounded by medical personnel standing around in small groups, smoking their cigarettes. FMA, Scott learned, stood for "Federal Medical Authority." From what he could tell, the sole purpose of the FMA Center was for performing mandatory sterilization and abortions, and for conducting medical research using convicted felons. It was high security with auto-locking doors, metal detectors, and video cameras everywhere he looked. Scott never came in contact with any of the other prisoners. He only saw Dr. Louis Kline and armed guards --- and there were always armed guards around Dr. Kline.

Dr. Kline ran him through a series of medical, psychological, and intelligence tests. Scott enjoyed the intelligence tests, as they were all trick questions and it appealed to his sense of humor. He thought they were funny. He gave a little laugh as he answered them, which made Dr. Kline frown. Scott couldn't tell if Dr. Kline was mad that he was laughing or because he wasn't falling for the tricks in the questions. "I'm going to tell you the truth," he said to Scott. "I don't like you."

"I don't like me either."

"I know." Kline, who was a small balding man with a gnarled, graying beard --- actually more hair on his chin than on his head, so that his face looked upside-down --- he looked over the top of his glasses at Scott, peering at him with owlsh eyes. "I have strong reservations using someone with a death wish as a test subject. I prefer someone who hopes the experiments succeed."

"If they do, they do. If not, then---?" Scott shrugged.

#

The nanobots finished their job. Scott knew before Dr. Kline told him, as the annoying flashes, spasms, and images grew less frequent then stopped completely. The fruit of their labors was a cerebral interface that allowed Dr. Kline to connect Scott's brain to a computer network. The idea didn't please him, but he was resigned to it. Kline used the interface to load very special software into Scott's brain that would give Scott --- and Dr. Kline --- complete control and access to Scott's memories. Dr. Kline called it a "memory browser."

Scott closed his eyes and pictured something in his head, and there the image was on the computer screen. But also, Scott

could picture the image of a three-dimensional spring, thick and red, looking like it was made out of shiny plastic. It was the control for the software. If he willed the spring to spin counter-clockwise it would take him back through his memories, and spinning it clockwise would bring him forward again. There was a numeric counter that had no real relevance except as a reference point for Dr. Kline's notes. When the spring was red, Scott saw the memories as still images, pictures from his past. Scott could will the color to change to green, and then the memories came alive.

He saw Terri when she was twenty. Amazing how vivid the vision was --- it was like he was there, he was completely reliving the memory. They were at a friend's house, and she was being silly and childlike, rolling around on the floor and giggling, a bright-eyed, free-spirited dark haired girl. He was sitting at the living room table, talking to his friend's father, and she was there on the floor at his feet. Looking down at her smiling face, he slipped off his sandal and placed his foot on her bare midriff. She reached up and took hold of his leg, smiling at him, still giggling. It was the moment he fell in love with her.

Dr. Kline took control; the spring turned red and then spun counter-clockwise. Memories were dim, then bright, blurry then sharp. Scott's mind had recorded every moment of his life, but the quality of the memory was only good when there was some importance attached to it. The next bright memory was from a day or so earlier. Scott was sitting with Terri and their friend Leo at a white metal table beside a swimming pool. The image of the spring stopped turning, and changed to green.

Leo was a small guy, blond and skinny and always smiling. He was the one who'd introduced Terri to Scott. They were all dressed in tee shirts and shorts, a weekend during spring break. Scott had brought them all home to his parent's house from college.

Another one of their friends, a redheaded guy named Kelly, was over in a corner of the yard beside a birdbath. He'd had too much to drink and was now on his hands and knees, puking. Scott was drunk himself --- as were they all --- he lurched to his feet, walking unsteadily along the swimming pool, and knelt by his redheaded friend. "You're going to be okay, Kel," he said. Leaning over, he put his arm around Kelly's stomach and hugged, supporting the stomach muscles as they contracted. He held on, lending support, trying to ignore the disgusting sounds and smells.

Through the waves of alcohol, he heard Leo saying to Terri, "I could never do that. He's really strong to do that."

"He cares," Terri said.

"He's a good friend."

Scott felt lifted by the words. Proud. Barfing was a hard thing --- he didn't want Kelly to go through it alone. Besides, Scott had bought the tequila that was making Kelly barf. It was partially his fault.

The memory froze to an image, and receded away from Scott. It was no longer immediate and live. Again he perceived the phantom image of the spring, unmoving and red. He opened his eyes and saw Dr. Kline across the room tapping at a workstation keyboard. One of the two ever-present armed guards was giving Scott a strange look.

"What was the significance of this memory?" the doctor asked him. "It's very vivid."

"Oh..." Scott felt his face flushing. "My wife told me it was the moment she fell in love with me."

"The wife that you killed?" Dr. Kline said. "Interesting."

Scott opened his mouth to tell him he'd only had one wife, just one, just one damn wife. One. But he let out his breath. Why be mad at Kline? Kline didn't kill Terri. He swallowed his anger and turned it inward, self-hate like needles in his heart.

#

Alone at night, Scott lay on the cot in his cell and mentally fiddled with the software hoping he'd crash it and give himself a lobotomy. He would go back five minutes, then back five more minutes, then forward five minutes, then back again until he got completely lost in his short-term memory, not knowing if he was reliving a memory or in the present. The clue, the giveaway, was if he willed the spring clockwise until it stopped and wouldn't go any further --- that was the present.

He found he was reliving memories of reliving memories, and so on, and so on again, and he kept it up all night, hoping it would foul the programming code. Jam it up. Freeze his thoughts into some horrible hellish spiral. It didn't work, though. His memories of remembering --- no matter how compounded --- were just more memories. A guard had told Scott that this was how one of the other test subjects had died, going into a catastrophic seizure and expiring of heart failure. Unfortunately Dr. Kline must have fixed this bug, or the nanobots had done a better job in Scott's brain than they did in the other poor bastard's.

Strange, though. He was lying there, deep in his repetitive

memory review, and he suddenly got tired and annoyed and he sat up and said "Shit!" He got up and walked across the room and then back. But he realized this was a memory. He was in a memory. But he didn't remember ... remembering it. He willed the spring to turn clockwise but it wouldn't budge. He was in the present. It was like he'd broken out of the memory into the present without transition. He was disoriented for a moment, but it quickly faded. He brought the memory back so he could review it, experience the transition, but there was nothing strange about it ... it wasn't disorienting in retrospect. Except, oddly, the reference number readout jumped several numbers the moment he sat up.

Scott wondered what that meant.

#

It was early morning but it was already hot, because this was the desert and the sun --- even the morning sun --- was harsh. Scott didn't really notice. He was used to it. To a young boy who had only known harsh sunlight and dry heat, this was just like any other day: he and a friend out in the desert beyond the small Tucson suburb where he lived. They were looking for horny toads but found a jackrabbit instead. It was trapped under a board, and his friend was laying on top the board, pinning the rabbit down. It was brown with soft fur. Scott couldn't believe they caught it, and he reached under the board and grabbed it by one of its back legs and pulled it out, and it kicked like mad and scratched the hell out of his arm before he could drop it. He barely saw the rabbit run off --- he was staring at the long ragged scratches and the blood running down his skin.

His vision paled, receded. Scott became aware of the red spring and the index number. "How old were you here?" Dr. Kline asked him.

"About seven."

Dr. Kline tapped on his keyboard. He paused, peering long and hard at his workstation screen. Scott asked, "What do the reference numbers mean?"

"They're just reference numbers. The lower the number, the further back into your memories we are."

"How did you correlate a number to the age of my memories?"

Dr. Kline paused, then pushed himself back away from his workstation, swiveling around in his chair to face him. "That was a very astute question." His eyes narrowed. "Who told you to ask me that?"

"I was just wondering."

"You were just wondering." Dr. Kline sounded doubtful.

"Well, yeah," Scott said, "I mean ... memories don't seem to be sequential things. They seem to be haphazardly stored. And, well, it seems unlikely that they're stored with any kind of date encoded in them."

"No, they don't have any kind of encoding at all," Dr. Kline said. His voice was dry and deadpan. Suspicious. "What did you do, before you murdered your wife? You said you worked in a warehouse?"

"I ran an automated warehouse system."

"System?"

"Yeah, I lived and breathed FIFO --- you know. First in, first out. My job was to store things and keep track of the date they were stored, so that the oldest was pulled first and shipped."

"So, in your mind, you're trying to figure out the human brain and memories in the same terms you would storing packages in your warehouse?"

"Well, not exactly, but----"

"I see where you're coming from now. Okay. This research I'm doing, it's rather ... delicate. Even though you're the person being experimented upon I can't tell you much about what I'm doing and what I'm looking for. But I can give you an answer to this... The software in your brain is not accessing your memories directly through the hippocampus, like other researchers are doing. It's going through your temporal perception."

"My, uh ... what's that?"

"There's a section of your brain that controls your sense of time. I can manipulate this time sense to retrieve memories that were stored at a specific time."

"So even though time data isn't recorded with my memories, I have a section of my brain that ... indexes the memories in a, um ... sequential log of some sort?"

Dr. Kline was shaking his head. "That's what I'm trying to find out," he said. "It must be ... it's working. But part of my research is to understand how it's working."

"That's interesting," Scott said. He wondered if he should tell Dr. Kline about the way he was able to cause the reference index to skip numbers. "Um..."

"Let's try going back even further," Dr. Kline said. Before Scott could interrupt him, the image of the spring brightened in his mind and began spinning counter-clockwise.

#

Scott's dinner tray always came with a little half-can of Coca-Cola. It was never enough, and he figured it was part of his punishment. He couldn't have a whole can, only a half-can. And they wouldn't give him more.

In the silent, stale air of his cell, Scott ate his dinner mechanically and downed his half-can of soda --- an act that always left him wanting more --- and after he finished it, he replayed the memory of drinking it. He hoped that in some way it would be like drinking more. It didn't work, though, because the feelings of wanting were present in the memory. He went back again, remembering drinking it for the first time, then remembering the memory of drinking it. Still nothing. He went back one more time, and out of frustration he poured the soda onto the floor instead of drinking it.

He stared at the foaming puddle of soda on the concrete as it spread, wondering how in the hell he'd done it. The empty can was in his hand. He looked at it and at the puddle again. I changed my memory? he thought. That was weird. Scott tried to will the image of the spring clockwise again, but it wouldn't budge.

He was in the present.

#

"Of course it's possible to edit your memories," Dr. Kline told him. "We do it all the time, even without the intrusive software. I knew you'd discover this. I'd been expecting it any day now. There was a chance you wouldn't, and I was hoping for that ... that's why I never brought it up. But now that it's on the table so to speak, here's the deal." Dr. Kline leaned forward and spoke in a low, evenly measured voice. "With this software in your brain, you can edit yourself right into an impenetrable wall of delusion."

Scott folded his arms across his chest, frowning. He hadn't really figured Kline out as a person, his motives, likes and dislikes, his quirks --- they were all a mystery to him. But the words the man was saying, the inflection in his voice, the expression in his eyes ... it didn't ring true. "What do you mean?" Scott asked him.

"If you start going back and editing your memories, you will cut yourself off from reality and go into a catatonic state. It

won't help you or me."

"How would editing my memories do that?"

"It will change your inner reality and cut it off from outer reality."

"You mean, I'll be insane?"

"Yes." Dr. Kline fumbled with his watch. "Delusional catatonic. Completely turned inward. It's a really bad idea and I'm asking you not to do it."

It occurred to Scott that not only was Dr. Kline lying, but also he was frightened. Frightened for Scott? Frightened for himself? Frightened that if he lost one more test subject that his funding would be cut off? Scott decided to play it safe and appease the man. "Okay," he said. "Becoming a delusional catatonic doesn't sound like a good idea to me, either."

"Good," Dr. Kline said. "Good. Good." He nodded. "Good."

Throughout the rest of their session, Scott's mind was unable to focus on what they were doing. He just gave control over to the Doctor while he kept hearing the man saying "Good" over and over again. Kline must have been able to see it on his computer screen, because he kept giving Scott dirty looks. Something was definitely up with this wall of delusion thing. Maybe, Scott thought, that's my way out. Maybe it doesn't cause insanity as much as it causes some sort of fatal brain seizure.

He could only hope.

#

There was one glaring memory of Scott's that Dr. Kline never visited. Until today, Scott had no wish to relive it either. But after his session was over and he'd eaten dinner and downed his half-can of Coca-Cola, Scott turned off his light and flopped back into the cot and stared up at the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths, preparing himself for the trip. The image of the spring came to mind, and he turned it counter-clockwise.

He was taking a morning walk through his old neighborhood, up to his house. There was the old 1950's car in the driveway. John Wahler's car. Scott already felt the deep, black undercurrent of fury. It carried him into the house, down the hall, peering into the bedroom. His wife and John Wahler deeply involved in mutual oral pleasure. It was too disgusting for her to do with Scott, her own husband --- why was it okay to do it with this guy? That was it, Scott realized. That's what pushed me over the edge. His wife's betrayal was deeper than he'd thought possible, harder

for him to accept. Impossible to accept. Shut it off, his mind just wanted to shut it off.

The dark veil went down over his eyes. He went for the gun, the big old heavy shotgun. Pulled it out of the case, loaded it up. I was going to stop this, he thought. I can't stop this. It has to be done. The moment demanded it be done. Scott burst into the bedroom, more outraged than the first time, screaming and pointing the gun. "Was it worth it?" he shouted at them. "Was it worth it?"

"Oh god, no..." John was muttering, holding his hands out as if they would block the blast of death, like he was going to catch it. "God, no, please ... don't, no, please..."

"Scott," Terri said, breathless, her voice quavering. "Scott, no..."

He swung the gun on her, the barrel right at her face. "Well?" he shouted at her. "Was it? Was it worth it?"

She shook her head. "No ... no, it wasn't."

Scott swung the gun back toward John. John was shaking his head, still holding his hands out as if to block the shot. "No," was all he could manage.

The gun swung back at Terri, then back at John. No, Scott thought, it wasn't worth it. It wasn't. It never was. He lowered the gun, then swung it around, trying to figure out how to point it at himself. He couldn't do it, though --- the barrel was too long. In frustration he pumped the two pathetic, unspent shells out and dropped the gun on the bed. Looking up at his wife and her lover, both of them trembling and completely white, he said, "I'll be on the front porch."

He left the room, walking down the hall and out the front door. Sitting on the steps he took deep breaths, trying to calm himself. He could hear the two of them arguing with each other but their voices were indistinct. It didn't matter. Scott didn't care what they were saying. This was all just a delusion anyway.

Scott summonsed the image of the spring and willed it to spin clockwise. Just as he'd hoped --- and feared --- it wouldn't spin. As far as the software was concerned, he was in the present.

After ten minutes or so, Terri and John stepped fully dressed out onto the porch behind Scott. Scott turned to see John holding the shotgun. It was obvious he'd thrown his clothes on in a hurry, as his shirt was only half tucked in and his buttons were done up crooked. "You going to shoot me?" Scott asked.

John shook his head. "I'm just going to hang onto this for a while."

"It was my idea," Terri said.

Scott nodded. It didn't matter. "You going with him?"

"Um ... I don't know." She looked up at John.

Scott had to look away. The anger was welling up in him again. This really wasn't helping ... it didn't relieve his guilt. It was just some sort of computer-enhanced fantasy while he lay in a coma in his cell.

"You wouldn't have shot us, would you?" his wife was saying. "If we stay to talk this out, you're not going to hurt me are you?"

"Hurt you?" Scott said. He could barely keep the hysteria out of his voice.

She nodded. "We can talk, can't we? Or should I come back?"

"It doesn't matter. I did shoot you. You're dead." He laughed at her expression. "You're dead!"

"Maybe I'd better go," she said.

"You're already gone. You're not even here." He laughed, and it turned to a sob. "I'm not even here."

Terri and John shared a glance. John's expression was unreadable, but Terri's was full of guilt. "You go," she said to John. "I'd better stay."

"It doesn't matter," Scott said to her. "This is too pathetic for me to stand. It was a big mistake. I shouldn't have done it." Then he looked at her. "Then again, I deserve it. Nothing was worth your life. What I did to you was way out of proportion to the little betrayal of yours. I would have killed myself, too. I swear it. But what I really should have done was just walk away. I mean, I could have started over again. It would have seemed hard, but compared to what I've been through..." He turned away, shaking his head. "I had no idea what 'hard' was."

John didn't leave, but he did walk over to his car and get in, the shotgun on the floor in the back. Scott was aware of him, but he was nothing but an annoying little presence far in a corner, like knowing there was a fly somewhere in the room. Terri had taken his hands in hers and was bent forward, staring hard into his eyes. Hers was an expression of worry. "You haven't done anything." He looked at her and she shook her head. "You didn't do anything. It's okay."

"It's okay?" He snorted. "Okay?" He looked around him, as if he could actually see the wall of delusion --- as Dr. Kline had called it --- like it was a pane of thick, marbled glass he was trapped behind, unable to see through to reality. "You know, I

think you really should go with him," Scott said to her. "Just go, be with your lover. You were meant to be with each other." He pulled away from her. "Just go."

"I don't think I should," she said. "I don't think you should be alone right now."

Scott thought this was funny. "I am alone right now!" He stood up suddenly, and she backed away, startled. "I'm in a cell with wires sticking out of my head! You're dead. I'm stuck in my memories because the government is experimenting with my brain!" He laughed at her uncomprehending wide eyes. "Go away!" he yelled at her.

John opened his car door and got out. "Come on," he said to her. "You better come with me."

Scott turned his back on the both of them and walked into the house, shutting the door behind him. Once inside he stopped and waited. Why am I doing this? he wondered. What does it matter if she follows me in or not? He realized he wanted her to follow him inside, he wanted her away from that jerk asshole bastard. But as he stood listening, he heard two car doors close and then the big rumbling engine erupted to life. As it drove away, Scott wandered into the living room and sat on their tattered couch, staring at the wall with a blank mind.

#

Scott had never seen the front of the medical authority building from the outside. He'd originally arrived from the back in a secure bus, which drove into a secure garage area where an iron door slammed. Here in the front was the large fountain with at least fifty jets of water making a beautiful interwoven pattern. The pool part of the fountain and the ground surrounding it was covered with thousands of cigarette butts. White smocked people stood smoking and staring at him as he walked past and up to the front of the place.

Inside the front reception area, his appearance made a small fuss as it seemed no one ever remembered someone wandering in off the street --- there were piles of papers and files everywhere, Styrofoam cups, and Coke bottles. A gruff woman who was obviously not a receptionist said, "Can I help you?"

"I need to see Dr. Kline. I'm one of his test subjects."

"Oh!" She looked around as if she'd lost something. "Go sit down over there," she said, indicating a dingy set of gray plastic chairs, "I'll give his office a call."

Scott sat down and waited, wondering if he'd really thought his actions through. His mind was coming up with all this detail? He looked at the dirty cups half-full of coffee, and the dead flies on the windowsill. If I was deluded, or dreaming, he thought, would everything seem so real to me? He pulled a piece of paper off of the table in front of him and read it over. Then he put it down for a moment, then picked it up and read it again. It said the same thing, exactly. Scott remembered seeing a TV program that said if you were dreaming and tried to read, the words would be changing constantly because the words were actually just thoughts in your head. Maybe this delusion is different than dreaming? he thought. I am probably reading this paper for real, but I'm actually somewhere other than where I think I am. I might be in Dr. Kline's office right now.

Dr. Kline showed up, looking different than Scott remembered him. His beard wasn't as long. "You've trimmed your beard," Scott told him.

The doctor took a good long look at him. "Who are you?"

"I'm one of your test subjects."

"I don't think so."

"I edited my memory --- just like you told me not to do --- and I'm trapped behind a wall of delusion, just like you said I would be."

Dr. Kline's eyes narrowed. "You edited your memory? How exactly did you do that?"

"You know, the memory browser. The little spring in my head."

Dr. Kline looked around the room, his expression flustered. "You'd better come with me," he said in a low voice.

Scott got up and followed Dr. Kline through a secure set of doors and into the restricted areas beyond. This was familiar --- it was just like he remembered it --- but this time there were no armed guards trailing them.

"What is today's date?" Dr. Kline asked casually.

"I'm not really sure," Scott said. "I know it's March-something."

"What year?"

"Twenty-seventeen."

They reached his office, and Dr. Kline opened the door and motioned him to enter. Once inside and the office door was closed, Dr. Kline said, "What memory did you edit to get yourself where you are now?"

"I went back and un-killed my wife."

"How did you do that?"

"I threw the gun down instead of using it."

"Your murder of your wife is how you ended up here in the first place?"

"Yes."

"Have a seat," Dr. Kline told him. He took his own place behind his cluttered desk. "If you go back and review your memories right now using the browser, can you get back here to the MA building?"

"No, I can't. When I go back to the point where I edited my memory, it simply keeps going back earlier. And the index numbers jump by about four-thousand."

"Jesus Christ," Dr. Kline said. He was staring at Scott in what looked like awe. After several seconds of not saying anything, he suddenly smiled. "I want to thank you for coming here to tell me this. You've helped me tremendously."

"Is there a way to get me back to reality?"

Dr. Kline leaned forward. "I'm going to tell you this just once. I'm not going to admit to anyone I've said it, if you repeat it I'll call you a liar and a whacko. They'll believe me, too, as I ought to know what insane is when I see it. You are not behind a wall of delusion. You are in the present right now. The year is twenty-fifteen and you have not committed the crime that originally got you here."

"How can that be?"

"I'll put it simply. The time/space continuum we exist in is not a flowing thing. It's just a thing. Our perception of time is a feature of biology, not physics. By altering your time sense, we altered where you were in the space/time continuum."

"I ... I don't understand."

"You are where you perceive you are." Dr. Kline tapped on his desk with his finger. "If you perceive you are here, this is where you are."

"But if the space/time continuum is a thing and not a flow, how can I change it?"

"I don't know. That's one of the things I'm trying to find out." Dr. Kline stood up. "Since you didn't commit your murder, I advise you to go out and make your life a better place. If you show up again here, or start telling people your story, I'll have you committed in a mental institution and perform a lobotomy on you. Do we have an understanding?"

Scott slowly stood up, his eyes on Dr. Kline. The man was serious --- he could see it. "Yeah, we have an understanding."

"Good. I'll escort you to the door."

#

Terri showed up later that night. The house was dark, and Scott had all the windows open so there was a breeze blowing through the rooms, fluttering the curtains. He could hear the wind chimes on the back porch. When she showed up and said, "Hi Scott," he didn't know what to say. It was suddenly all different. He had a question to ask her but he didn't want to just blurt it out.

"John's not here," she said. "I came to see how you're doing."

There was just enough light for him to see her; a diffuse glow that flowed and ebbed as the wind moved a tree branch in front of a street light. She was wearing a familiar white summer dress. Her hair was up, exposing her long graceful neck. I killed her, Scott thought. I blew her face right off. I wish I could edit my memories, I could cut that whole scene out and forget it. Of course, it's still possible that I am --- even now --- behind a wall of delusion. But if I can't tell the difference, why worry about it?

"Are you okay?" she asked him.

"I'm better," he said. "I guess I went over the edge there for a while, but I'm back."

"I really didn't want this to happen," she said. "Things just got out of control."

Here it is, Scott thought. An opportunity. He composed his question for the moment, hoping it wasn't too out of left field.

"I need to know something," he said to her. "Is there a mistake I made, or something I did wrong, that caused this? Something that happened?"

"I don't know."

"Think," he said, unable to keep the tension out of his voice. "Remember when you told me the moment you fell in love with me? Was there a moment when you fell out of love with me?"

"I never fell out of love with you," she said. "I just succumbed to temptation."

"Is there something I could have done to prevent that?"

"It never was something you did or didn't do."

"Nothing at all?"

"It's more that you have a day shift and I have a night shift." She gave a low laugh. It sounded sad. "I'm late for work as it is right now."

"I remember," Scott said. "I remember the discussion we had, when we decided it would be okay for you to take a night shift."

"Yes," Terri said. "I guess that was our mistake."

He suddenly grabbed her, startling her, but he gave her a big kiss. "That's it!" he said. "We'll give that a try!"

"I don't understand," Terri said.

"It's okay," Scott told her. "You don't need to understand." He had his eyes closed, picturing the phantom spring in his head, and as he did he willed it to turn counter-clockwise.

[Oh man, that was awful! Get me out of here!]