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Ahead!

a short story by Ian Watson

Foreword

Ahead! first appeared in *Interzone* in May 1995, and was reprinted in the benefit anthology *The Best of Interzone* in 1997. My immediate stimulus for the story was an article by Charles Platt in an earlier issue of *Interzone* about how he has signed up to have his own head frozen. Personally I feel a bit dubious about this freezing of neomorts (the opposite of neonates, I suppose) -- or, on a smaller budget, decapitated heads -- to wish upon the future, supposing that the power or funding doesn't fail in the interim and supposing our descendants can unfreeze these bequests from the past and can reverse whatever brought death. Oh it's a grand old dream, going back to the time of the Pharaohs, not forgetting all those mummified cats -- but what might the future decide to *do* with us? Still, there's Charles five hundred years ahead laughing his head off at me as he operates a mining machine on Pluto and leads a rich VR fantasy life...

Ahead!

1: The Head Race

There's an old saying: it'll cost you an arm and a leg.

For me the cost amounted to two arms, two legs, and a torso. Everything below the neck, in fact. Thus my head and my brain would survive until posterity. How I pitied people of the past who were dead forever. How I pitied my contemporaries who were too blind to seize the chance of cryogenic preservation.

Here we were on the threshold of potential immortality. How could I not

avail myself of the Jones legislation? The opportunity might not be available in our own country for longer than a couple of years. The population might drop to a sustainable level. A change of administration might bring a change of heart. There could be rancour at the cost of maintaining increasing numbers of frozen and unproductive heads.

Until then, though, we were in the Head Race with China and Japan and India and other overpopulated nations. The previous deterrent to freezing had been guillotined away. Now no one was compelled to wait for natural death by cancer or car crash -- and thus risk their brain degenerating during vital lost minutes.

Farewell, likewise, to the fear of senile dementia or Alzheimer's! The head would be surgically removed swiftly in prime condition and frozen immediately. This knowledge was immensely comforting to me. It was also a little scary. I was among the earliest to register. Yet I must wait almost a month till my appointment with the blade. A whole month! What if I were murderously mugged before I could be decapitated? What if my head was mashed to pulp?

Fortunately, I was part of a nationwide support group of like minds linked by our PCs. To a fair extent our lobbying had finally resulted in the Jones Law. Yes, *ours*; along with lobbying by ecologists concerned with the welfare of the planet -- and also, I have to admit, pressure from certain powerful right wing groups (but it's the outcome which counts).

So whilst awaiting decapitation (now a proud word!) there was quite a sense of emotional and intellectual solidarity.

As regards storage or tagging of our heads, would a distinction be made between idealists such as ourselves -- and those who were incurably ill or who had despaired of their current lives -- and so-called Obligatories?

Initially, the Obligatories would be processed separately by the Justice or Medical systems. Would storage be mixed or segregated? This remained unclear. We had no wish to stir any suspicion of discrimination! Surely there was a significant distinction between idealists and non-idealists. The permission/identification form we all signed upon registering contained a box reserved for our motive.

Reportedly, the majority of idealists would be withdrawing from the world for altruistic, ecological reasons. Too many people on the planet for the

health of the world! These volunteers would forgo their lives.

Enthusiasts such as myself nursed more personal motives, although I would never call those motives selfish. *Immortality* is not a selfish concept but is a watchword of faith in the survival and advancement of the human race. Immortality treasures what we have been, what we are, and what we shall become in the huge aeons ahead of us.

In a state of considerable excitement, we of the Immortalist Network confided the motives which we had inserted in our box.

To share in the Future.

To know what will be.

To reach the Stars. (That was mine.)

To strive, to seek, to find.

Manifest destiny of Homo Sap!

$p = f_p n_c f_l f_i f_c$. (Which is the famous Drake Equation for the number of extraterrestrial civilisations out in space.)

Even: *To go boldly.*

And, wittily: *I want to keep ahead.* (To Keep A Head. Ho!)

In the future world, would our heads be provided with new bodies? New bottles for the old wine, as it were? The Forethought Institute assured us that nanotechnology was just around the corner. Another thirty or forty years, judging by state of the art and according to Delphi Polls. Eighty years at the most. Working in vats of raw materials, millions of molecule-size programmed assemblers would speedily construct, if not living bodies, then at least excellent artificial prosthetic bodies. These might be preferable to living bodies, being more resilient and versatile.

Even failing this, surely our minds could be mapped into electronic storage with the processing capacity to simulate entire virtual-reality worlds, as well as interfacing with the real world. Those who had despaired would be fulfilled. Idealists would reap their reward.

Ought criminal Obligatories to receive resilient versatile new bodies? Should their electronic versions be allowed full access to a virtual-reality domain? That was for the future to decide -- a future where the roots of mischief were better understood, and could be pruned or edited.

With what hopes and longings I approach the decapitation clinic on this my last day. My healthy organs will be harvested for transplants. My heart and kidneys and retinas will disperse. My blood will be bottled for transfusions. I imagine the anaesthetic as sweet, even though it will be delivered by injection. I imagine the farewell kiss of the blade, even though the anaesthetic will rob me of sensation. Farewell, Old Regime. Welcome, the Revolution.

2: The Head War

Smell, first of all, as the primitive reptilian brain-root re-awakens: an overpowering odour of hair-gel, though without any actual sensation of breathing. No lungs to breathe with?

Taste: slick and sour-sweet.

Sound: high-speed warbling.

Tactile: soft pressure all around my head. Otherwise: nothing at all, sheer absence.

Vision! Slightly wobbly, as if through liquid. There's a pyramid! It's composed of decomposing *heads*. Squinting sidelong, I spy another pyramid -- of whitened skulls.

And another, beyond it.

I must be hallucinating.

Or else information is being presented to me symbolically.

My viewpoint is rising up, disclosing yet more pyramids upon a flat white plain, perhaps a salt-flat. Ovoids are airborne. Eggs hover and dart to and fro. One of these floats close to me. The rounded bottom is opaque. The

transparent ellipsoid of the upper two-thirds contains a hairless head, surely female. I believe that a clear gel wraps and cushions the head. I must look likewise. Twin antennae protrude from the top of the egg. She's a mobile disembodied head. I mouth at her, making my lips form mute words. (*Hullo. What's happening? Where are we?*)

She mouths at me but I can't read her lips. No thoughts transmit from those antennae to what I presume must be my own corresponding overhead antennae. Her egg-vehicle begins to swing away. I urge mine to follow but it continues onward lazily under its own impetus.

Can this white vista, with its menacing pyramids and its hovering heads, be actual? How can this be? Surely my head is being used. What seems to be happening is not what is really happening. It is a by-product.

Of a sudden two head-vehicles rush directly at one another. They collide and burst open. Briefly two faces kiss bruisingly while spilling gel hangs down elastically. Moment later both vehicles plummet down to the salt-flat. There they shatter entirely. Both heads roll out, surely oblivious by now.

From under the surface, two mobile crab-like devices emerge. In their claws they seize the heads. They scuttle towards a fledgling pyramid. Clambering, they nudge the heads into position, upright, where I suppose they will rot.

The female egg hasn't gone away, after all. It -- or rather she -- is swinging back towards me. At least I think that it is the selfsame egg. Now it's picking up speed. It's rushing at me. Will we shatter, and kiss hideously, and fall? I'm terrified.

At the very last moment, my vehicle tilts. I'm staring upward at blue sky and high wispy clouds. A fierce blow strikes my base. Such a stunning shock vibrates through me. Nevertheless I'm intact. I haven't ruptured. I think I am sinking down slowly towards the salt. Slowly, slowly.

Of her, there's no sight. She must have broken against my base and tumbled rapidly. Overhead, a dozen heads cruise by. What grim aerial game is this?

Or is this the only way in which I can experience a selection procedure whereby worthwhile heads are chosen for survival? Whereby hundreds of

thousands are discarded?

Have I been selected or rejected?

Again I hear that high-speed warbling, as of bird-song speeded up a hundredfold. With a slight bump I have come to rest.

Sky and salt-flat and flying eggs and a nearby pyramid are fading -- until I'm seeing only... invisibility. There's nothing to see, nothing to taste, nothing to hear. Is this worse than being a disembodied head used as a game-piece by unknown forces?

Amidst this deprivation, for the first time in many years, I find myself praying to a force I scarcely believed in. *Dear God, help me.* Will an angel appear to me, coagulating out of nothingness?

All that can fill this void is a million memories of childhood. Of schooldays. Of my parents (forever dead, gone utterly!). Of first sex, first drug trip, first sight of the steaming teeming canyons of New York through which by night the roaming wailing vehicles suggested to my mind lugubrious monsters prowling for prey...

Presently my memories attain a vivid visionary actuality against the all-pervading nothingness!

I realise that my identity is being reinforced and stabilised -- and perhaps scrutinised. The episode of the flying eggheads was akin to a pre-uterine experience. All of those heads in the sky were equivalent to so many sperms surging for existence, all of them failing except for one, myself, being fertilised in that shocking collision and sinking down to become attached to the ground. Surely that was the significance. Maybe most frozen brains fail to reintegrate.

Now, like cells multiplying, my memories multiply until --

3: Embodied

-- *I am embodied.*

I'm aware of *limbs*. Of arms and legs and hands and feet! They're so real to me, as I lie face downward with my eyes tight shut. How intensely I treasure this moment. I cause my limbs to move just a little at first, like a beached swimmer. My fingers wiggle, and my toes.

I feel ampler than I used to be. I'm larger, superior, more muscular.

Arms and legs and -- *wings*...

Wings? Yes, great furled wings are socketed into my shoulders! Already I'm sensing which new muscles to flex so as to use my amazing wings. These wings are why I am lying face downward and not upon my back; otherwise I would crush my wings uncomfortably.

Wings? Wings? A body with wings? Now I do open my eyes in wonder.

A veil of tiny flies fills the air, flitting around me like a myriad airborne workers around some vast construction project, which is myself. I have arisen. My new body is golden, ambery, its fabric not of flesh but of some flexible responsive robust plastic -- inorganic yet endowed with organic performance.

This is a substance for which there is no word, since it never existed previously. Perhaps *protoplast* is a suitable term. Undoubtedly energy cells, charged by sunlight, are woven throughout my new skin, powering inner engines which can defy the thrall of gravity -- else how, when I unfurl my wings, do I rise and hover like some colossal deity of this cloud of flies? The wings must be of some ingenious anti-gravitic bio-technology, to uplift my weight.

My head is still enclosed in a protective helmet. My new golden winged body is an ingenious prosthetic device sustaining and serving my natural head, in perfect harmony with my head.

Those flies are beginning to disperse, as if wafted away by my slow wingbeats. The veil is thinning -- except over to my right. There, a dense cloud of flies begins to vibrate audibly. Vibrations become a voice, announcing my task...

4: The Colossi

There has been a *nanocatastrophe*.

The Forethought Institute were correct in their promise of rampant nanotechnology transforming the world. (How, otherwise, could I possess this angelic body, golden and winged and of miracle substance? How else would this body interface with my head of flesh and bone and blood and brain-cells, sustaining and obeying and augmenting me?) Alas, the whole world is as smooth as a billiard ball. Farewell to mountains and valleys. Farewell to forests and seas. Farewell, likewise, to all the species of fish, flesh, and fowl which once inhabited sea or land. Farewell to all plants and fungi and bacteria.

Due to the nanocatastrophe nothing remained of life except for these sealed frozen heads of ours, preserved perfectly -- as if the human race had intuited the need for such a global insurance policy in the event of a nanoplague.

When I say that the planet is smooth and perfectly spherical I am omitting to mention the thousand equidistant colossi which rise from the surface. Seen from space, under modest magnification, the colossi might seem like so many individual whiskers upon a huge chin, or like so many stiff short freak hairs upon an otherwise gleaming bald head -- few and far between, and exactly spaced.

Seen from the ground -- or whilst hovering with our wings -- each colossus towers vastly and baroquely up through the clouds. Some are still under construction by the untold trillions of mobile microscopic nano-assemblers, or by larger macro-machines forever being assembled and disassembled. Other colossi are almost complete, soaring to their designed height of ten kilometres.

Rooted by deep thermal spikes which exploit the inner heat of the planet, these colossi are *ships*. When the construction is completed, their matrix-engines will all activate in unison. This will generate a global matrix-field. As the world implodes towards a vanishing point, all of the thousand great ornate darts will be translated outward simultaneously through the cosmic matrix -- not to mere stars in our own galaxy, but each to the vicinity of some planet roughly similar to Earth but in a different galaxy millions or

tens of millions of light years away.

This is the Project for which the world was smoothed flat, erasing all life in the process, except for our preserved heads. Expansion throughout the universe!

5: *But...*

But even at speeds far slower than that of light, surely nanos in tiny vessels could reach the furthest part of our own galaxy within, say, twenty million years at most. They could arrive in other galaxies within a hundred million years. The universe is due to endure for *fifty times longer than that*. At least!

Why the urgency? Why convert the entire Earth into a catapult which will destroy itself?

The pace of activity of microscopic nanos must be far faster than that of creatures such as Man (and Woman) -- yet why could the nanos not become dormant en route to the stars, like spores, simply switching themselves off?

The reason for their hurry provides an answer to the *Von Neuman Enigma* -- as I discover in conversation with another golden Angel nine kilometres up the ship to which we are both assigned.

The Von Neuman Enigma: If life already arose anywhere in the universe and sent out self-replicating probes, why is the universe not already full of probes? In the whole of the cosmos did adventurous, intelligent life only ever arise on one single planet, Earth?

My companion and I soar on thermals, ascending alongside the ship. We arrive at a platform in the stratosphere. With our robust bodies of protoplast we are to assist macro-machines to construct a spire which will support yet another tier of the colossus.

My companion is Hispanic. With bald tan head enshrined in transparent holder fixed upon golden body -- and his wings folded dorsally from shoulders down to knees now that we had arrived high above the clouds -- he is magnificent. Daunting.

After some labour we rest... not that our new bodies ever became fatigued. We do not sleep, though we might daydream while we absorb nutrition through valves in our ankles. Nanos in our heads repair any physical degeneration. A device in our throats permits us to speak aloud.

"What year do you think this is?" I ask my colleague.

"The Year Zero," he replies. His comment makes sense. All human history has vanished except for what we each remember. The time of the nanocatastrophe constitutes an absolute gulf between *before* and *now*.

I broach the matter of the Von Neuman Enigma, which bothered me even in the old days.

"The answer," he declares, "is that the Hayflick Limit applies to all social entities as well as to individual organisms." Such is the profound conversation of angels!

But of course, but of course...!

The bugbear of the damned *Hayflick Limit* used to torment me. Body cells only replace themselves a finite number of times before the process fails. For human beings this limit is seventy times or thereabouts. Then comes decay and death.

"The Hayflick Limit also applies," says this Hispanic angel, "to the Congregation of Nanos. Social entities such as civilisations obey the same limiting constraint as the cells in bodies -- a law as binding as entropy. No matter how well the nanos stabilise their collective activity, over a period of millions of years this would lose all coherence."

"Collectively they would suffer entropy..."

"Exactly so!" he tells me. "With our slower thoughts, we serve as an anchor -- as the *root* from which they arose. Their source and origin. We are their touchstone and criterion. Their pacemaker, their talisman. Furthermore, in an important sense we provide purpose. People uniquely

possess a sense of far-reaching purpose -- because that is our nature. This is true even if only one person remains in existence, provided that he never yields to despair."

In the terms of a ship (for the Colossi are certainly ships) we are, quite literally, to be --

6: Figureheads

-- figureheads, no less!

At the very summit of each colossus, protected by a cone of energy, right there at the tip of the ship, one of us will ride head-first.

On a thousand colossal ships a thousand proud heads (attached to protoplast bodies) will each gaze upon a new galaxy, and a new world similar to Earth.

Translation through the matrix will ensure comparability -- similarity as regards mass and diameter and distance from a star which will closely resemble Earth's own sun. The planet in question *might* be barren, or be at boiling point due to greenhouse gases, or be an ice-desert. Yet surely hundreds may be habitats of some kind of life, or potential for life; for cosmic companionship.

This, mine eyes shall behold...

A thousand ships, a thousand heads! What if more than a thousand heads still survive?

At this moment the Hispanic angel launches himself at me.

How we wrestle. How well-matched we are.

Our struggle ranges to and fro across this uppermost platform. Will he try to butt my helmet with his own, to crack it open if he can? When I realise that he has no intention of risking this, I am less cautious in my grips and clutches.

Pulling free and half-turning, he unfurls his wings to buffet and batter me. I punch with all the force of my golden fist at the base of one wing... which sags, which droops! I have fractured the attachment.

We are at the edge of the platform, where a thin breeze streams by. Gathering myself -- and against all former human instinct -- I hurtle against him, carrying him over the side along with myself.

For a moment, as we fall, he can't free an arm to grasp me. In that moment I deploy my own wings and release him.

Down, down he drops, crippled, spinning single-winged, accelerating willy-nilly. Nine kilometres he will fall to the billiard-ball ground. I'm alone upon the ship except for machines and invisible nanos.

7: Triumph

The Project is complete at last.

I stand erect, the very pinnacle of the galaxy-ship. No thunderous surge of acceleration will raise this colossus upon a column of fire. When the matrix-field activates world-wide -- when the smooth ball of the world begins to implode -- translation will occur instantaneously.

Even so, like a swimmer upon the highest diving board I raise my golden arms above my bottled head, palms pressed together steeple-style as if to leap and cleave the heavens.

Do my nine hundred and ninety-nine brothers and sisters likewise signal their imminent departure?

A humming vibration commences.

8: Fulfilment

Lakes of brilliant stars! A ball of blinding yellow light which is the local

sun! Its radiance illuminates a full hemisphere of another nearby ball -- a world white with clouds and blue with ocean, mottled with land-masses.

Earthlike. Similar...

Maybe the oceans and the land are sterile. Maybe not. To stare from space at this spectacle is to be Columbus and Cortez and Captain Cook all in one. I may be ten million light years away from my birthplace. Or a hundred million. This, in itself, is an ultimate achievement.

All because I dared to be decapitated!

Within a day or so, my colossus will be in orbit -- like some titanic statue equipped with a tiny living head. I assume that the nanos will reshape the ship into hundreds of gliding wings which will descend. I presume that provision will be made for me.

Or what purpose could there be?

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