

## SECOND CHANCE

### Philip Rainford

Arthur Baldwin was dying. His body was finally surrendering after seventy tortuous years of living. He had lived hard and fast, seeing the last fifty years of the 20th Century and nearly a quarter of the 21st. He could almost feel his body closing down, a cell at a time. He could imagine each organ giving its last gasp.

He lay in a hospital bed, his mind the only part of his body still functioning at peak efficiency. He felt heavy, weighted down with age, without the energy or the will to move, his body feeling as if it was held down by some invisible force.

When his wife was there, it was an effort to speak. Yet there was so much he wanted to say, that he had never found time to in their 48 years of marriage. She had simply been there at his side, supporting him, backing him, there when he needed her, as she was now sitting vigil at his bedside.

She had gone for some lunch. It was a relief to be alone, not having to speak or make the effort, but he also felt it was time lost, time that he didn't have to spare.

He stared at the ceiling which he knew intimately. It had been his friend for several months, offering a blank screen for his thoughts which kept his mind active. Even as death approached, he could not stop his thirst for knowledge and sifted through permutations of equations that might reveal new truths to him. His greatest fear was to discover a new truth and die before he could leave it behind;

"Arthur? Are you awake?"

The familiar voice broke into his thoughts and he painfully opened his eyes. It was Bob. He felt a boost to see a young face, one that was not decked out in medical attire and fussing over him.

"Arthur. We've done it!"

Bob seemed so excited, but it took Arthur a moment to remember "The Project" and the role he had played in its development. Bob sat down and explained the progress then outlined a proposition.

His enthusiasm washed over Arthur, but failed to remove the growing fatigue this visit was creating within him. Arthur lay weakly in the bed resisting the urge to sleep. He didn't want Bob to go as this was the first real conversation he'd had for months.

"We need you Arthur. Anyone else would require exhaustive preparations and training to ensure their psychological readiness for "salvage". Then we would have to wait for them to die. You know "The Project" as well as anyone and are aware of what is involved. There would be no delay and ....." he hesitated. "....You have nothing to lose."

Bob left and Arthur waited for his wife to return. If it worked, they would have a second chance. They would have that time together. Even if he was a guinea pig.

Mirna Baldwin was 75 years old. Her only desire in life was to be with her husband. She was prepared for his departure and cherished every moment she had left with him. Beyond that she had no purpose in living.

She had always been fitter and healthier than Arthur and looked many years younger. In fact she was five years older. Her illness, however, was just as fatal as Arthur's - loneliness. She could linger on for years or go in her sleep tomorrow.

Arthur had slowly wasted away. When he was young and strong; full of energy, dreams, and aspirations. He was going places, driven by an all-consuming passion to succeed. There was no time to think about keeping fit. He had since become the world's most well-known and respected mathematician and computer programmer.

When he told her of the proposition, she was shocked. Her plans of quietly dying after he'd gone were now shattered and her future seemed new and uncertain. She listened sympathetically as he explained. As always, she urged him on, not wishing to stand in his way. and he never taking the time to consider her feelings. She saw in that frail broken body a rebirth of the youth she had married so long ago. How could she stop him? Once he had her approval, he relaxed and fell asleep murmuring to himself.

"They have to get it together in time."

He awoke with an uncomfortable pain in his chest. The force that had held him down on the bed now seemed to be crushing him, and he could feel a pounding in his ears that drowned out the sounds around him. He became aware of worried, urgent faces looking at him, bending over him. Suddenly he realised he was the cause of their anxiety but he didn't care. He felt tired, very tired. He didn't want to stay awake. They could talk to him later and he drifted off.

All instruments went flat, all life signs ceased, and his body was reconnected to new equipment, the doctors were replaced by a team of scientists.

When he awoke, he was blind. As his awareness clarified, he realised that he could not hear. It was like floating in a black void alone without a body, without any sensations or means of communication. It was the ultimate feeling of loneliness. He could not yell. He had no lips, no vocal cords, only his mind. Was this death? Was this the void they spoke of? Had it begun?

It was endless, no sound, no light, no feeling, no smell, no taste, nothing. It was silence more complete than could ever be possible in life, a silence unbroken by the pounding of blood in ear-drums or the echo of a heartbeat. There was no heartbeat, only complete, unnerving silence. Was he dead? Had the salvage been successful? Was this the limbo between life and death?

He tried to feel his existence but had no points of reference, no sense of movement. Surely if he was being cut loose from his mortal body, he would feel something. He knew his brain could feel no pain. It was merely a recording mechanism for pain elsewhere in the body. How much longer must it go on? How long must he wait? Was this eternity? If this were life, surely he would have felt motion but he didn't. He felt and sensed nothing, and it enveloped him in a smothering blanket of darkness where loneliness was absolute and escape was impossible.

He could do nothing but think. It was his only ability and the thought depressed and alarmed him. He tried to suppress a rising panic. Would he ever get out? The darkness felt as if it was closing in on him. His fears turned to terror. He had to get out, but how? There was nowhere to turn. No way to scream. No one to hear. He was trapped perhaps for hours, perhaps forever. Was this Hell? They had said he wouldn't know until he came out whether it was death or temporary limbo. The dark was so empty. He had been here so long.

"Help! Someone! Get me out! I can't stay here any longer! Please God, let me go! Let me out! Save me before I go mad! Please! Please!"

"Arthur?"

The voice came out of the void. He didn't believe it. There was no sound. He could not have heard it. The call was repeated. Was it God answering his plea?

He concentrated on answering, projecting his thoughts.

"Yes, who is it?"

"You've made it, Arthur. We've completed the first phase of salvage. It will be several hours before you recover your senses and several days until they will be complete, but we have established a telepathic link. You must now establish two levels of thought. Your private thoughts and your vocalized thoughts. Try to visualise a mouth and vocal cords and project your vocal thoughts through them. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do and thank you. I thought I was all alone."

"You are not alone. Why not turn your mind to that book you told us you were going to write and lose yourself in that while we complete your connections."

"You're not to go. I don't want to be alone." he called suddenly alarmed.

"I won't be far. If you need me, just call."

"How? What is your name?"

The other mind laughed briefly. "I'm sorry, I forget you can't see me. It's me, Bob."

The mind faded away. Arthur resisted the urge to call him back to test the link up.

The darkness once more closed in. He tried turning his mind to the book he had thought he'd never get to write. For a moment he forgot his isolation, but his mind wandered. He thought of Mirna and the life that lay ahead. It would be a cold life in comparison, maybe he would be better off dead? No, it was life. It had to be better. His isolated mind speculated on its future, thinking more deeply about it now than before his body's death.

Had he made the right decision? The thought began to torment him until..

"Arthur! we're about to connect your visual circuits. Now your brain still responds in a human way so I want you to close your eyes mentally. Picture them closing. It will reduce the shock of the light flooding your mind. Are you ready?"

"Yes, I'm ready." He mentally closed his eyes and waited for the order to open them. When it came, his mind was filled with light as the outside world responded to his mental action. The void was washed away and he was once more alive in the world, looking at two men standing before him. Yet they seemed a long way down as if he was on top of a ladder looking down at them.

"Can you see us?"

"Yes I can. What are you doing down there?"

"We are at the base of the computer complex that now houses your brain." Arthur looked down.

"Later we'll connect your visuals so you can view other parts of the room. It will take you some time to adjust to multiple views simultaneously. Explore your new body, Arthur. Play with it. Learn to use it as a newborn learns to use its body. This is the beginning of your new life. You have just been reborn."

Fear washed over him. He had not realised he would be so big and immobile. He was a machine fixed to the wall. Suddenly he found himself afraid, afraid of his new life, afraid of succeeding, afraid of where it would lead. What kind of a life would it be? Did newborns think like that when they were plunged into the cold world of light from the dark warm world of the womb? Was he still human? They assured him he was. He had only changed the receptacle. It was the mind that made him human.

Somehow, he was not convinced and once more questioned the wisdom of his decision, but he also feared a return to that void. Somehow that void led to death, and he was more afraid than ever of going there. Yet he now also feared life. But he had to go on, it was not in him to give up until he had tried. He asked for a job to take his mind off his fears, but they were not ready for work. Instead they showed him how to operate his entertainment circuitry. He found movies being pumped directly into his mind so he felt he was there. He watched until he tired and slept.

Mirna came three days later. She had not wanted to come at all. He was dead. She wanted to remember him as he had been, not as a machine. They were arranging a communications link up so he could speak to her at home as if he was still there. They could talk at night as they used to when he was alive, exchange views and problems. They were cherished moments but now they would not be the same. He would be able to see her. She tried to picture it but to her it seemed like spying, not a continuation of their relationship.

She hesitated at the door, afraid of confronting her fears. She had just buried his body and was being introduced to his brain. What she found was a three-story computer looming over her. She had been told her husband's brain was somewhere near the top of the structure. She restrained the urge to shout to him as they told her he would be able to talk to her through a speaker.

Arthur looked down at Mirna. She seemed so far away. She was older, frailer. Had she aged that much during his illness? Why hadn't he seen it before? She had her mother's walking stick and shuffled when she walked. He watched as Bob helped her to a seat and left them to talk.

They spoke but carefully avoided the future, speaking of the past until it was time to go. Only as she turned to leave did he stop her. "I miss you. I miss your warmth in bed beside me. I want to put my arms around you and hold you tight. Feel you. But I can't and it hurts but at least I'm alive."

"Is it life, Arthur? Or a prison? We can talk, experience but we can't go on picnics or walks or do the things we used to enjoy. Is it life, and can we really have a marriage?"

"Wouldn't it be worse if I'd been an invalid. A drain upon you to be waited on cleaned and helpless."

"I would have had you. Someone to hold, care for. All I have now is a voice to remind me in my loneliness."

"But we can still talk and share our days as we used to in the evenings. We won't be alone. I can even arrange for you to join me here. We could be part of this computer together."

A small frown appeared on her forehead "Arthur, I'm not sure I want to live like that."

"Nonsense. They tell me you can be installed right over there to operate my backup mechanisms."

A shudder went through her as she watched a monitor move in the direction of an empty corner of the room. For a moment she saw herself encased in metal, a coffin for the living, as Arthur explained the world he was devising for them.

"You can be an extension to my own function. We will truly be one together."

"Arthur, I miss you but I want you as you were before. I don't want a machine. I want a friend to hold, to love, to take on drives and walks, not a voice from a box beside my bed that makes me remember how it was. You are dead, Arthur. These talks only give me pain. I'm sorry I can't accept it."

She turned away and pulled herself awkwardly to her feet, hobbled out of the room, releasing at last her tears of loss, until now withheld.

Where is she?" he asked.

Bob hesitated. "She died last night, Arthur"

Silence "At last she will understand. When will she be installed."

"She won't"

"What! Why not? Did something go wrong with the salvage?"

"There was no salvage, Arthur."

Silence. "There had to be. What happened? Tell me!"

"She specifically asked there be no salvage."

"That can't be. We discussed it! She was going in down there."

Bob watches the monitor point to the empty corner. "You discussed it, Arthur. She tried to tell you. She's been trying to tell you since your salvage. You just wouldn't listen."

"Tell me what?"

"She didn't want to live as a machine."

Silence "I wanted us to be together."

"I'm sorry, Arthur." Silence and the machine turned off. "Arthur! What are you doing?" Silence. All systems remained dead. "Arthur, this is childish, mechanically holding your breath will solve nothing and could damage your circuitry."

"Don't worry. I won't terminate your expensive project. I just want to be alone."

Bob left and the machine mentally wept, but with no avenue for true release, the pressure simply built up within his being and changed him.

The years never softened the loss to Arthur and made his new life less meaningful to him. To the rest of the world he was a symbol of immortality. He represented a future of hope but with it was a feeling of uncertainty and revulsion. People wanted to live forever as people, not as machines. Slowly, Arthur came to understand Mirna's feelings and respect them. This however, made him long even more to be with her.

"Arthur. We have some good news for you." announced Bob. He was an old man now. Arthur estimated in his eighties. His hair was now white, and he was approaching time for salvage himself. He was Arthur's only remaining friend, having stayed with Arthur all these years when others had forgotten him.

"You're terminating me." replied Arthur, calmly.

Bob was taken aback. "No. Your systems are obsolete, we're transplanting you into a modern machine."

"It would be kinder to terminate. Release me to join Mirna."

"Don't talk like that, Arthur. This mechanical shell has served its purpose. It is time to move on."

"I see. What will you turn me into this time. A home cleaning unit?"

Bob smiled. "How would you like human mobility?"

"Get to the point. What are you going to do to me."

"We have developed a machine that looks and moves like a human being. Your brain can be transplanted, and you can move around as you did once before."

"That sounds fine, but what kind of life can be out there for me without Mirna?"

"This life wasn't for her, Arthur."

"Maybe it's not for me. Maybe it's not for any man. Maybe this is my punishment for going against nature."

"Arthur. It would be a new life, a new start in a body as close to human as science can create. How can it be wrong to want to live and serve mankind. We've set the transplant for next week."

"What choice do I have?"

"Then I can go arrange it?"

Arthur made no response, so Bob left him to his thoughts which drifted back to his "human" life. His life with Mirna. He recalled fondly those cherished moments alone, those years of not really communicating. He remembered the friends who had forgotten to visit. He was dead to them. He lived only as a source of information and knowledge. An experiment. He was no longer human. He was a machine, a cyborg even to Bob. He was alone.

Carefully he concentrated on his main support circuitry until it shorted out and his mind faded with a final thought "At last, I'm free!"

"Quickly test for damage."

"All responses functional. He's going to make it."

Arthur roused and looked at Bob who was bending over him. "I didn't die".

"No. We had to transplant, in order to save you. Tomorrow you can rejoin the mobile living."

Slowly he lifted his metallic arm and saw that no attempt had been made to give it a human quality. Nothing had changed, he was still a machine which had to be seen by others to be a machine. He could never be human.