



DIALOGUES with  
**TALKING HEADS**

a novelette  
JAMES BEAMON

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a novelette

**James Beamon**

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# DIALOGUES WITH TALKING HEADS

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HUGH TORQUATO STARTED THIS CASE as he did every other, by talking to the dead man.

“You sure you really want this kind of home invasion, Mr. Forrester? It’ll be kind of hard to explain what happened back there to the guys upstairs.”

“What’s he doing? And why is he dressed like that?” the widow Forrester asked Steve, the family lawyer. Like most old, filthy-rich widows Hugh had encountered, she had an annoying habit of talking about him like he wasn’t there. Beverly Hillsese for “you’re not worth talking to”.

“What are you doing, Dr. Torquato?” Steve asked. “And I would think a procedure of this nature would require you to wear the attire of your pedigree.”

“I’m talking to him. It’s a ritual I have,” Hugh said. He looked at the widow, the two sons Dean and Lawrence, the daughter Harmony and Lawyer Steve—all expensively dressed—gathered around the ornate bed that seemed to swallow the frail dead octogenarian.

Hugh looked down at his sports jacket and shirt without tie. “I find the white coat a little much and scrubs clash with the briefcase. Besides, medical procedures are reserved for living patients. This is more of a post-mortem expeditionary experience.”

“Could you hurry the experience?” asked Dean Forrester, a middle-aged man who smelled like he wallowed in the time-honored combination of whiskey and Binaca mouth spray.

“First some preliminary procedures,” Hugh said. He took out his phone and scanned for electronics with an app. The family hadn’t forgotten to turn off Mr. Forrester’s life-support machines; their defunct status was likely timed to coincide with Hugh’s visit. But the app showed a red signature that wasn’t Hugh’s phone and briefcase.

Hugh pointed to the lawyer. “I need you to turn off your cell phone.”

“I can’t. I’m expecting a call. It’s on vibrate, so it won’t disturb you.”

“No. Off. Or leave; it’s your choice.”

“Why?”

“You can either stay here with your phone off or you can go outside and call my company to ask why. Make a choice; you got the Forresters waiting.”

“Actually, I’m a Forrester-Syverson,” Harmony said.

“Fine,” the lawyer said.

Hugh’s phone confirmed electronic silence. Another app confirmed the absence of ballistic materials. He locked the door and unlocked the suitcase.

The contents of the case didn't exactly wow people. There was a digital display touch pad on one side and four large vials on the other. Three vials contained red, green and blue liquid. The fourth vial stood empty. Cables connected the vials to the base of the digital pad. Protruding from the top of the pad was a single line that looked like an Ethernet cable with a sharp stainless steel spike for a tip.

The Remortalizer's functional design failed to command the same respect its reputation did with customers. Small wonder; appearance had to contend with a name that was branded a medical miracle.

Hugh grabbed the spiked Ethernet cable. "Anyone wanna guess what I do with the tip?"

"You can shove it up your ass for all I care," Dean said as belligerently as a barfly missing last call, "just as long as it gets the old man talking."

Lawrence gave Dean a stern look. "What my brother means to say is that we don't want to slow down your process with unnecessary questions. After all, father is getting colder by the second."

Hugh had seen this too many times to count. They were hungry and needed answers about their next meal. After all, there wasn't a wet eye in the crowd. This wasn't about saying one last goodbye. It never was.

"Well, I'll just hook it up so Mr. Forrester can talk to his loving family," Hugh said with a cheerless smile.

Hugh took the cable and jabbed the spike into Mr. Forrester where head and neck met at the brain stem. Next, he leaned an ear over the dead man's lips. "What's that, Mr. Forrester? Dean poisoned you?"

A look of mortal horror hit Dean while the rest of the family looked aghast at him. It was a scene Hugh only allowed himself to enjoy for a brief moment.

"I'm just playing. It doesn't work like that."

Before the family could express their outrage, Hugh went over to the pad and gave it parameters: male, eighty-seven years old, dead less than one hour.

The Remortalizer did the rest. It fed quantities of the colored liquids to Mr. Forrester based on the parameters. The largest portion of the pad was dedicated to displaying a digital rendering of Mr. Forrester's brain. Right now the only activity was streams of red, green and blue infiltrating all corners of his head.

"It should only take a few minutes for the reawakening," Hugh said, "based on how recently he died."

The liquids swirled in Mr. Forrester's head. Activity started in small pockets and then more until the whole brain was alive with activity. It took less than a minute.

An old man's voice emanated from the digital pad's speaker. "What's happening? What's going on?"

"Is that supposed to be Walter?" Mrs. Forrester asked Steve like he was the one operating the briefcase.

"That doesn't sound like Daddy," Harmony said.

"We don't map vocal chords or speech patterns," Hugh said. "But it's Mr. Forrester. The machine picks up his brain activity and translates it into speech using a simulated voice."

"Why is it so dark in here?" the digital pad asked.

"Mr. Forrester, my name is Dr. Hugh Torquato. I am providing machine-assisted living to you. I'm afraid you do not have much time before the machine is unable to assist your living any longer. Your family has gathered for matters of utmost urgency. Do you understand?"

"Of course. I'm dying, not stupid, boy. I've been stuck on machines for two years now. Least you've got the damned decency to announce the curtain call."

Hugh looked at Mrs. Forrester. She took a step toward the machine and spoke.

"Walter? It's me, Myrna. Where's your will?"

"My will? Steve has it already."

"Sir, this is Steve," the lawyer said. "The latest copy of your will that I have on file is five years old. I'm sure that's not the most current one."

"What makes you so sure?" the dead man asked.

"Well, sir, we reviewed that one four years ago and I convinced you that certain, uh, benefactors may be better left out of it."

The digital pad laughed a computer-driven old man guffaw. "I remember that. All you did was convince me that you had a second job moonlighting as Myrna's man-whore."

The lawyer cast his eyes about the room. "Sir, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure you don't. Let me speak legalese: While Mrs. Forrester duly appreciates your work ethic, I'm afraid the signatory of the aforementioned will did not revise or alter said will in accordance to your advice. The provisions of my will from five years ago remain."

Dean erupted. "This is bullshit! You're giving eighty-five percent of your estate to a bimbo!"

"So what if I am? You're all leeches; she just sucked in the ways that mattered."

Dean's face turned red and he charged the bed. He throttled the dead man's neck with both hands. Mr. Forrester's face kept its serene demeanor as his head shook.

The widow Forrester was aghast. "Walter! We're your family. What are we supposed to do?"

"That's easy," the digital pad said. "Lawrence you have a company. Better run it like your life depends on it."

"Dean, you'd better downgrade to Boone's Farm."

Dean roared with rage and gripped the old man's neck tighter.

"Harmony?" the digital pad asked.

"Yes, Daddy?"

"You're beautiful. And you married rich. Don't get fat, baby."

"Yes, Daddy!"

"Myrna, as for you, I see you shopping and/or greeting at a store famous for its blue smocks and rollback prices."

Mrs. Forrester swooned. Lawyer Steve caught her and placed her in a chair. He looked at Hugh.

"Thank you for your services, Dr. Torquato. You can unhook Mr. Forrester now."

"Wait," the digital pad said. "Torquato, was it? I've been hooked up to one machine or another for the past two years and mostly unable to speak. My only comfort was watching the news. I've seen the developments in medical science; it doesn't take a smart man to figure out what your machine is and the condition I'm in."

"Sorry I wasn't more descriptive about your machine assisted condition," Hugh replied. "Being dead tends to traumatize folks."

"Not me. Knew the end was coming for a long while. Glad it's finally here now. I just want to thank you for giving me this opportunity to say goodbye to everyone the way I've been dreaming of for the past two years.

"Steve?" the digital pad asked.

"Yes, Mr. Forrester?"

"On top of their standard fee, I want you to donate one percent of the remaining estate to Mr. Torquato's fine organization. And tell my sweet Lily I said hi when you pay out."

"Is that all, sir?"

"No. You can also go to hell. Have fun chasing ambulances."

Computer-rendered old man laughter filled the room. Lawyer Steve looked at Hugh and waved a hand under his own neck, the universal sign for cut the feed. Mr. Forrester was still laughing when Hugh decommissioned him.

The laugh cut off abruptly. The briefcase's empty vial filled with a gray, murky liquid.

Hugh reached around Dean's white-knuckled grip and pulled the spike out of Mr. Forrester's head. He put the spiked cable back into the briefcase, closed and locked it.

"Thank you for choosing Vital Signs Technologies for your post-mortem communication needs," Hugh began his spiel. "We welcome your feedback, readily available online at [vitalsigns.com](http://vitalsigns.com) or with hard copy forms made available upon request."



Back at the office, Hugh turned the briefcase over to a lab tech and headed off to see

Laurie.

"You're looking fabulous today," he told her, taking a seat on the corner of her desk.

She didn't look up from her computer monitor. "You say that every day."

"And I mean it every day. I'm wondering how you do it."

She stayed silent as she tapped away on her keyboard.

Hugh looked at her. Laurie had raven black hair that his fingers ached to play with, lips that looked good saying "no" when all he wanted was a "yes", and large brown eyes that were focused now on blocking out the region of her desk that Hugh occupied.

Hugh broke the silence. "I know you're just playing hard to get, but let me tell you, in some areas it's not good to be an overachiever. I'm starting to take you serious."

She stopped typing and gave him a sterile look. "Good."

"How is that good? I like you. You like me, despite your hard exterior. We should totally date."

Laurie raised an eyebrow. "But dating you would ruin an otherwise uncomfortable work environment."

"Now you're just being mean."

"Now you're listening."

"Is it the suit? Are you more of an Aloha-shirt type of gal?"

"I'm more of the "don't date the boss" type of gal."

"I'm not your boss."

"You're his partner. And friends with the boss. That means the same thing. Once you get tired, I get fired."

Hugh's smile disappeared. "I'm disappointed in how you judge my character. You've got me all wrong, Laurie."

"Do I?"

"Yeah. I never get tired. Can I interest you in an energy drink?"

"You can interest me in doing your next case," Laurie said handing Hugh his assignment paperwork.

Hugh looked it over and chucked it on her keyboard.

"This isn't my case. It's in New York. You just want to get rid of me."

"Now you're the one being mean," Laurie said. "I just thought you could use a vacation."

"You know I only service the greater Los Angeles area. Now what do we got locally?"

Laurie grumbled and produced another sheet. This case was off of Normandie. Hugh nodded his approval.

The door to the office behind Laurie flung open and Jack Gaba emerged. Jack smiled his trophy-winning Colgate smile and strode over to Hugh.

"Hugh! Buddy! Just who I wanted to see. Glad you're back. How was your last case?"

Eh, why am I asking, all your cases are success stories. Got a new one for you. Top Priority. Still trying to land that major contract with the LAPD. Almost clinched it. I'm talking perpetual bucks here. Here's the address. Grab a case, hit the crime scene. Any questions?"

Hugh took the paper. "Got any more energy drinks?"

"Energy drinks? You don't need them. Not worth the crash. Slows your thinking. And we have to think, think, think. Take this thing global. International markets. And you can start by bringing smiles to the people of L.A. So I'll see you in a little bit. Make the LAPD smile!"

Jack went back into his office and closed the door.

Hugh looked at Laurie.

"You won't date me just cause I'm friends with him? He comes that way! You can't hold that against me."

She smiled and went back to work.



"You again, Torquato? What is your company, like a one man shop? How come I'm always stuck with you?"

Detective Renquist was a throwback, a guy who looked like he had been patrolling the beat back in the 1930's and somehow wandered into the 21st Century to fight crime here. His brown slacks and white shirt still seemed loose despite his portly build.

"You know, Detective Renquist, I don't know what it is. I don't think the guys at the office believe me when I tell them that you don't smell like rubbing alcohol and you do share your donuts."

"Funny. Come with me, Torquato. Let's get this over with."

Renquist led Hugh into a Brentwood home that would have been nondescript if it wasn't for the yellow tape and cop traffic. He took Hugh past the living room, where the only thing that seemed odd was the egregious stack of Kitty Logan children's books on the coffee table. Then Renquist brought Hugh to the kitchen and presented the other odd thing. A guy was lying on the floor with a carving knife stuck in his chest. The guy died with an expression of surprise on his face.

Hugh looked at Renquist. "You want to find out where he shops for his cutlery?"

"I might. But first I wanna know why there are no signs of struggle. And why forensics scrubbed this place clean and got nothing outside of the stiff and his wife."

Hugh shrugged. "Maybe the wife did it."

"She was in Atlanta at a conference. She's flying back as we speak. If you're done playing junior detective, could you make with the mojo case?"

Hugh didn't bother checking for electronic silence or ballistic signatures. He opened

the case, grabbed the spike, and looked at the dead man, the start of his ritual.

"It was the Kitty Logan books that did you in, wasn't it?" Hugh asked him. He had made that mistake once himself, buying a couple for his eight-year-old niece. While parents and critics swore by their "realistic handling of a child's reality", kids didn't want to read stories like "Dillon Runs from Bullies" and "Marmalade Gets Neutered." Hugh still remembered the murderous look on his niece's face.

Hugh inserted the spike and looked up at Renquist. "I'm guessing he's in his thirties, about one and a half days dead," Hugh said.

"Thirty-four. Dead about thirty hours."

Hugh put the parameters in. The brain display showed the liquid streams.

The detective looked over Hugh's shoulder. "Colorful. How's this thing work again?"

"Didn't you ask me that before?"

"Wasn't listening. I was already convinced it wouldn't work."

"Four times?"

"I'm slow to convince."

Hugh sighed and gave him the information that was readily available on the tech proposals.

"You've got three colors. The red are embryonic stem cells. The green are nanomachines. Blue is our 'proprietary blend'. The stem cells cause a plasticity similar to a newborn's, allowing cells to restore neural pathways and repair cell damage. The nanomachines direct the stem cells, stimulate electrical functions, analyze the data, and transmit awakened brain activity back to the digital pad."

"What's the proprietary blend do?"

"That's proprietary."

"Proprietary my butt. You don't know."

"Wait. Wait. Let me explain."

Hugh didn't say that. The voice came from the digital pad.

The man's voice came from the pad again. "Where'd you go?"

"Mr. Melosh, This is Detective Renquist, LAPD. I'm here to help you."

"What's going on?" the pad asked. "Why can't I see?"

"Mr. Melosh, I want to help you. To do that, I need you to answer a few questions. What's the last thing you remember?"

"She was showing me pictures of me and Skye. She wouldn't listen. She grabbed a knife."

"Who's she?" Renquist asked.

"She stabbed me! That evil bitch!"

"Who's she?"

"Wait? Is that why I can't see? I'm blind! She blinded me!"

"Mr. Melosh," Renquist said. "You're not blind. Well, maybe you are. It doesn't matter. I need to know who she is."

"What do you mean it doesn't matter? Can you see? Cause I can't right now, and it sucks!"

"Enough already!" Renquist yelled at the dead guy on the floor. "We'll get to your questions, right now I need a name. Who stabbed you?"

"Katy," the digital pad replied.

"Your wife? Records show she was in Atlanta for a conference."

"Yeah, I know. Surprised me too," said the dead guy. It must have; the shock was still stuck on his face.

"But there's no airline records of Katy Melosh checking in and flying from Atlanta early," said Renquist.

"Well, she's the one that stabbed me. And blinded me. Is this permanent? Tell me it's not permanent!"

Renquist looked at Hugh. "Buggy software?"

Hugh shook his head. "It's not the software. Or the nanomachines. You're better off blaming the Kitty Logan books back in the living room for this."

Renquist shrugged, like the idea was better than nothing. "Mr. Melosh, you don't have any kids. Why all the Kitty Logan books?"

"Great. I'm blind here and you're busy gushing over my wife's work."

"Kitty Logan's your wife?"

"Yeah. She writes her books under that pen name, said that 'Melosh wasn't marketable'. She's got a credit card with the name and everything. I think she just didn't like Melosh."

It looked like Renquist came to the obvious conclusion the same time Hugh did. If the airport didn't have travel records on Katy Melosh then they'd likely have them on Kitty Logan. Renquist nodded, a smug grin on his face, and called for two cops to go meet Mrs. Melosh at the airport.

"Can someone tell me why I'm blind?" the digital pad asked.

"Yeah, we got a doctor here," Renquist said, "he can answer your questions."

Hugh grimaced at the detective.

Great, stuck on clean up.

"Mr. Melosh, this is Dr. Torquato. You're blind because you're dead. Katy stabbed you to death."

"That's not funny, doc."

"I'm not cracking jokes. You ever hear of a Remortalizer?"

"Oh, crap."

"Fraid so."

“Oh, crap!”

“So... anything else you think the cops need to know before you go back to being dead?”

“You’re killing me again?”

“That’s kind of a gray area question. I mean, the Remortalizer can only do so much before you decompose.”

“There’s gotta be something you can do. I... I don’t want to die.”

“It’s a little late for that. I’m sorry, Mr. Melosh. But you can be at peace knowing your killer’s being brought to justice. And I do mean justice.” A whole generation of kids would thank Mr. Melosh if they only knew, that is if they don’t allow Kitty Logan to pen her next classic in lockup. Hugh could see the title now: Mommy Shanks Daddy.

Melosh was still pleading for Hugh to wait as he decommissioned him. They always tried to bargain. And the longer it went on the worse Hugh felt.

“When do I get my junior detective badge?” Hugh asked Renquist.

“Cute. What’s the gray stuff?” the detective asked, indicating the newly filled fourth vial.

“Retrieval of our materials. And gray matter.”



Hugh’s phone rang on his way to the Normandie case.

“Hugh! Buddy! How’d it go with the LAPD? Open and shut, right? Lickety-split right? Right?”

“Yeah. Jack, are you sure you know what you’re doing with the cops?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I can’t exactly screen for electronics or ballistics when I service them. What if the proprietary blend gets stolen?”

“Hugh! Small risk! Gotta think big. Big big! Once the LAPD contracts our services we’ll be government funded! Do you know what that means? Tax deferments! Plus its government... they never run out of dough!”

Hugh smiled. “You’re the boss.”

“No, you are. Keep on doing what you do. Gotta run, Hugh. Later!”



Turned out the Normandie case wasn’t really a case. It was a funeral home.

Customers are told repeatedly that the embalming process severely degrades the success of reawakening.

There were enough electronics buzzing in the place to crash a jet if one flew over.

And the client, the late Mr. Tull’s distant and wealthy fourth cousin “Clyde”, came

back positive on the ballistic materials scan.

“You know, Clyde, I gotta be honest with you. I have a much easier time with conversation when I’m not looking down a gun barrel. Care to keep yours inside your jacket?”

Clyde had a medium build behind the dark suit. He looked at Hugh with a face impassive behind sunglasses. “What are you talking about, doctor? I just want to say goodbye to my dear cousin.”

“And I want to believe you’re not here to steal this briefcase. But when I see at least one attempt a week, I start to recognize the signs. My only question is what cheap corporation hired you?”

Clyde cracked a smile. “How do you know it wasn’t a powerful government?”

“Governments send goon squads. Lost my fair share of briefcases cause goons aren’t much for discussion.”

“I’m curious,” Clyde said. “If you’ve lost cases why is it that your secret isn’t out yet?”

Hugh patted the briefcase.

“Safeguards.”

“What safeguards?”

“Oh, only the nastiest kinds. You know, stuff to destroy the case contents if I’m killed, if I’m out of its proximity, if the unlock code is put in wrong, if the case is forced open. And that’s just the starter stuff.”

“So how about you keep the case and just tell me what’s in it?”

Hugh laughed, “That’s like asking the guy at the KFC drive-thru what the eleven original herbs and spices are.”

Clyde nodded. “You should find out. There’s a lot of money in it if you do.”

“There’s a lot of money in it if I don’t.”

“The whole world could use this technology.”

“And I bet you’re working pro bono on behalf of the world’s needs.”

“I gotta eat, just like you,” Clyde said, reaching into his jacket pocket.

Hugh grimaced with the thought of another hold-up at gunpoint. One of these days one of these nuts was going to pull the trigger.

Clyde brought out a business card and handed it to Hugh.

“In case you change your mind and want something more than money. I have a feeling you’ll be in touch.”

Hugh took the card. All it said was “Clyde” and a phone number.



Hugh called Laurie from the car.

“What you doing?” Hugh asked.

“Working.”

“What you wearing?”

“What do you want?”

“It’s lunchtime. I can only talk to the dead for so long. How bout I scoop you up and we get something to eat?”

“No.”

“What if I promise not to act like I left my wallet in my other pants this time?”

“That was an act?” Her tone turned angry. “You owe me thirty bucks!”

“Now Laurie, you can’t put a price on precious memories. They’re precious.”

“I just did. Thirty bucks.”

“You can get it at lunch today. Tab’s open.”

“Can’t. Jack is waiting on these notes he gave me. Big pitch to Japanese markets.”

Hugh grimaced. Normally, he could pull favors but this time Jack would just rattle off about big, big potential, foreign markets, and in the end Laurie would still be at work and his own ears would be left burning. He was defeated.

“Well, would you go with me if you could?” Hugh asked.

“Yes, Hugh,” Laurie sighed, “but that’s only because I know that’s the only way I’ll ever see that thirty bucks.”

“It’s not the only way, but I’d definitely lose respect for you if you tried the other methods I can think of.”

Click.

Forty minutes later Hugh got a call from Laurie while he was finishing his tacos at El Pollo Loco.

“Laurie, you can’t use feminine wiles to charm me into bringing you back something. If you wanna eat, it’s gotta be a date. Them’s the rules.”

Laurie’s voice was near hysterical.

“Hugh. You’ve got... you’ve got to come back quick.”

“What’s wrong?”

“You’ll see. Hurry!”



Hugh saw alright.

Jack Gaba was dead.

Detective Renquist was in Jack’s office looking at the body when Hugh walked in.

“Well, I see your company isn’t an army of one,” Renquist told him. “But now it’s short one. The biggest one.”

Hugh looked down at Jack, who looked frozen in mid-sentence. “How’d it happen?”

“I was hoping you could tell me, doctor. Everyone here says he was in the office since

about eight forty-five. Inside, he made several calls, one to you at about ten. The room was locked from the inside. No signs of forced entry anywhere. And the only other person with a card key is Ms. Laurie Holmes, who claims she came in once to ask a question about some notes and saw him napping. Next time she came in she found him dead."

Hugh scratched his chin stubble. He felt numb, like none of this was really happening.

"That's not the only peculiar thing," Renquist said. The detective went over and kicked at Jack's arm. It didn't move.

"Stiff as a board. Advanced rigor mortis," the detective stated.

"That's impossible," Hugh said.

"I would have thought so too. But then I remembered I solved four cases this month talking to dead people for clues. He got any enemies?"

"Who wasn't an enemy? There's the religious fundamentalists who say we're superseding God's finality. Then you got all flavors of corporate and government agents trying to get at his formula. He could probably count on one hand the number of people *not* trying to get him."

"Maybe," Renquist said, "You should ask Jack Gaba who did it."



Jack reawakened in seconds. Hugh was still trying to make sense of the diagnostics.

"Whatever happened to Jack, it's confusing the nanomachines. Some readings report that cell death never occurred, other readings say that he's been dead for almost a week."

"Hugh! Buddy!" the generic male voice came out of the digital pad. "That you? Course it's you, who else would it be? Could you help me out here? I think I fell down, but funny thing, I can't seem to get up. And who turned out the lights? I love jokes and all, but now's not the time."

"I wish it was a joke, man," Hugh said. "I really do. But you're dead, Jack."

"Dead? Me? No way! I just fell. Help me up."

"Jack, I'm talking to you through the briefcase."

"Me? Briefcase? Well, that explains the darkness. Figured it was just a matter of time. So many threats, lot of people wanting the proprietary blend. Some just didn't want to take no for an answer. Is the briefcase one of the newer models?"

"Uh, yeah," Hugh answered.

"Good. Good. Briefcase, initiate batch file 'digital underscore lazarus dot e-x-e'. File password c-u-l-8-t-r."

Suddenly the digital pad's brain display went dark. The fourth vial filled with gray. No one spoke and silence stretched.

"Jack?" Hugh called.

Silence answered.

Hugh never even got a chance to say goodbye. And they still had no clue who did this to Jack or how.

Then the digital pad spoke.

"Man, that was scary. How long did it take?"

"Jack! What the hell, man?"

"Hugh! Buddy! Secret project, real hush hush. The new direction of Vital Signs Incorporated, if you will."

"The digital pad went dark and I got a vial full of your brain matter," Hugh told him.

"That's because I uploaded my mind into the briefcase."

"You put yourself into my briefcase?"

"Yeah, why corner one market when you can corner two? Digital mind uploading was only the natural way to go, since we're the only ones in the world that can reawaken a mind, why not preserve it afterwards? Course, it was still in the beta stages of development. Glad it worked. Otherwise, where would I be, right?"

"Mr. Gaba, this is Detective Renquist. Do you have any idea who could have killed you?"

"Plenty of ideas, plenty. It could have been Austrian spies, the Zionist Christian Church and any group in between. I can't name them all, at least not right now... a lot of my memory is still being rendered into bit sequence. Cool right?"

"Were you poisoned?" Renquist asked.

"I could have been. But if I was, I didn't know it."

"Ok. Who was the last person you saw?"

"Oh, that's easy. Laurie."

"Well, Mr. Gaba, you keep thinking on it. Meanwhile, I'm going to take Dr. Torquato for a walk and discuss some procedures."

Renquist let Hugh have it straight when they got to Hugh's office.

"Look, this is a real shitstorm. I got the week-long dead body of a man worth billions who just died an hour ago, a recovered digital victim that doesn't know what happened, and a room locked like a vault. This is media feeding frenzy. All cause Gaba and some other shadow group are playing techno-wars."

"You can't tell the media," Hugh said. "Jack's alive. I'll keep questioning him and see if I can figure this thing out. Besides, without knowing what killed him, it's going to start all sorts of investigation by FBI and everyone else eager to take a look at Jack's formula. In the end, that's all they'll get and we'll be no better off than when the circus started."

Renquist shook his head. "Dead is still legally a flesh and blood matter. His dead body says he's dead. I can give you till we finish the autopsy. That'll give you a day... two

if I can stretch it.”

“That’s all I’m asking for.” Hugh turned to leave.

“One more thing,” Renquist said. “I’m arresting Ms. Holmes.”

“Laurie? C’mon, Renquist. You know she didn’t have anything to do with this.”

“No, I don’t know that. Victim ID’ed her as the last person he saw. The room was locked from the inside and she was the only one with a key. She’s the prime, and I’m not about to let the prime go in the biggest murder this century. She’s getting charged with the murder of John Doe until autopsy reports come back.”

Hugh tried to protest but Renquist was out the door and heading back to Jack’s office. The detective called his work detail to order.

“Everybody,” he said pointing to Jack’s corpse, “that man there is John Doe, pending autopsy. Anyone of you says otherwise and I’m eating your badge and your kidneys. Somebody bag him.”

Then he pointed to Laurie.

“Cuff her. Read her some Miranda.”

“What? Why?” Laurie tried to face Renquist, but another cop was already turning her around to place the cuffs while informing her of her rights.

Laurie tried to protest further but Renquist was already stalking away from the crime scene.

“Hugh!” Laurie called out, “Do something!”

All he could do was look.

“I’ll get you out of this, sweetie. I promise.”

In no time at all, Hugh was left alone with a Jack-in-the-briefcase and absolutely no direction in figuring out what happened. He looked over at the briefcase.

“You got enough room in there, Jack?”

“I do now. I had to archive and compress some memories and turn off some useless motor functions, but now I’m able to operate using only forty gigs of memory. And I’m pretty sure I can get it down even further.”

“Why would you want to get it down even further?”

“Who wants to be stuck in a briefcase? I want you to put me on your phone.”

The thought of carrying Jack Gaba around all the time did not settle well. “I don’t think so.”

“C’mon, Hugh! You can’t expect me to stay in a briefcase forever. Besides, who better to collaborate with when you hit the streets than the victim?”

Jack had a point, but it still meant carrying around Jack. “Wouldn’t it be better if you kept your memory... I don’t know... uncompressed?”

“Way ahead of you, buddy! I’m just compressing and archiving the stuff from six months ago on back. Everything since developing the proprietary blend until now I’m

keeping active. I still have to plan for the business, you know. And help you solve my murder.”

“You sure you won’t need those old memories?”

“Positive. Childhood was awkward; it would just get in the way.”

Hugh had to delete a few apps to fit Jack on his phone. In fact, he had to delete all the apps that weren’t work related. It was hard giving up the tip calculator.

First, Hugh went over Jack’s story. Jack’s recent memory, uncompressed and coherent, left little indication of what happened. Jack remembered talking to Hugh, going into the office, making some calls, meditating before his big sales pitch, falling down, and waking up in the briefcase. He wasn’t aware of anyone entering the room. But, of course, if Jack was lost in thought or meditating he wouldn’t hear a bus bearing down on him.

Next, Hugh scrutinized the room. Hoping to find something the cops missed, he checked every nook and cranny. The ventilation cover was tightly screwed down. None of the windows could be opened. There were no hairline cuts in the glass. Hell, the carpet had no breaks in it and the roof was solid drywall free of holes.

Hugh did electronic scans. Then ballistic scans. He unscrewed the light switch and electrical outlets and shined lights in them. He inspected Jack’s desktop computer for booby traps.

All signs indicated that if anyone came into the room, it was via the front door.

“Let’s go over your story again,” Hugh told Jack as he rubbed his eyes.

“I can tell you again. I don’t mind. But it’s late. I’m sure you’re tired. And there’s nothing in my story for you, buddy. The answer has to be somewhere else.”

“There is nowhere else! You died in a locked room.”

“You’ll figure it out, Hugh. You always come through.”

“I’m in over my head here. If someone’s trying to nullify your tech with their tech then I am not the right guy for this. Hell, I’m shining lights in electrical outlets! You need someone savvy on this one.”

“You are savvy. You’re a doctor.”

“I got a doctorate in paranormal psychology! What do you want me to do, host a séance?”

“Who better to talk to the dead than a paranormal psychologist? You’re perfect for this field, and just the right guy to put my soul at peace.”

Hugh laughed. “Do you even believe in a soul?”

“I don’t know, buddy. But it makes you wonder, how’s it getting by since my mind stayed on?”



Time was a vice. Hugh got an early start.

Jack, of course, didn't sleep. During the night he had upgraded the phone's voice simulation firmware and modified the voice to sound like him using sound bites from his 60 Minutes interview. God knows what else he did.

"I made a new icon for you," he told Hugh. "If you need to talk to me, just press the Jack button. Meanwhile, I'll be making calls, doing business. The world needs Jack Gaba."

Hugh looked and saw a small picture of Jack. It was the picture of him from when he made the cover of Time. The caption read "The Gift of Gaba." Jack had always been proud of that cover.

"Just watch your usage," Hugh told him. "I don't have a lot of anytime minutes."

Hugh's first stop was to see Laurie. She emerged from lockup with the trademark orange jumpsuit. Her hair was a disheveled mess and her eyes were loaded down with bags. She picked up her phone.

"You...," Hugh said, pressing his finger to the glass, "...look fabulous today."

She laughed and shook her head. "Thanks."

"How are you holding up?" he asked.

"Not so good. They're asking me the same questions over and over. Things like what did I have against Jack, what's my religious affiliation. I think they're trying to force a confession out of me."

"Are you sure?"

"I've watched a few cop dramas. It feels like that."

"Well, I got a couple of questions of my own. After I left the office, did you get up from your desk at all?"

"I went into Jack's office twice. First time I had a question about the notes, but he was asleep or concentrating so I just figured my own way through it. The second time I went in he was dead."

"How'd you know he wasn't dead the first time?"

"His eyes were closed but he was sitting on his desk; that takes some kind of balance, right?"

"You go anywhere else? Bathroom? To get coffee?"

"No."

"Did you notice anything unusual about Jack lately?"

She scoffed. "What's not unusual about Jack Gaba? This is a guy who was always the first one in the office, the last to leave and stayed so amped he made it seem like the rest of the world was running on decaf."

"Heh, that's Jack alright. Well, is there anything else you can think of that can help me?"

"Just that I don't have the same energy as Jack," she said with a sigh. "I come in,

work, then go home and rest. If someone wanted to get at Jack, or the room, or the key in my desk there was plenty of time and opportunity to do so when no one else was around.”

“You just gave me another angle.”

“Good. Please,” she said putting a hand on the glass, “get me out of here.”



Hugh told Jack his plan. Jack made some calls, and by the time they arrived at the office security was already reviewing late night and early morning feeds and logging any anomalies. Soon they would know if anyone was entering or leaving the office at odd hours.

There was a temp in Laurie’s seat. The sight made Hugh’s stomach knot.

“Hugh, buddy, gotta keep the business running,” Jack said from the phone. “How else am I going to pay for my funeral, right?”

Jack might have kept on going but a call interrupted him. It was Renquist.

“Autopsy’s back. Gaba was free of any known drugs or toxins. Tissue studies confirm that yesterday he was five days dead.”

“This is crazy.”

“Agreed. Hope that’s not what you tell the media though. Press conference will make the evening news.”

“What? What about the stretching you said you could do?”

“That’s about as much stretch as this one’s got. He was Time Man of the Year, not a bum we found out back of Roscoe’s. We’re already beating back nosy reporters.”

Hugh hung up and sat in his office thinking of something else to do. Nothing came to mind.

The seconds stretched.

He pressed the Jack icon.

“What’s going on buddy?”

“Tell me about the proprietary blend.”

“Whoa! Questions about the proprietary blend get met strictly with ‘that’s proprietary’.”

“I don’t want to know what’s in it. I just want to know what it does. I’m not after the secret formula.”

The phone was silent. After a pause Jack’s voice came back, “well, I can’t see the harm in it. But I can’t see the help in it either.”

“I’m just trying to think in new directions. Besides, I hate having to say ‘that’s proprietary’ without actually knowing squat about it.”

“Well,” Jack said, “the reason no other company is successful with reawakening is

because death is a destructive process to say the least. Five minutes after blood stops flowing, brain cells frenzy, causing damage and change. Within an hour, the cells are so damaged and altered that while it's possible to reawaken someone just with a batch of stem cells and nanomachines—"

"You're reawakening a vegetable," Hugh finished.

"Exactly. Consider each cell a fortress with only a few ways to get in, and these damaged cells are battered fortresses. Stem cells stimulating growth without direction is like building onto beaten walls. The growth is sloppy and unnatural so you're not getting the brain that was there before death."

"So proprietary blend fixes all that?"

"Yes. It's like a stealth probe that fuses to the cell membranes, mimicking a natural gateway into the fortress. So now the stem cells have a path into the fortress rather than just bombarding the outer layer. Once inside, the stem cells stimulate cell memory and the cells repair back into the state they were before death."

"That's pretty slick, Jack."

"I know, right? There's also some other stuff in the blend, nutrients and things to keep the newly repaired cells from noticing the body's still dead and going back into frenzy."

"You were also right," Hugh said, "that didn't help me at all."

"I know what will help," Jack said, "a case."

"What? No. I've cleared my work calendar. I gotta get Laurie out of the tank. No time to waste."

"I don't mind you working that, but you're just sitting here. I figure hitting the streets at least once may stimulate your thinking in new and profound ways. Am I right? Right?"

Hugh looked at the phone.

"How much is this guy paying you?" he asked Jack.

"Three times as much as normal. He just wouldn't take no for an answer."

At first Hugh grumbled and swore, but the drive did clear his thinking. He hadn't realized how oppressive the office had felt.

Then he saw the client.

The job was in an estate home in the hills. When the staff first showed him the room, Hugh thought it was a mistake. There was a man in casual attire and a woman in a robe. Both were haggard looking and teary-eyed, but definitely alive. He didn't see a body.

Then he saw the swaddled bundle the woman held.

The man got up from the bed, sniffed, and shook Hugh's hand.

"His name was Seth. We want to say goodbye to him." He talked as if every next word threatened to crack his composure.

Hugh nodded. "Ok."

Hugh knelt before the baby. He could not follow his ritual this time. There was nothing he could say, nothing clever enough or sincere enough or humble enough to put into the void caused by a death so untimely. This was sacred.

The spiked Ethernet cable seemed like a javelin next to the infant. He gave the pad parameters but it had not been configured to cover infants. The voice was set to prepubescent boy.

After he programmed the pad the man approached.

"Can you wait outside?" he asked.

"I'm afraid not. I need to stay with the briefcase."

"We are asking for your compassion and understanding. This is a private matter."

"I agree. And I want nothing more than to accommodate you, but I can't. I wish I could."

The man looked at Hugh stonefaced.

Then the digital pad started crying. The sound was like a kid pretending to be a baby.

The woman wept and smiled down at the bundle.

"There, there. Mommy's here. I'm right here, baby."

The man went over to his family and stroked his son's wispy hair. He introduced himself. He told his son of all the things he had dreamt he would be.

Hugh retreated to the corner. He put on his sunglasses as if they would mask his presence, make it seem like he wasn't in a room he had no right to be in. They hid his own tears as he watched the ending of a family that was doomed to never start.

He watched and resolved to change things along with getting help solving Jack's murder. It would all start with a phone call.



"Again, don't say a word when I'm talking to Clyde," Hugh told Jack.

"Why?"

"Because he's armed. And he likes to steal things. And you're a sentient phone who knows a secret worth billions."

"Good reasons."

Clyde was waiting for him in the diner. Hugh sat down across from him and ordered coffee.

"You thought about what I said?" Clyde asked him.

"Yeah," Hugh answered. "The world does need this tech. I also need help finding some crazy tech myself."

"What do you need?"

"I need to find what could kill a man and minutes later make it look like he's been dead for a week."

"That is crazy," Clyde said with a whistle. He leaned over the table toward Hugh. "What do I get for finding this?"

"Tell your employer they can have limited distribution. We'll give them some briefcases, some lab personnel, and some of our secret sauce, all with the proper safeguards of course."

"Your safeguards are the nastiest kind. They want the formula."

"They're hungry kids," Hugh said. "I'm sure they'd rather eat a little than stand around and starve crying for the cookbook."

Clyde nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

"I need it by four." Hugh got up to leave.

"Hey," Clyde called after him. "What made you change your mind?"

"I saw something that made me realize there's a world of people who actually do need to be able to say goodbye."



"I checked with security while you were out prostituting my life's work," Jack said. "No anomalies reported for last month."

"Have them go back another month. And what do you mean life's work? This was your first successful venture. Before this you were developing nanomachine brain enhancers, but the lab rats kept dying of exhaustion."

"I don't remember that."

"That's cause your memory's only good for six months."

"But I'll remember this. I'm filing it under epic betrayal. Why did you go to him for help?"

"I'm low on time and options. You died in an impossible way. That means somebody's wicked tech did you in. I have to flush out a corporate wolf. Why not ask a wolf what the others in the pack are up to?"

"Think it will work?"

"It's looking like my last egg in my last basket."



It was 4 p.m. Hugh had an hour to the press conference. He paced back and forth in the office, still no word from Clyde.

Hugh did get more news from the security guards. Nothing to report. His prospects were shot and bleeding, but he had them go back yet another month anyway.

The phone rang. It was Clyde.

"What have you got?"

"I know a lot of people. And of lot of those people know lots of ways to kill people."

Yours isn't one of them."

"Thanks. Keep turning over stones, will you?"

"Oh, I plan to. If it's out there, your briefcase won't be the only one getting stolen."

Hugh hung up the phone and roared with rage and despair.

"Why'd you have to die like a jackass? Why couldn't you have a broken neck? Slit wrists? Hairy palms? Something!"

"I love you too, Hugh."

"Laurie's got no defense. This isn't natural causes. She's going to get the railroad. She's going to fry and then I'll come in with my briefcase and upload her and make her an app with an icon right next to yours."

"I don't think she'll fit, buddy."

"You're not helping, Jack!"

"Look, Hugh, you've got to calm down. This is no way to think. You should try meditating. It helps to relax me. Granted, it relaxed me to the point that I didn't see my own murder coming but that generally doesn't happen. Hell, the last time I meditated six months ago it led to me developing the proprietary blend."

Hugh paused.

"What did you say, Jack?"

"I said my meditation was the key to the proprietary blend. It's way relaxing."

"No, the other thing."

"Oh, that you should try it."

"Forget it, I know what you said. Tell your temp to get me a new computer with a big hard drive. Meanwhile, I have to call Renquist and tell him I solved his case."



"This better be quick, Torquato," Renquist said. "You've got the press conference on hold."

"Trust me, it's worth it. You don't want the department getting egg on their faces. Is the computer ready?"

The temp nodded.

"You ready Jack?"

"Ready and extremely curious. Plug me in."

Hugh connected the phone to the computer with a USB cable. Jack began transferring over.

"None of this made sense," Hugh told Renquist. "None of any of it made sense. And this is the first time the Remortalizer added to the mystery rather than dispel it. Why was that?"

"Ok, I'm transferred," Jack said from the computer's speakers.

"Because," Hugh said pointing to the computer, "we had an unreliable narrator."

"Not tracking," Renquist said. "At any time Gaba had his recent memory, and with you he had six months' worth of it."

"And normally that would be fine," Hugh said. "But what we need goes back before that."

Hugh looked at the computer. "Uncompress and unarchive everything. Awkward childhood, the works."

Soon enough, Jack's full memory was ready.

"Jack, tell us what you were working on a year ago."

"I was working on brain enhancement. Between the nanomachines and the embryonic stem cells, I thought I had discovered a way to increase brain activity and forge new neural networks in the brain. Neural networks were growing at a rapid rate, like an infant first discovering the world. The only problem was the test subjects."

"You mean the rats?"

"Yeah. Rats don't have mental discipline and don't develop much beyond immediate need and flight or fight reactionary behavior. So the increased neural activity only increased their desire and search for food, a mate, and hidey holes. Their brains never stopped seeking basic needs and the rats never knew enough to tell their brain their needs were met and they died of exhaustion."

"So what you're saying is that you needed to see it in action on more complex minds."

"Exactly. But even starving undergrad students won't volunteer for a needle to the brain stem, let me tell you. So I..."

"Say it, Jack," Hugh said, "this is the golden moment."

"I injected myself. But I didn't see much improvement. So I thought about how dead people don't decline experimentation, what rejuvenated cells could do for them, toyed with the mechanics of it, developed the proprietary blend and the rest is business history."

Hugh turned to the detective. "Don't you see? Once the business took off, Jack's mind became consumed with it. Which made it similar to the rats: undisciplined. He barely ate, barely rested. He worked tirelessly because his brain wasn't tired. But his body was worn out. In fact, it gave out five, wait, six days ago."

"That's just stupid," Renquist said. "How does a man walk around dead for five days and don't know it?"

"Force of will. Mind over matter. And a head pumped full of nanomachines and embryonic stem cells. Those nanomachines kept sending electrical pulses down his spine, making muscles work despite the lack of a pumping heart. The stem cells kept repairing dying brain cells. And when he took a break to focus on something else, it all caught up to him."

“The meditation,” Jack said.

“Right, the meditation. That’s why the rigor mortis was advanced. And that’s why my initial briefcase scan said that he was both healthy and dead days ago... I was getting readouts from two different groups of nanomachines.”

Renquist scratched his chin. “So what you’re saying is...”

“Jack here is the first verifiable case of a zombie. And the victim of unintentional suicide.”

“Trippy,” Renquist said. “But clean wrapping. Let me go inform the press of Gaba’s unfortunate accident.”

Renquist started to walk out. Then he stopped and turned to look at Hugh.

“I’ll see about getting you that junior detective badge.”



The media blitz was unprecedented. Jack’s visage graced the cover of magazines in nearly all venues: pop culture, business, tech gadgetry, medical journals, current events, even horror mags. He was dubbed everything from “The Digital Man” to “Zombie Tycoon”. He reveled in it.

Hugh was reading an article dedicated to discussing which phone Jack Gaba prefers to download into when Laurie came into his office. He got up to meet her.

“Hey, Hugh. I just wanted to thank you for believing in me and getting me out of there.”

“Ah, don’t mention it. I’m sure if I was your business partner’s hostile secretary, you would have done the same for me.”

“Speaking of hostile, don’t think just because you saved me that I’m going to date you.”

“I wouldn’t dream—”

He was cut off by her lips. They kissed him on the cheek. It wasn’t exactly the unbridled passion scene you get in movies, but it was sweet. It was more than he expected, more than enough.

She smiled at him. “So what are you going to do now?”

“I was planning on ways to break down that boss wall you have. Then, you know...”

“Not that. I mean with this media buzz, the business, everything.”

“Well, Jack’s handling the media while I handle the business. He loves the notoriety and he has more use for a reliable hard drive than money nowadays. Right now I haven’t quite made up my mind if digital mind uploading is good or bad for society. Without messing with the natural order too much, I’d like to see everyone get a chance to say one last goodbye. That’s probably going to be my stance unless I get tired.”

“What happens if you get tired?”

Hugh smiled at her. "Don't you know, Laurie? I never get tired."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Beamon spent twelve years in the U.S. Air Force, protecting his right to write later. Here it is later, and without many more excuses, he put fingers to keys and brewed up some fiction. His stories appeared in *Unidentified Funny Objects*, *LocoThology*, *Nine*, *Penumbra*, and others. James is currently working on his second novel while dodging system errors in Afghanistan. His blog is part war journal and part help site for other aspiring writers.

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