

Seven Years in Dreamland

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I think it was in 2089 when we discovered we could leave the world. My grandmother used to say that her grandmother said it had become impossible to live in the previous one. When the war that nobody remembers anymore broke out, society split up into different segments that lost contact with each other. I don't know, maybe that was nothing more than a dark scenario created to justify our world. What is it they say? A group of people found a way to leave that world and move into cyberspace. When I think about this, I imagine it wasn't easy – they had to create everything from scratch. They wanted to avoid repeating old patterns and their new world was supposed to have nothing to do with the previous one, but I assume their imagination was limited by what they were used to. I would never say this to my grandmother, who's a loyal fan of our place and refuses to admit that its roots go back to the old realm. People never believe in roots here. To some extent, they're right – they don't have any because their lives are continuously changing.

A group of hackers known as WWW were the ones who started it all. No, actually, it was even before that. At first, more and more people were spending most of their time in Dreamland, living alternative lives. Back then the world was horrible, so this was their only way to escape. The way the story goes, some of them got lost and couldn't come back. Their families found the best hackers in the world and persuaded them to help their relatives. The hackers agreed to, but no one could have anticipated that they'd also find the special portals that let people move into cyberspace. WWW was created by an independent group of specialists who became saviors of the previous society. People moved to the new world and started living new lives there. But not all of them. Why only some of them managed to escape and what happened to the rest of the society remains a big mystery. We don't talk about it, because it's part of the past.*

New laws were created and our imagination was no longer limited by the material world. We were free, not bound to matter. Tragedy in the old realm had been caused mainly by wars between different nations and cultures. Because the horrific destruction was based on racial, religious and cultural differences, the first thing we decided to do in the new world was to give up having fixed identities. We enacted a law requiring every citizen of our world to trade in one life and identity for a different one every seven years. That's long enough to enjoy one lifestyle and identity, while short enough to remember you can't hold on to it. Ours was a perfect society.

I sat in the office waiting for my last client. The last rays of sun shed light across the desk, and I was thinking that although the summer had started late, it was much hotter than usual at this time of year. Either some programmers had made a mistake, or they were making changes in the laws governing the weather.

* This probably stands for World Walking Wizards, a reference to their informal, nomadic way of life.

The client came in. I straightened up a little bit and smiled at him. He was in his fifties and wore a lime-green suit that contrasted with his dark skin but perfectly complemented his bright, green eyes. It reminded me of my young nephew, who was full of the joy only children can have. He was at the very end of his seven-year period, which we call Identity Time. My job was to inform clients about new identities for the next Identity Time and provide them with any help they might need. New identities were assigned by the System on the basis of previous Identity Times. The main idea was to have everybody experience as many cultural, religious and gender identities as possible.

“Could I have your name, please?” I asked.

He gave a very long, completely incomprehensible name, which I took to be Arabic. I checked the database and found I was right. The shortened version of his name was Mudy.

“I will check the next Identity Time for you.”

This was what I usually said to my clients. He could expect anything – to start new life within the Jewish religion, for example, or as an American businessman. Most Identity Times were appropriate, so our clients were never very stressed over these changes. We got rid of all forms of poverty, misery and failure.

“Actually, I don’t want you to check it for me,” he said.

I looked at him, surprised.

“How can I help you then?”

“I do not want to know who I am going to be, that is not what interests me.” He had a very strange English accent, and I was wondering if it was not a holdover from previous Identity Times. Residues of certain traits remain sometimes. They support diversity.

“I would like to ask you if it is possible to extend my current Identity Time. Actually, I would like to live out my life like this. I do not want any changes.”

I was surprised. Usually people were quite excited about their new Identity Times. Change-overs were a big success in our world – people understood variety to be an inevitable part of human life. And even if they were not excited about what was coming, they accepted it. This was the main premise of our world and arguing with it was not an option.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” I said calmly. “Why don’t you want to change your identity? Seven years is a long time, long enough for you to get bored with it.”

“I am happy with my identity. I don’t remember all my Identity Times, but I know that I have been a successful jazz guitarist, an Orthodox patriarch, a Chinese doctor working with children, and a Jewish writer. I am not sure if I was happy in those times, but I know that I am now and I don’t want that to change.”

“Who are you now?” I asked.

“I am an Arab and my wife has Balkan roots. I am the happy father of five children.”

“Are you Muslim?”

“No, I’m an atheist. I know I didn’t choose to be. It was just the System’s assignment, but I don’t want to philosophise about it. I am just a shopkeeper who wants his life to continue as it is. Can you help me?”

I didn’t say anything. Obviously, it was not possible, but it was the first request of this kind that I had come across in my life.

“No, I’m sorry,” I said. “I can only check your next Identity Time, and that is all I can do for you.”

He was my last client, so I closed up the office and went home. It was only a pleasant, fifteen-minute walk home for a warm summer evening. I didn't enjoy it, though. I was completely confused. I started thinking about our Identity Times Law. The main principles of our world targeted the evil that had destroyed the previous one, and had as their aim to make us all conscious of the temporary character of identity. As a result, it didn't make sense to discriminate against or belittle anybody based on their religion, culture or skin colour, because we all had an equal chance of taking on an identity similar to our neighbor's. Sooner or later we'd be living somebody else's life, so no one dared criticize another person, someone they might be one day. People usually quite welcomed the changes, if they weren't frankly indifferent to them. But what would happen if somebody wanted to hold on to an identity until the end? It would be against the law, for sure.

When I got home I went to bed, but couldn't get to sleep until 5 am. I was thinking that constant changes in identity can hinder the emergence of values attached to any of these identities. At the same time, emotional attitudes towards identity can lead to conflicts, intolerance and discrimination – problems we will never solve.

But maybe there was an error in our way of thinking and our law. Was it possible, I wondered, to be attached to one identity while at the same time accepting other identities that will never be your own? On the other hand, aren't we discriminating against the man who wants to continue in his life by not letting him do so? What a vicious circle humankind endures, I thought.

I fell asleep as the first rays of the sun entered my room. When I woke up, I had to deal with a horrifying jolt of reality. I think it was the first time I had experienced reality in Dreamland. When I opened the morning newspaper over breakfast, I saw a big picture of yesterday's client and a long article about how he'd attempted suicide the night before.

In our world death never comes. There is only transportation to different Identity Times. The only way that you can give up this place is through suicide. But it had only been tried by one person at the very beginning, just after the first group of people moved to our world. Nobody even thinks about it now, because our lives are good and, what's more, we can't know what happens after death. Some say it would mean a return to the previous world, where the war continues. I don't believe this, though.

I called my office to tell them I wasn't going to work today. Instead I went to the hospital to see my client.

I knocked on the door and went in. His eyes were closed, his face emotionless. When I sat down on the chair by his bed, he opened his eyes and looked at me with an animated, almost child-like expression.

"I think I understand," was all I said. He smiled and said nothing.

It was just the beginning, though, not the end.

Why am I telling all this? Because this was how we started the movement Mudy and I organized. It turned out that what happened to him was just the beginning of bigger changes. Now I see there are no ideal, permanent solutions, only a constant fight for our rights and those of others. We are searching for new solutions, to try to answer the question of how to protect rights to identity in our society but still support the acceptance of a variety of identities. We're still looking for answers, but at least we're now aware of our mistakes.