A Branching Narrative

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Oliver rushed to the teleporter and mashed the keypad with such haste that, unbeknown to him, he broke the machine in just the right way, such that he was about to accidentally clone himself. It was something straight out of a philosophy textbook, but rather than ending in an apparent paradox that invites copious speculation, Oliver and his clone both had a lot more living to do.

After standing in the teleporter for a seemingly elongated period of thirty seconds, Oliver stepped out and gave the machine a once-over. He found, as his eyes came back to the damaged keypad, that the display was reading "Out of Order." And just like that, the immediacy of his actions dropped away. There was no way to get over the other side of the city in time without using the hub system.

Nothing I can do about this, he thought to himself, while over the other side of the city his clone was rushing down the street towards his office. However, before Oliver could make it inside the office building, Oliver had called to let them know he wasn't going to be there for the presentation. Finding his own phone not able to connect to the 3NG network, and thinking himself technologically cursed, Oliver spotted a jogger and requested the use of his cheap holowatch. So it happened that while Oliver was strolling in the sunshine on his way home, Oliver was getting a slightly disgruntled look from Bernie at the front desk.

The mishap was not unprecedented. There had been cases of accidental cloning because of the hub system before. For this very reason, most people in serious relationships tended to avoid using them. Although, as time went on and the stories became more rare, people sunk into lazy non-concern and the hub system became as uninteresting as the antiquated railway system—a system that had once, a long time ago, been the cause of much fear and anxiety.

Oliver was inspecting his hubCard while he walked and, to his frustration, noticed a charge for the trip he didn't take. On top of that, there was a hefty sum taken out that he assumed was due to the broken machine. Not knowing the charge was for the cost of the materials used to create his clone, Oliver put the card away and continued on his way.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the city, the presentation had begun and Oliver was proudly outlining the work that he had done. The "science mob" that had requested a unique game engine seemed to be pleased with the result and were following Oliver's words with semi-subdued excitement.

As Oliver talked about the "intuitive modular input system," a face secretly appeared in the corner of the window and peaked in. Bernie couldn't help himself, he wanted to know how things were going. Since he had a hand in setting up this job, he felt warranted in sating his curiosity about its progress. After all, Bernie had the multifaceted job that sat somewhere between concierge, social organiser, and handsome face of the company. In a business context, to get to Oliver you go through Bernie—which is a much more cohesive system than when Oliver struck out on his own a few years prior.

The ringing phone brought Bernie back to his desk and away from the interesting happenings of the meeting room. The call, however, proved to be even more interesting. The hub system's management has a rather simple policy about clones: if they happen, let both people know. As it happens, this isn't as simple as ringing up "Oliver's mobile." Since that was also cloned, there were currently two phones with the same serial number. Sorting through what was once one and needs to become two is a rather messy job. When the first clone appeared, the news stories

reported that the clone got the new phone number, new haircut, and new look—this seems logical, but is awfully unfair from the point of view of the clone.

When Oliver came out of the meeting room he was all smiles and handshakes. The "science mob" were very pleased and wanted to expand their project with his technical direction. Oliver was excited, but a small part of him was wondering if perhaps this job was going to get too big for just himself. Had Bernie known what he was thinking, he may have been unable to stifle an inappropriate laugh.

"That went well," Oliver exclaimed after the mob had left. "They want to keep on going."

Bernie was sitting at his desk, a little too upright. Although gifted with a very tactful social grace, he had never had to tell someone that they were a clone. Of course, Oliver was blissfully unaware and was still rambling on about the project. It took a while until he noticed Bernie was silent.

"Is something wrong, Bern?" he asked, beginning to fear some nasty family catastrophe. "Are you okay?"

"Earlier, before you came in, I had a call from you letting me know that you weren't going to make it in today," Bernie said, somehow maintaining his characteristic smoothness.

Oliver frowned slightly and waited for an explanation.

"You told me that the hub system was broken."

Oliver's frown grew slightly deeper, "Well, I didn't make any such call."

Bernie's face softened an imperceptible amount as he thought about the situation for a moment.

"I guess that's true, but someone almost identical to you did. While you were in the meeting room I got a call from the hub system management."

"Some sort of stolen ident-"

"You're a clone. The machine malfunctioned and Oliver, the other Oliver, must have called in not knowing that he—I mean you—were on the way."

Oliver looked around for a chair. For a moment he felt lost in his own office. He could no longer hear anything Bernie was saying, instead the word "imposter"

began resounding in his head. His body almost flinched into action when the notion of fleeing came to mind, but he remained completely still. Although outwardly inert, collapsed into a nearby chair, Oliver's thoughts were becoming more and more rapid.

Wouldn't that be the best thing?, Oliver thought to himself. *To just run away and let myself get on with normal life.* Almost immediately the image of Adeline popped up and his ability for physical movement weakened. He couldn't bring himself to leave her, but the idea had been planted—*perhaps it would be the best for her.*

Bernie watched Oliver's eyes flick around wildly—it was the only evidence of the tumult of contradictory thoughts that were scrambling for attention.

"You're still Oliver," Bernie offered after some time, "just, there will be two of you for a bit until you get it sorted."

Despite this reassurance, and the *inner feeling* that he was truly Oliver, he couldn't help but concentrate on the fact that he was also *the clone*. Although he felt he wasn't, he *knew* he was. And so, as it goes, Oliver began to feel like a clone, he had become an imposter. His eyes darted at Bernie. In a somewhat contradictory line of reasoning he concluded, *this is not my workmate, this is not my office. I am an imposter.*

Oliver began to stand up, but as he did so he noticed the little scar on the back of his hand and stopped, mid-stoop. It was a childhood scar, a little innocuous injury he had gotten from climbing a tree. Was this his scar? Surely those hands are his hands, who can claim otherwise? Then surely he is Oliver. *But Adeline cannot be married to two Olivers, can she?*

Bernie had decided, noticing that Oliver was hunched over his seat and staring at his hands, that he was not taking the news all that well.

"Don't go running out on me," Bernie cautioned while he picked up the phone, "I know a guy that can help you."

The sentence had gone into Oliver's ear, but was stuck buffering. By the time he had understood what was said, Bernie was already off the phone and had rushed over to the other side of the office to fetch a glass of water. While handing the glass to Oliver's slowly outreaching hand, the office line began to ring.

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While all this had been going on at the office, Oliver was leisurely strolling home. He was initially interested to know what happened with the 'science mob' and if the presentation had been postponed, but with his phone currently marked as potentially counterfeit he was blocked from the network. He had tried to connect a couple of times before deciding the best course of action on this clear sunny day was to let Bernie deal with the people side of things. After a while Oliver got home, popped the kettle on, pottered around a little, and went out into the garden to see if he could spot Adeline. On pleasant days such as this she liked to work out in the garden, dictating to whatever device she happened to grab.

Rather than calling the office straight away from the house, Oliver decided that he'd stroll out to Adeline's little spot under her favourite tree and borrow her phone if she was there. Adeline indeed was there and was rather delighted to see Oliver out and about in the garden.

"Well hello there," she called out upon seeing him walking up the garden path. "I thought you were supposed to be at a meeting right about now?"

"Supposed to be," Oliver replied when he had gotten a little closer, "but the hub was down so I couldn't make it. They still charged me for the trip though."

"Well that's no good," she replied after happily accepting a kiss on the cheek. "So what happened with those scientists and their engine?"

Oliver told her that he didn't know, and that he'd like to borrow her phone to find out. It was right after this that the office phone rang and Bernie looked at it with a slightly twisted face.

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Bernie grabbed the device with a well-practised hand.

"Hello… everything is good."

He stared pointedly at the wall and continued, "The SimResearch people are happy and they want to expand the project. I can't talk right now, I'm in the middle of something that's rather time-sensitive."

Bernie ended the call and looked over guilty at Oliver.

"That was Oliver," he admitted.

Oliver looked away dejectedly and asked, all but knowing the answer, what he wanted.

"Just to check up on the project," Bernie answered out of habit. Then, remembering his previous phone call, added, "Someone is on the way to help you deal with this. He's qualified, works with my sister as the in-house philosopher."

For the first time since he had collapsed into the seat, Oliver straightened up and began slowly wringing his hands. Watching this change, Bernie smiled, gazed distractedly out the window, and edged slowly between the still-seated Oliver and the exit. A sharp rap at the door got Oliver to his feet in an instant, but Bernie waved reassuringly and turned to answer the knock.

After a brief moment consisting in mumbling and nodding, Bernie walked over and introduced the "in-house philosopher." He was a slim man with a short crop of curly, sandy-blonde hair.

"Oliver, this is Alby," then, turning formally to the other, "Alby, Oliver."

Oliver nodded and muttered a greeting as he shook Alby's extended hand. Alby asked if there was somewhere comfortable where they could sit, and the two went off into the meeting room as Bernie returned to his desk.

"So," Alby begun almost abruptly, "Bernie tells me you're a clone."

Oliver nodded but remained silent. He still hadn't come to grips with the fact that he was Oliver, but also somehow somebody else.

"Just a question, are you sure you're the clone and not the other fellow?"

"Yes. Quite certain. He got in the machine, it didn't work, then he continued home I guess. I popped up over here and started running around like I was me."

"But you're not you?"

"Not really. *He* is me, and I'm a clone of him. What right do I have to say I'm him?"

"Have you ever used the hub system before?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well then, isn't he already a clone too?"

Oliver pursed his lips and shook his head, "That doesn't matter. There's never been two of us before—and since he was the one that walked up to the machine and did the stuff, he's the real one."

"Didn't you do that too?"

Oliver paused for a moment.

"Well, yes, I suppose. But he persisted while I was created. In fact, he would have probably been standing there confused right at the moment I was being created."

"May I tell you something?" Alby asked in a well-balanced tone.

Oliver looked him in the eyes and nodded.

"From my position, I don't think that either one of you have a greater claim to being the 'real' Oliver. Had the hub not malfunctioned you would have continued on your day without anything being amiss. You fulfilled the plan of the day whereas the other Oliver did not, but, in a manner of speaking, it was both you and he that decided on that plan. Why should you be punished for sticking to the plan?"

"You're not suggesting that he's the clone are you? I don't think I can get on board with that."

"Not at all. In fact, I think the term 'clone' is a little bit derogatory. For a split second there were two Olivers that were identical in every way except for their location. Why should we label one the clone and one the original. The things that define both you and the other Oliver *as* Oliver aren't so easily divided."

Alby straightened up in his seat.

"Does the other Oliver know about you?"

Oliver looked out the window in the direction of Bernie before saying that he doesn't think so.

"Well," Alby said, "if the roles were reversed wouldn't he act in the same way as you?"

"He would have probably run away and let me live in ignorance," Oliver admitted, his thoughts continuing, *except I couldn't do it.*

"So you're even," Alby concluded.

Oliver took in a deep breath and nodded slowly.

"You should go talk to him, I'm sure he will see it from your point of view."

For the first time since the news of being a clone had struck him, Oliver smiled. He even almost let out a small chuckle, but then thought of Adeline and lost his cheer. There was something that had to be done, and the sooner the better.

Oliver breathed in, held it for a moment, and slowly let it out. He looked at Alby eye to eye and thanked him before asking about how he should pay him. Alby grinned and told him not to worry about it.

"I feel I have a responsibility to help where I can," Alby said, politely waving his hand at Oliver's attempts to offer him money. Oliver tried to insist, but Alby was already decided in his course of action.

"It's fine," Alby smiled. "Besides, I've never encountered an actual 'duplication problem' before."

The two men walked out of the meeting room and to the door of the office. Before parting ways, Alby stopped to give one last piece of advice.

"Just remember, although you and the other Oliver share a past and *were* the same person—despite how similar you are now—your futures may very well see you with radically different personalities. Even right now you two are different; you seem to have come to terms with an existential trauma that the other Oliver is yet to face. If either one of you needs some clarity, call me. You seem like good persons."

Oliver thanked Alby once again before turning to Bernie with a face full of gratitude. Bernie noticed that his jaw had unclenched and a little colour returned to his face, although his hands were still trembling.

"Well," Oliver said in a half-sigh, "at least we will be able to get twice the amount of programming done… probably."

Bernie smiled and asked what he was going to do next. Oliver was quiet for a moment before answering, "I guess it's time for me to head home."

"Going to call a car, I assume?" Bernie asked with a delicate cheekiness.

"I think I might walk for a bit."

In silence Oliver gathered his things, put away the now empty glass, grabbed a spare office phone, and with a small nod to Bernie, exited the office.

As he walked in the sunshine, Oliver couldn't stop himself running through all the beautiful moments he had shared with Adeline. Both the hard and happy times, so emotionally charged and meaningful, were now shared with this third person. Despite the fact that this other person was virtually identical to himself, Oliver couldn't help but feel somehow exposed. He felt as if they were both now laughing at him—together. He knew that this was impossible, for two reasons, regardless, his shoulders were slumped like that of a man condemned.

Oliver kept on walking, lost in thoughtless nostalgia for what felt like a time gone by. An overwhelming fondness for Adeline was welling up inside him. She was somewhere with somebody else—himself, practically, but someone else all the same. What moments were they creating that he was to be left out of? What mock arguments about dinners and surprise cups of tea?

Oliver continued to torture himself until he was overwhelmed and sat down at an old, disused bus stop. Again the feeling of being an imposter came creeping back up to him. He was on his way to disrupt a loving relationship—one that was continuing happily along without him. But underneath this was the feeling of love—*his love*—getting crushed. Why should he suffer? Has he not the same right as the other Oliver?

The tremor in Oliver's hands had increased in amplitude. Without thinking, he crossed his arms, pushing his now balled fists into his ribs. His breathing and his gaze were sharp, his muscles tensed, and every so often he would stand up, pace around, and sit back down feeling dizzied. It was from this blooming, buzzing confusion of anxiety that this particular Oliver was reborn.

The sun had long since set, taking with it the light and warmth from the street. At the bus stop, Oliver was now standing. In one last magnanimous act he had phoned Bernie and implored him to keep what had happened a secret, at least as long as possible. In front of Oliver was an intense and terrifying freedom, one that dissociated him from his old immediate social relations. It was a freedom that came with a steep price, but it was also one that allowed him to become his own person, rather than sharing a life with the other Oliver.

Just as people had lost interest in the railway system, stopped using the bus, and become unconcerned with the hub system, Oliver had left behind a way of moving through the world that could no longer work for him. As best he could, he continued onwards. By morning there was only one Oliver left in the city.

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