**Movement**

***by Nancy Fulda***

[*http://www.nancyfulda.com/movement-a-short-story-about-autism-in-the-future*](http://www.nancyfulda.com/movement-a-short-story-about-autism-in-the-future)

It is sunset. The sky is splendid through the panes of my bedroom window; billowing layers of cumulous blazing with refracted oranges and reds. I think if only it weren’t for the glass, I could reach out and touch the cloudscape, perhaps leave my own trail of turbulence in the swirling patterns that will soon deepen to indigo.

But the window is there, and I feel trapped.

Behind me my parents and a specialist from the neurological research institute are sitting on folding chairs they’ve brought in from the kitchen, quietly discussing my future. They do not know I am listening. They think that, because I do not choose to respond, I do not notice they are there.

“Would there be side effects?” My father asks. In the oppressive heat of the evening, I hear the quiet *Zzzap* of his shoulder laser as it targets mosquitoes. The device is not as effective as it was two years ago: the mosquitoes are getting faster.

My father is a believer in technology, and that is why he contacted the research institute. He wants to fix me. He is certain there is a way.

“There would be no side effects in the traditional sense,” the specialist says. I like him even though his presence makes me uncomfortable. He chooses his words very precisely. “We’re talking about direct synaptic grafting, not drugs. The process is akin to bending a sapling to influence the shape of the grown tree. We boost the strength of key dendritic connections and allow brain development to continue naturally. Young neurons are very malleable.”

“And you’ve done this before?” I do not have to look to know my mother is frowning. My mother does not trust technology. She has spent the last ten years trying to coax me into social behavior by gentler means. She loves me, but she does not understand me. She thinks I cannot be happy unless I am smiling and laughing and running along the beach with other teenagers.

“The procedure is still new, but our first subject was a young woman about the same age as your daughter. Afterwards, she integrated wonderfully. She was never an exceptional student, but she began speaking more and had an easier time following classroom procedure.”

“What about Hannah’s… talents?” my mother asks. I know she is thinking about my dancing; also the way I remember facts and numbers without trying. “Would she lose those?”

The specialist’s voice is very firm, and I like the way he delivers the facts without trying to cushion them. “It’s a matter of trade-offs, Mrs. Didier. The brain cannot be optimized for everything at once. Without treatment, some children like Hannah develop into extraordinary individuals. They become famous, change the world, learn to integrate their abilities into the structures of society. But only a very few are that lucky. The others never learn to make friends, hold a job, or live outside of institutions.”

“And… with treatment?”

“I cannot promise anything, but the chances are very good that Hannah will lead a normal life.” I have pressed my hand to the window. The glass feels cold and smooth beneath my palm. It appears motionless although I know at the molecular level it is flowing. Its atoms slide past each other slowly, so slowly; a transformation no less inevitable for its tempo. I like glass – also stone – because it does not change very quickly. I will be dead, and so will all of my relatives and their descendants, before the deformations will be visible without a microscope.

I feel my mother’s hands on my shoulders. She has come up behind me and now she turns me so that I must either look in her eyes or pull away. I look in her eyes because I love her and because I am calm enough right now to handle it. She speaks softly and slowly.

“Would you like that, Hannah? Would you like to be more like other teenagers?” Neither yes nor no seems appropriate, so I do not say anything. Words are such fleeting, indefinite things. They slip through the spaces between my thoughts and are lost.

She keeps looking at me, and I consider giving her an answer I’ve been saving. Two weeks ago she asked me whether I would like a new pair of dancing shoes and if so, what color. I have collected the proper words in my mind, smooth and firm like pebbles, but I decide it is not worth speaking them. Usually by the time I answer a question, people have forgotten that they asked it.

The word they have made for my condition is temporal autism. I do not like it, both because it is a word and because I am not certain I have anything in common with autists beyond a disinclination for speech.

They are right about the temporal part, though.

My mother waits twelve-point-five seconds before releasing my shoulders and returning to sit on the folding chair. I can tell she is unhappy with me, so I climb down from the window ledge and reach for the paper sack I keep tucked under my bed. The handles are made of twine, rough and real against my fingers. I press the sack to my chest and slip past the people conversing in my bedroom. Downstairs I open the front door and stare into the breathtaking sky. I know I am not supposed to leave the house on my own, but I do not want to stay inside, either. Above me the heavens are moving. The clouds swirl like leaves in a hurricane: billowing, vanishing, tumbling apart and restructuring themselves; a lethargic yet incontrovertible chaos.

I can almost feel the earth spinning beneath my feet. I am hurtling through space, a speck too small to resist the immensity of the forces that surround me. I tighten my fingers around the twine handles of the sack to keep myself from spinning away into the stratosphere. I wonder what it’s like to be cheerfully oblivious of the way time shapes our existence. I wonder what it’s like to be like everyone else.

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I am under the brilliant sky now, the thick paper of the sack crackling as it swings against my legs. I am holding the handles so tightly that the twine bites into my fingers.

At my feet the flytraps are opening, their spiny blossoms stretching upwards from chips and cracks in the pavement. They are a domestic variety gone wild, and they are thriving in the nurturing environment provided by this part of town. Our street hosts a flurry of sidewalk cafes, and the fist-sized blossoms open every evening to snare crumbs of baguettes or sausage fragments carried by the wind from nearby tables.

The flytraps make me nervous, although I doubt I could communicate to anyone why this is so. They feel very much like the clouds that stream overhead in glowing shades of orange and amber: always changing, always taking on new forms.

The plants have even outgrown their own name. They seldom feed on flies anymore. The game of out-evolving prey has become unrewarding, and so they have learned to survive by seeming pleasant to humanity. The speckled patterns along the blossoms grow more intricate each year. The spines snap closed so dramatically when a bit of protein or carbohydrate falls within their grasp that children giggle and hasten to fetch more.

One flytrap, in particular, catches my attention. It has a magnificent blossom, larger and more colorful than any I have seen before, but the ordinary stem is too spindly to support this innovation. The blossom lies crushed against the sidewalk, overshadowed by the smaller, sturdier plants that crowd above it.

It is a critical juncture in the evolutionary chain, and I want to watch and see whether the plant will live to pass on its genes. Although the flytraps as a whole disquiet me, this single plant is comforting. It is like the space between one section of music and another; something is about to happen, but no one knows exactly what. The plant may quietly extinguish, or it may live to spawn the next generation of flytraps; a generation more uniquely suited to survival than any that has come before.

I want the flytrap to survive, but I can tell from the sickly color of its leaves that this is unlikely. I wonder, if the plant had been offered the certainty of mediocrity rather than the chance of greatness, would it have accepted?

I start walking again because I am afraid I will start crying. I am too young. It is not fair to ask me to make such a decision. It is also not fair if someone else makes it for me.

I do not know what I should want.

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The old cathedral, when it appears at the end of the avenue, soothes me. It is like a stone in the midst of a swirling river, worn smooth at the edges but mostly immune to time’s capricious currents. Looking at it makes me think of Daniel Tammet. Tammet was an autistic savant in the twenty-first century who recognized every prime from 2 to 9,973 by the pebble-like quality they elicited in his mind. Historical architecture feels to me the way I think Tammet’s primes must have felt to him.

The priest inside the building greets me kindly, but does not expect a response. He is used to me, and I am comfortable with him. He does not demand that I waste my effort on fleeting things – pointless things – like specks of conversation that are swept away by the great rush of time without leaving any lasting impact. I slip past him into the empty room where the colored windows cast shadows of light on the walls.

My footsteps echo as I pass through the doorway, and I feel suddenly alone.

I know that there are other people like me, most of them from the same ethnic background, which implies we are the result of a recent mutation. I have never asked to meet them. It has not seemed important. Now, as I sit against the dusty walls and remove my street shoes, I think maybe that has been a mistake.

The paper sack rustles as I pull from it a pair of dancing slippers. They are pointe shoes, reinforced for a type of dancing that human anatomy cannot achieve on its own. I slide my feet into position along the shank, my toes nestling into the familiar shape of the toe box. I wrap the ribbons carefully, making sure my foot is properly supported.

Other people do not see the shoes the same way I do. They see only the faded satin, battered so much that it has grown threadbare, and the rough wood of the toe box where it juts through the gaps. They do not see how the worn leather has matched itself to the shape of my foot. They do not know what it is like to dance in shoes that feel like a part of your body.

I begin to warm my muscles, keenly aware of the paths the shadows trace along the walls as sunset fades into darkness. When I have finished the last of my pliés and jetés, stars glimmer through the colored glass of the windows, dizzying me with their progress. I am hurtling through space, part of a solar system flung towards the outer rim of its galaxy. It is difficult to breathe. Often, when the flow of time becomes too strong, I crawl into the dark space beneath my bed and run my fingers along the rough stones and jagged glass fragments that I have collected there. But today the pointe shoes are connecting me to the ground. I move to the center of the room, rise to full *pointe*…

And wait.

Time stretches and spins like molasses, pulling me in all directions at once. I am like the silence between one movement of music and the next, like a water droplet trapped halfway down a waterfall that stands frozen in time. Forces press against me, churning, swirling, roaring with the sound of reality changing. I hear my heart beating in the empty chamber. I wonder if this is how Daniel Tammet felt when he contemplated infinity.

Finally I find it; the pattern in the chaos. It is not music, precisely, but it is very like it. It unlocks the terror that has tightened my muscles and I am no longer a mote in a hurricane. I am the hurricane itself. My feet stir up dust along the floor. My body moves in concordance with my will. There are no words here. There is only me and the motion, whirling in patterns as complex as they are inconstant.

Life is not the only thing that evolves. My dancing changes every day, sometimes every second, each sequence repeating or extinguishing based on how well it pleases me. At a higher level in the fractal, forms of dance also mutate and die. People call ballet a timeless art, but the dance performed in modern theatres is very different from the ballet that originally emerged in Italy and France.

Mine is an endangered species in the performance hierarchy; a neoclassical variant that no one remembers, no one pays to watch, and only a few small groups of dancers ever mimic. It is solitary, beautiful, and doomed to destruction. I love it because its fate is certain. Time has no more hold on it.

When my muscles lose their strength I will relinquish the illusion of control and return to being yet another particle in the rushing chaos of the universe, a spectator to my own existence. But for now I am aware of nothing except my own movement and the energy rushing through my blood vessels. Were it not for physical limitations, I would keep dancing forever.

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My brother is the one who finds me. He has often brought me here and waits with electronics flickering at his temples while I dance. I like my brother. I feel comfortable with him because he does not expect me to be anything other than what I am.

By the time I have knelt to unlace my dance shoes my parents have arrived also. They are not calm and quiet like my brother. They are sweaty from the night air and speak in tense sentences that all jumble on top of each other. If they would bother to wait I might find words to soothe their frantic babble. But they do not know how to speak on my time scale. Their conversations are paced in seconds, sometimes in minutes. It is like the buzzing of mosquitoes in my ears. I need days, sometimes weeks to sort my thoughts and find the perfect answer.

My mother is close to my face and seems distressed. I try to calm her with the answer I’ve been saving.

“No new shoes,” I say. “I couldn’t dance the same in new shoes.”

I can tell that these are not the words she was looking for, but she has stopped scolding me for leaving the house unaccompanied.

My father is also angry. Or perhaps he is afraid. His voice is too loud for me, and I tighten my fingers around the paper sack in my hands.

“Stars above, Hannah, do you have any idea how long we’ve been looking for you? Gina, we’re going to have to do something soon. She might have wandered into the Red District, or been hit by a car, or—”

“I don’t want to be rushed into this!” Mother’s voice is angry. “Dr. Renoit is starting a new therapy group next month. We should—”

“I don’t know why you’re so stubborn about this. We’re not talking about drugs or surgery. It’s a simple, noninvasive procedure.”

“One that hasn’t been tested yet! We’ve been seeing progress with the ABA program. I’m not willing to throw that away just because…”

I hear the *Zzzap* of father’s shoulder laser. Because I have not heard the whine of a mosquito, I know that it has targeted a spec of dust. This does not surprise me. In the years since father bought the laser the mosquitoes have changed, but the dust is the same as it was millennia ago.

A moment later I hear mother swear and swat at her shirt. The mosquito whizzes past my ear as it escapes. I have been keeping track of the statistics over the years. Mother’s traditional approach to mosquitoes is no more effective than Father’s hi-tech solution.

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My brother takes me home while my parents argue about the future. I sit in his room while he lies down and activates the implants at his temples. Pinpricks of light gleam across his forehead, flickering because he’s connected to the Vastness. His mind is wide, now. Wide and broadening; horizons without end. Each pulse of his neurons flares across the thoughtnets to stimulate the neurons of others, just as theirs are stimulating his.

Forty minutes later my grandparents pause by the open doorway. My grandparents do not understand the Vastness. They do not know that the drool pools at his cheek because it is hard to perceive the faint messages from the body when the mind is ablaze with stimuli. They see the slackness of his face, the glassy eyes staring upwards, and they know only that he is far away from us, gone somewhere they cannot follow, and that they think must be evil.

“It isn’t right,” they mutter, “letting the mind decay like that. His parents shouldn’t let him spend so much time on that thing.”

“Remember how it was when we were young? The way we’d all crowd around the same game console? Everyone in the same room. Everyone seeing the same screen. Now that was bonding. That was healthy entertainment.”

They shake their heads. “It’s a shame young people don’t know how to connect with each other anymore.”

I do not want to listen to them talk, so I stand up and close the door in their faces. I know they will consider the action unprovoked, but I do not care. They know the words for temporal autism, but they do not understand what it means. Deep inside, they still believe that I am just bad mannered.

Faintly, beyond the door, I hear them telling each other how different young people are from the way they used to be. Their frustration mystifies me. I do not understand why old people expect the younger generations to hold still, why they think, in a world so full of tumult, children should play the same games their grandparents did.

I watch the lights flare at my brother’s temples, a stochastic pattern that reminds me of the birth and death of suns. Right now, he is using a higher percentage of his neural tissue than anyone born a hundred years ago could conceive of. He is communicating with more people than my father has met in his entire lifetime.

How was it, I wonder, when Homo habilis first uttered the noises that would lead to modern language? Were those odd-sounding infants considered defective, asocial, unsuitable to interact with their peers? How many genetic variations bordered on language before one found enough acceptance to perpetuate?

My grandparents say the Vastness is distorting my brother’s mind, but I think it is really the opposite. His mind is built to seek out the Vastness, just like mine is attuned to the dizzying flow of seconds and centuries.

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Night collides into morning, and somewhere along the way I fall asleep. When I wake the sky beyond my brother’s window is bright with sunlight. If I bring my face close to the glass, I can just see the flytrap with the magnificent blossom and the crumpled stem. It is too early to tell whether it will survive the day.

Outside the neighbors greet each other; the elderly with polite nods or handshakes, the teenagers with shouts and gestured slang. I wonder which of the new greetings used this morning will entrench themselves into the vocabulary of tomorrow.

Social structures follow their own path of evolution – variations infinitely emerging, competing, and fading into the tumult. The cathedral at the end of our street will one day host humans speaking a different language, with entirely different customs than ours.

Everything changes. Everything is always changing. To me, the process is very much like waves hitting the tidal rocks: Churn, swirl, splash, churn… Chaos, inevitable in its consistency.

It should not be surprising that, on the way from what we are to what we are becoming, there should be friction and false starts along the way. Noise is intrinsic to change. Progression is inherently chaotic.

Mother calls me for breakfast, then attempts to make conversation while I eat my buttered toast. She thinks that I do not answer because I haven’t heard her, or perhaps because I do not care. But it’s not that. I’m like my brother when he’s connected to the Vastness. How can I play the game of dredging up memorized answers to questions that have no meaning when the world is changing so rapidly? The heavens stream past outside the windows, the crustal plates are shifting beneath my feet. Everything around me is either growing or falling apart. Words feel flat and insignificant by comparison.

Mother and father have avoided discussing synaptic grafting with each other all morning, a clear indication that their communication strategies must once again evolve. Their conversations about me have always been strained. Disputed phrases have died out of our family vocabulary, and my parents must constantly invent new ones to fill the gaps.

I am evolving too, in my own small way. Connections within my brain are forming, surviving, and perishing, and with each choice I make I alter the genotype of my soul. This is the thing, I think, that my parents most fail to see. I am not static, no more than the large glass window that lights the breakfast table. Day by day I am learning to mold myself to a world that does not welcome me.

I press my hands to the window and feel its cool smoothness beneath my skin. If I close my eyes I can almost feel the molecules shifting. Let it continue long enough, and the pane will someday find its own shape, one constrained not by the hand of humans but by the laws of the universe, and by its own nature.

I find that I have decided something.

I do not want to live small. I do not want to be like everyone else, ignorant of the great rush of time, trapped in frantic racing sentences. I want something else, something that I cannot find a word for.

I pull on mother’s arm and tap at the glass, to show her that I am fluid inside. As usual, she does not understand what I am trying to tell her. I would like to clarify, but I cannot find the way. I pull my ballet slippers from the rustling paper bag and place them on top of the information packet left by the neuroscientist.

“I do not want new shoes,” I say. “I do not want new shoes.”

THE END