

Futures

Please fill out this form regarding your loved one

Travel disruption. By Carol Scheina

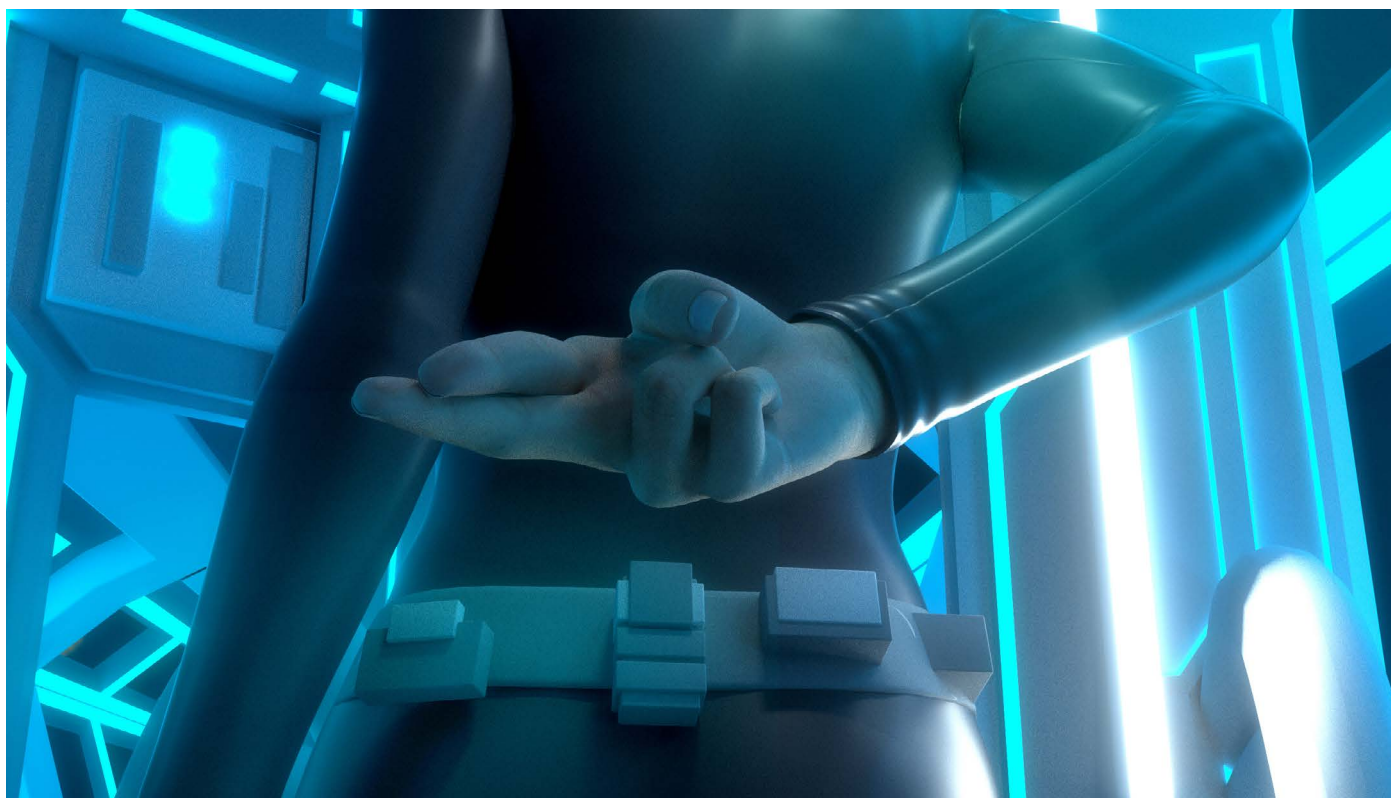


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

What is your loved one's favourite smell? Lani stared at the questionnaire and realized that after two years of being married to Omar, she didn't really know.

Why the hell did she have to answer that, anyway?

Hadn't Omar arrived safely?

They'd taken different ships, which she hated right from the start, but tickets were cheaper that way. She'd done the synaptic download alone, eyes closed and trying not to think about the fact that as her mind downloaded, her body would die.

Omar, Omar, Omar, she'd thought. She'd see him again after their 200-year venture across the stars.

His name was on her lips when she awoke in her newly printed body. As her mind adjusted,

she imagined hiking with Omar through the planet's terraformed forests, snuggling in the house they could finally afford. The new body was so perfect she couldn't even tell it had been printed.

Omar was supposed to arrive four weeks after her, yet instead of kissing him, she was sitting in a hospital room filling out paperwork about favourite smells.

A familiar person walked by: Margery. The nurse had overseen Lani's care in those first weeks after synaptic insertion.

"Margery? What's going on?"

"Lani?" Margery's voice lowered. "No one told you? There was an accident with the ship."

"Oh god!"

"The synaptic IDs were lost, the personality surveys – all our identification data, gone."

Lani felt shoved inside a deflating balloon, all the air escaping, the walls closing in, the

world shrinking to nothingness.

No identification.

Lani knew how important it was to match minds with the correct bodies. Before their trip, scanners had measured *everything* about her and Omar; not just their synaptic pathways, but their physical bodies as well. Machines tested how they held a ball, walked, even chewed food. Their printed bodies *needed* to fit what their synaptic patterns expected. A wrong match would force the mind to adjust for the physical body. It would create someone completely new.

It would not be her husband.

Margery patted Lani's shoulder. "Stay calm. We're doing everything we can."

Their family, friends – all 200 years away and dead. Here was where their future would begin. What if she had to do it all on her own?

What is your loved one's fabric of choice?

Futures

Lani didn't know. *Oh god.*

Two eternal hours later, Margery asked Lani to come into another room. "The doctor wants you to test out possible ID matches. We can't keep the synaptic connection too long, or it'll start to imprint. You'll have five minutes with each. Just do the best you can."

Five minutes to determine whether it was her husband? Lani took a shaky breath.

Omar lay on a table, tubes weaving around his arms, wires jutting from his head, like an octopus had merged with her sleeping husband's form.

The nurse pushed a button. Omar's eyes opened. "The green is everlasting. Do you see the green? Like a poet's breath."

What the hell? "He's not making any sense."

Margery explained, "He's expressing basic levels of his synaptic patterns. Sensory memories appear first. Did he like the colour green?"

Did he? They'd never discussed colours. "I don't know."

Omar babbled on as Lani held his hand, then his eyes focused on her. "My love. My love."

"Omar?"

His eyes closed.

The nurse patted Lani's shoulder. "We had to cut the connection."

"But that was Omar!"

"Many people focus on a loved one before

the synaptic procedure, so it's often their first coherent thought. He's not really seeing you. We're going to try another one."

After several long moments, Omar's eyes opened. "The rocks crumbled over my cupcakes. Smells like musty fur and fatigue." After several mumbling minutes, he said, "I was dreaming of you the whole trip. Finally, we're together."

His eyes closed.

That *had* to be Omar.

Margery asked, "Did Omar like cupcakes?"

Lani bit her lip. She didn't know. How could she not know?

The third time Omar opened his eyes, he talked about slippery sheets and fluffy bath towels. Then, "I love you so much. Just hold me tight, baby."

Lani squeezed Omar's hand. This seemed like her husband too. "How many more are you testing?"

"Just those, but ..." Margery bit her lip.

"What is it?"

"We're still exploring the full extent of the data loss. We'll do our best to find your husband, but there's a potential he may be lost."

No. There was no world where Omar didn't survive. Where she was here alone.

What if she just picked one? All three possibilities had professed love for her; she just had to keep telling him who he was. Who

she needed him to be. That he loved her.

Minds could change to the physical body, right?

"He liked the colour green," Lani blurted out. "I just remembered."

The nurse nodded. "That'll help us."

Lani bit her lip and tried not to think about what she'd just done.

Lani was ready to forget those two weeks of hell in the hospital. Any time a doctor's eyes narrowed, Lani was always there, saying everything was fine. Yes, that was exactly like Omar. How could anyone contradict a wife?

"You're my husband," like a jammed audio system, she whispered to Omar over and over while trying to muffle her fears. What if they took Omar away?

They had made it, though.

Omar brought her lips to his. "We should celebrate. I'll make our favourite for dinner."

What was their favourite meal? Omar had never enjoyed cooking.

But that was then. This was now.

"Our favourite meal sounds perfect."

Carol Scheina is a deaf speculative fiction author from the Northern Virginia area. Her stories have appeared in publications such as *Flash Fiction Online*, *Escape Pod* and others.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Carol Scheina reveals the inspiration behind *Please fill out this form regarding your loved one*.

This story was born from two quite unrelated events. The first involved a day stuck at home, during which my husband and children took several online personality surveys to pass the time. I started wondering if I could anticipate my family's results, specifically my husband's. Does he prefer pizza or hamburgers? What is his favourite vacation destination? How would he describe himself?

After more than a decade together, how well did I really know my husband?

The second event involved a discussion with my oldest child on downloading human consciousness into ships to allow interstellar travel. My child's words tumbled out at excited speeds. What could humanity do with that kind of technology? Meanwhile, my mind was wondering what could go wrong. (Those reactions correspond pretty well to our personality tests, by the way.)

My mind lumped together interstellar travel gone wrong and personality tests, and thus, this story was born.

