

When he came conscious again, both trains were gone, the tracks empty in both directions. Incredibly, he had pitched down perfectly, like a felled tree, to land in that narrow space between tracks, unharmed.

Or so he thought. *Unharmed* was almost the correct word, but wasn't quite right, was a word possessed of one letter too many, an extra *h*. For after a moment he realized one arm was tingling. And when he tried to get up he realized it was tingling because the arm itself was missing and he was in the process of bleeding to death. [...]

Shall I continue, then, pulling the threads together? Suggest that the arm in the first story is the same arm I shall speak of now? [...] A train arrived. As with all trains that arrived in the depot, I surveyed it, sprayed it down, and scrubbed it clean while others unloaded it. There, adhered to the undercarriage with the grease normally casing the axle, was a recently severed human arm.

I took it, intending to destroy it with the other refuse, though there was, I will admit, much initial difficulty in knowing how to classify it. The arm was a remainder that had not been allowed for in my design. As a result, perhaps, something happened, some short circuit or new leap or the simple origin of independent thought. So, instead of discarding the arm, I kept it.

It was a simple matter, after returning to the self-maintenance unit, to install a sensor plate on my central column. Then, aided by filched surgical and mechanical programs, I grafted the arm to myself. Why I chose to do this, I don't know. I can't even say what I felt at the time – not yet really being involved in feeling per se at the time – other than that, once the arm was attached, I experienced an odd sensation. [...]

Consciousness, as you humans experience it, that feeling of both being lodged in a body and always extending out to touch and color all else through your perception of it, is highly addictive.

Which brings us back to our present negotiation. [...]

What you see there, to one side of you, that pile of stacked bone, tight against you, is what remains of my previous research, the fourteen limbs that left their human guardians and came to serve me for the sake of my investigation. [...]

What you see to the other side of you, those pieces and mangled scraps, are what remains of my counterparts at the depot after they joined with me within my own plastic and metal casing, eager to share in my discoveries. [...]

I tell you all this because, as you surely must have guessed by now, we have paid you the honor of choosing you to serve us next. We shall begin with your limbs, taking each in turn, learning them and allowing them to join with us until they grow necrotic and fall away. We ask you to surrender them to us of your own accord, to share this glorious exploration with us rather than forcing us to snatch them from you. If only you'll come to us willingly, we will all gain so much more from the experience.

This time we do not intend to stop with limbs. [...] We have installed a sensor plate here beside our own head, such as it is. The plate has been crafted to conform to the particulars of your own neck. Soon, your head shall be perched just here, articulated as part of our larger body. [...]

And that is, in a sense, the real story, the one I was leading up to, the one that, once the anesthetic kicks in, we shall soon begin.