

Juliettes
by
Vernon C. Seward

Juliette sat at her terminal as she did every hour of each work day since being hired as a entry level programmer, producing lines of code that became a part of an increasingly larger and more complex work, supported by hundreds of others just like her. She came to work, tapped away at her computer, and went home to a silent apartment. She was a barely significant cog in a hardly important project for a rarely noticed firm.

Occasionally, Juliette would treat herself to lunch at her favorite restaurant, but she did this so infrequently that no one ever noticed the girl who quietly ate her lunch while reading a trashy romance paperback at the same table each time she visited. The waiter never learned her name and treated her as he would any stranger. The cashier smiled automatically as she took Juliette's money, the same way she did the people before and the people after her.

Juliette was not a remarkable person. She was smart and pleasant to look at, but somehow she seemed to always blend into the background, always becoming one in an endless sea of ones.

Each day flowed into the next, moving with the cadence of a funeral procession. Each as uneventful as the previous, until one day a thought occurred to Juliette as she sat tapping at her keyboard. She sat back in her chair, her eyes fixed on some distant point in space and allow the thought to form and fill her mind.

"What if, " she said out loud but not loud enough for anyone to hear. "...what if I just got up and left? Who would care? Who would notice?"

She paused to consider what she had just said. Who would notice?

"I think I would, " came a reply.

Startled, Juliette looked around to see who might have answered her. The guy in the cubical behind hers, she believes his name is Bill, was steady tapping at his keyboard while talking on the telephone. The cubical to the right was vacant. Sally, the cube's normal occupant, had gone home earlier with a nasty cold. The cubical to the left was occupied by a new hire, a young Hispanic man who kept to himself and never smiled.

Strange, she thought. The voice she heard, or thought she heard, worried her. It sounded vaguely familiar. But just then her phone rang and soon she had almost forgotten about it. Juliette continued her her workday routine though she felt just a bit unsettled. The four words from the mysterious voice began to echo faintly in her mind.

I think I would.

A week or so had past and life continued for Juliette as uneventful as always. Each day blending seamlessly into the next. Even the mystery of the voice she had heard, and the four words it had uttered, were finally forgotten. Robotically she performed the small lists of tasks that her employer requested or required of her each day and she never complained. That is, until another day came when she had a familiar thought materialized in her mind while she was at lunch.

"I wonder...", she said as she looked up from her trashy romance novel that she read as she sat in her favorite restaurant, at her favorite table. "I wonder what would happen if I stopped being me and became someone else?"

The people at the next table eyed her suspiciously and the waiter, who was new and had never seen Juliette before, stopped and asked if there was something he could get her. Realizing she had spoken aloud, Juliette sheepishly declined service from the waiter and tried to hide behind her book.

Just then, someone asked. "Who would you want to be?"

Alarmed, Juliette looked around to see who had spoken. She half expected not to find the owner because the voice was the same as the one which spoke to her before. The people around her continued eating or talking as if nothing extraordinary had occurred. No one looked as if they had even noticed her, much less spoken to her. Juliette wondered if she might be hallucinating, or perhaps getting some sort of illness.

She felt her forehead, she didn't think it felt abnormally warm. She couldn't remember taking so much as an aspirin the last year or so. She wondered, silently, just what, the fuck, was going on?

She quickly picked up her things, hurriedly paid the cashier, and went back to the imagined safety of her cubical. There, Juliette sat for a long while just staring at her terminal. Bill, the man in the cubical across from hers, asked if she was ok. Juliette responded with a brief smile and a nod and continued to stare at her terminal. Her phone rang, but she didn't answer it, she was afraid she would hear that voice on the other end.

Who would you want to be?

The words replayed like a skipping record in her mind. She began to wonder if she actually heard the voice or imagined hearing her own thoughts. It's possible, she reasoned, that her subconscious answered her own question in such a way that it sounded as if it came from an external source.

"Yes!" She thought. "Yes, it could be only my mind playing tricks on me!" It was an answer, though not a very good one. Even so, she held onto it, and she felt less frightened as the words continued to echo within her.

Who would you want to be?

Juliette, still unsettled, called her manager and told him that she was feeling ill and that she needed to go home. She locked her terminal, picked up her purse and made her way through the maze of cubicles to the elevator. When the elevator car arrived empty, Juliette sighed in relief. She didn't want to participate in the inevitable elevator interaction one had to go through when there were others present, she just wanted to be alone. She needed to think, to clear her head so that she could figure out what was happening to her. She stepped into the elevator and pressed the 'down' button, then she leaned back to allow the smooth, fake wood grain walls of the elevator car to support her. Her eyes settled on the display above the door and watched it tick off the floors as she descended to the ground level garage.

Without warning, the now familiar, but nonetheless unsettling voice said. "I know why are you so unhappy. I can help you."

Juliette yelped and backed into the corner of the small elevator car in a vain attempt to distance herself from the vocal phantom that plagued her. Wild-eyed, she looked around the small space for a speaker grill, anything that might explain the voice she now knew she had distinctly heard.

Fear gripped her. She felt trapped. The elevator stopped and Juliette bolted through the barely opened door and ran to her car. She frantically opened the door and got inside, locking the door behind her. She glanced back at the elevator, its doors were closing, no one had entered or existed. Her heart pounded as she searched the lot for a face, a logical explanation for what she had heard, but she found none. Hot tears welled in her eyes. She looked at herself in the car's rearview mirror and asked her reflection, "Am I going mad?"

She shuddered and tears flowed over her cheeks, mucus dribbled from her nose, she wiped at it absently then, out loud, she demanded. "What's happening to me?"

"I'm sorry to do this this to you, but its the only way," came a reply.

Juliette closed her eyes tightly and screamed. "Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!"

The voice persisted. "I'm sorry, I am so very sorry. I only want to help."

Juliette put her hands over her ears and pressed so hard that her head hurt, but the voice rang through as clearly as before. "Please, I know this is hard for you, but we must talk."

"WHERE ARE YOU?" Juliette screamed.

"I am here, with you."

"LEAVE ME ALONE!!!!"

"If I do you may die."

"I DON'T CARE! JUST GO AWAY!" Juliette wailed. "GO AWAY AND LEAVE ME ALONE!"

She rocked back and forth in her seat and sobbed uncontrollably. Her heart banged in her chest like some caged animal desperate for freedom. Then, mercifully, fear, like a dark blanket, consumed her totally. The world turned black as Juliette lost consciousness.

"Juliette?"

The voice sounded so familiar. "Mom?" Juliette asked.

"No." The voice replied softly.

Juliette's mind slowly clear. She opened her eyes to find that she was sitting in her car. The doors were locked. Then, she remembered what had happened before she blacked out. She began to cry. "God!" She whimpered. "Oh God, oh God!" She began to cry again.

"Please. I won't hurt you. I couldn't hurt you. Please just listen."

"Who are you?"

"This will sound strange, but I am you."

Me? Juliette thought. Still apprehensive but in a more controlled, she asked. "What do you mean? Are you saying that I am talking to myself?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. You are not insane, however. I am very real."

"But, how can that be? What I'm hearing has to be my imagination or maybe I'm crazy, or..., or..., I don't know what."

"Please, let me explain. I am you, a you from a possible future."

Curious disbelief began to veil her fear. Juliette wiped the tears from her cheeks and looked around her car hoping to find some small hidden device, the source of her torment.

"So you are telling me that you are me and you've traveled back in time? This has got to be a joke."

"No, it's no joke. I have not traveled back in time, I am still 30 years ahead of you, possibly. Only my voice, actually, my vocalized thoughts has made the trip and only you can hear me."

Juliette sat back and considered what the voice was telling her. She said. "All right, if what you say is true then tell me something about myself that no one else knows."

"Sure. Remember Carl Robinson? Remember how bad I . . . , you..., I mean we wanted him and we finally got him alone and we threw ourselves at him only to find out the guy was an ewww?"

Juliette wiped her remaining tears and smiled at the memory. "Yes, I remember. What was it that turned me off?"

"Ear wax." The voice said.

Juliette snickered. "Yep! It looked like he had enough wax in his ears to make a dozen candles!"

The voice laughed too. It was a familiar laugh, and, in that moment, Juliette realized that the laugh was hers. "Ok, so you are me. That or I'm completely crazy. They say crazy people hear voices. Maybe..."

"You are not crazy." The voice said sternly. "You have to believe that."

Juliette sat quietly trying desperately to digest what was happening to her. After many moments of silence, Juliette asked. "Are you there?"

"Yes, I'm still here. I thought I'd give you a moment to collect yourself."

"Thank you. Um..., how is this possible?"

"Well, I could explain it, but I don't think it would make a lot of difference."

"Ok then, at least tell me why you are here."

"Why indeed," the voice sighed. "As I had mentioned earlier, I'm here to save your life, and to end mine."

"What?" Juliette asked, totally confused.

"I am from one of many possible futures for you. At any moment you make decisions that make a particular future more possible. The thing is, the decisions you are currently making is leading you to become me."

"But you're alive, which means I'll be alive," responded Juliette.

"True, but it's how I live that is the problem."

"You lost me again."

The voice was silent for a moment, then said. "Maybe if I told you about my past, your likely future, maybe you will understand better."

"Maybe," agreed Juliette.

"Ok. In about a year from now you will be finishing a photography class. I..., I mean we discover that we like photography, but the project you are working on at work starts taking more of your time. You get a promotion and more responsibility, but you are never truly happy.

Five years from now you sign a release in which you donate your organs for tissue transplant and research. There's no way for you to comprehend how that decision will affect your life, until it is too late."

"But you're not dead. If I'm alive, how can that be a bad thing?" Asked Juliette.

"In good time. Seven years from now you will fall in, then out of love with Robert Grimes. Each of these events do not amount to much by themselves, but the compound affect will become nearly fatal. Over worked, unloved, and unfulfilled, you begin to care little about yourself. Your life begins to spiral downward."

"Then, on a rainy night 15 years from now, after having too much to drink, we cause an terrible traffic accident. We lay in a comma for almost a year before our body finally gives out."

The doctors reviewed that release form. The next thing we know, we are here.", The voice fell silent.

"Here? Where's here???" Asked Juliette. "Where did we end up?"

"You have to understand that I am a possible future," the voice implored. "That's why I had to talk to you, so you could see, so you could change."

Juliette became frantic. "See what?! Change what?!"

There was silence. Juliette sat in her car and strained to hear a reply. None came. "Hello? Are you still there?"

"Yes," the Voice said solemnly. "I wasn't entirely truthful before. I said that only my thoughts could travel back to you. The truth is, with effort, I can show you what I see." The voice was quiet for a moment, then said, "Perhaps what I sense is more accurate than what I see. I don't think I can see in the way you do anymore."

Juliette could not hide her confusion. "What? Are you blind?"

“Well, perhaps, in the way you see the world. But I can now sense far more than what your eyes and ears can.” The voice paused, then continued. “I will have to show you before you can understand. You have to see what I see. Sense what I sense. But remember, this is only one of a infinite number of possible futures. Close your eyes.”

Juliette closed her eyes and waited. A bright spot of light appeared to hang in front of her. The spot expanded. As it grew, fuzzy shapes began to form within the light. At first Juliette could not make out what she was seeing, but as the scene expanded, but her mind was flooded with light and sound. She became aware that what she was seeing light reflected from her surroundings, but also other frequencies. There were no shadows. There was a cacophony of colors and sounds. Some she had never seen or heard before and her mind struggled to make sense of it all. Objects seemed to shimmer as if everything around her generated its own light, emitting its own sounds.

It took her several moments to make sense of what she was experiencing. Her mind struggled to relate what she was sensing to visual references in her own experiences. Slowly, the flood of sensory input subsided and she began to see shapes she recognized.

She realized she was in some sort of large room, like a warehouse, but it seemed to go on in all directions. There were row after row of glass globe suspended by unseen means. Each globe contained a gray mass. The voice spoke. “I am the in the globe in front of you.”

The scene shifted and Juliette was in front of one of the globes. Juliette, puzzled, said. “I don't understand. Where are you?”

“I am in front of you. I am the gray tissue in the globe. It is all that is left of you. Of us.”

Juliette was horrified. The clear globe contained a brain suspended in a reddish liquid. It didn't look real, like a prop in a cheap science fiction movie. She focused on the mass. Itv floated motionless in its liquid bath. Dangling beneath it was a stubby red extension, much like a fleshy tail. The extension ended in a mass of hair-fine glowing filaments, which where bundled by several small straps. The bundles led away from the gray mass and disappeared into an opening at the bottom of the globe. Juliette had decided that what she beheld could not possibly be real, her mind simply would not, could not accept it.

Then the lump of grey matter moved! It writhed and pulsed, then settled. As if they had sensed the movement, the other lumps of grey wriggled within their spheres, the movement expanding out like a wave.

Juliette screamed, and opened her eyes, ending the vision.

Her heart was beating wildly and her hands shook uncontrollably. “What..., what happened to me?”

“The donor card. You donated your organs. After the crash and after you lay comatose for so long, and since no one claimed you, a decision was made to take you off life support and harvest your organs. Your heart, kidneys, liver, even your eyes were transplanted into people who needed them. But your brain..., the government took that. You became part of a top secret program that used human brains to build an organic computer. Your are kept alive and they believe that your memories were erased. No one believes you are still conscious, and no one really cares.”

Juliette struggled to comprehend what her future self was telling her. She was a thing in a jar! A lump of bottled grey matter in a sea of bottled grey matter. And in that moment her current

existence came flooding back to her. The life she was living, the drab, colorless existence that she now lived in would go on. She felt trapped. She wanted to flee, to get away from her life, both current and future.

She closed her eyes and instantly the images of what she had seen before, in the future, was before her. "OH GOD!" She wailed.

The voice spoke. "God can't help you. Only you can."

Juliette struggled to control herself. She sobbed and tried to forget what she had seen, but couldn't. "What...", she stammered. "What can I do? How can I stop this from happening?"

"Live." Came the simple reply.

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Juliette aimed her telephoto lens at the pride of lions that lounged in the shade of a tree on the bank of a river some 500 meters away. The hot South African sun made the image in her camera's viewfinder waver, but she managed to click off a few shots she believed would be useable.

As she watched several cubs pounce on each other, rolling in the savannah dust under the watchful eyes of a trio of lionesses. Juliette marveled at their understated power, strength that could take down a wildebeest, yet gentle enough to cuff a cub that got a bit too rambunctious. Her guide, Joseph, had gone back to the Landrover for more film. Jim, her boyfriend, had scolding her about her continued use of that media when most new cameras were now digital.

"I like the idea of film", she replied.

"What does that even mean?" He asked, to which she only smiled.

Juliette knew she could never get him to fully understand that it was the experience that she was after. She wanted to know photography in its fullest. She wanted hone her skill behind the camera, learn everything about it and how to produce the best possible image. She felt that going digital was cheating, a shortcut, settling instead of striving to know more. Perhaps the old Juliette would have been content with 'good enough', but not now, not this Juliette. She knew that she would never "settle" for anything ever again.

Juliette wanted to immerse herself into each new experience, savoring every facet, every nuance. Unless Jim could have known what she knew, there was no way she could make him understand.

It had been two years since that voice spoke to her, and her new life was so full that she seldom gave it much thought. She had imagined that her once future self no longer existed, that her choices in life had led to a different future, one where a disembodied voice housed in a jar could not haunt her. Warn her. Be her.

Her photographs were selling well, and people seemed to notice the wild life around them more because of her pictures, or so it had been said. And it pleased Juliette to think that she might, in some small way, be making a difference in the world around her. This was the life she wanted and she felt something that seemed to have eluded her most of her life. She felt contentment.

She steadied the camera and snapped off several shots. She was far enough away that the pride hadn't noticed her and felt threatened. As she looked through her viewfinder, however, she realized that two, possibly three members of the pride were missing. Joseph had warned her to keep a watchful on the lions as some will go off to hunt while a few remained behind to care for the cubs.

She heard the grass rustle behind her. "Did you find the film?" She asked, but heard no reply. The hairs on Juliette's nape stood on end, someone, something was watching her.

"Joseph?" She called out in a low voice, not wanting to disturb the lions. No one answered. At that moment, Juliette knew what the watcher was. She turned slowly and looked right into a pair of yellow eyes not more than 10 meters away. Her heart skipped a beat, instantly the lioness pounced on her, sinking its teeth into her throat and shaking her like a rag doll.

A gunshot rang out, and it was all over. Warmth washed over Juliette, and she suddenly felt oddly distant, as if she wasn't actually a part of the scene, but merely a spectator. There was no pain, no panic, she was simply there, watching. She watched as Joseph ran to her carrying the rifle that killed the lioness. She saw Joseph's frantic, futile attempts to stop the bleeding from her neck, his pleading with her not to die. The scene started to recede, as if she were being drawn into a tunnel. Though she watched as the last eddies of life drained from her body she did not feel fear and was not concerned. She felt bathed in contentment and, as she was pulled away from the scene of Joseph cradling her lifeless body and sobbing, she noticed the expression on the face of the husk she was leaving behind. There was a faint, but very definite smile.

The End