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Phantom

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PHANTOM

Daniel didn't want to lie on his back. With the back of his head on the pillow, he couldn't feel the texture of the scratchy, white hospital sheets on his cheek. He rolled over onto his side.

He liked feeling as much and as often as possible. A week and a half ago, he was running full-blast, shooting and getting shot. Now he was lying on his back in a blank hospital, with blank emotion, and one blank sleeve. When he lost his left arm, he lost what seemed like half of his sense of touch; because of this, he liked to feel the scratchy sheets.

But as much as Daniel wanted to feel these days, he was unwilling to experience his surroundings. The dreary veterans' hospital was depressing as hell: whispers bounced off white walls; the nurses appeared to be more dead than the patients. He didn't want to feel any gloomier, so he rarely opened his eyes.

The change from combat to bed had been jarring. He felt like a corpse, a pod - a space-filler. He wasn't even sure that he was still alive for the first few hours, and he was afraid to ask.

Luckily, he had paid attention in Intro to Philosophy. *I think, therefore I exist*, he reassured himself.

This philosophy didn't make sense when it came to his left arm, though. Although it wasn't even there, it hurt more than anything had hurt in his life. The imaginary fingers were buried in the imaginary palm; the imaginary hand was twisted and clenched like a crusty old gym sock. The doctors at the center had been looking into treatments because, they determined, these phantom pains were too severe to ignore.

I feel my arm; therefore, it doesn't exist, he thought, then let out a

dispirited chuckle.

Beyond the physical pain, there was more pain – the thought of never swimming, never playing basketball again. Most of all, his fifteen-year-old dream of being a concert pianist was destroyed.

Daniel opened his eyes. His best friend, the man who had been by him all through combat, was on the bed next to him. Jake had gotten shot in the butt – not too serious, but enough for a hospital stay. Basically, Jake had explained, he couldn't dress his wound, so he had to stick around.

He saw Jake's eyes were open.

"Hey," Daniel said quietly.

Jake's head turned. "What's up, man?" he asked.

Daniel sighed. "Just thinking about how I won't be able to play the piano anymore."

"You play the piano, man?" Jake said. "That's cool."

He had been saying strange things like that since they had been in the hospital.

"You knew that," Daniel said. "I've told you a million times."

Jake laughed. "If you say so, man," he said. "How good were you?"

"Pretty good, I guess."

"Why did you join the military?" Jake asked. "Weren't you worried about wrecking your hands?"

Daniel made a mental note to mention Jake's forgetfulness to the nurse again. He had already told her about it, but she hadn't done anything. He was convinced Jake had some kind of memory loss.

"I joined ROTC in college so I could pay for school," Daniel said. "I didn't really think I'd ever end up fighting in a war."

"Well," Jake said, "It's not your fault. The war shouldn't have happened anyway."

This, Daniel thought, was such a drastic change in Jake. During combat, he had been very enthusiastic about the war. Now, in the hospital, he was like a completely different person. *It must be the memory loss*, Daniel thought.

"Think about it," Jake said insistently. "The war started on false premises. It was conceived on false premises. We weren't fighting for anything real. Did you see that Fahrenheit movie, man? In ten years, the government is going to realize its mistake. In fifteen, they'll erase it from the textbooks. When they can, they'll erase it from our minds. It'll be like it never even happened."

Annoyed, Daniel cut in. "It happened," he said. "People will remember it."

"But how will they know it happened?" Jake asked. "Sometimes people think they remember things that didn't happen."

Sometimes they don't remember things that did happen, Daniel thought.

"It's like that ol' stump you've got there," Jake added. "Hurts like hell, but it ain't there. See?"

Daniel was sick of the conversation. He didn't want to hear that the war that he had lost his arm to was pointless. He rolled onto his back, away from Jake. He closed his eyes, and either blinked or slept for hours. He didn't have a clock so he couldn't really tell. It didn't matter, anyway.

When he opened his eyes, the blond nurse was standing over him. She wanted him to come with her.

"We're going to try some therapy," she explained as she helped him out of bed. "We're going to work on that phantom pain."

As she led him out of the room, he passed twenty veterans. Ten on the left, ten on the right. None of them moved. They were stationed very

close to one another. He briefly wondered if he was in the dead-people room, and if he was dead.

The nurse led Daniel down the hall. In the middle of the white, high-ceilinged room he saw a doctor and a box.

"Hi," the doctor said. "I'm Dr. Pechardo." She extended her arm.

"Daniel, ma'am" he replied, and shook her hand.

"Well," she said kindly. "here's the plan. I need you to sit on this chair, and put your arm straight forward and through this hole." She gestured towards the box, which had a hole in one of its five cardboard sides. There was no top, and there was a mirror on the left side.

Daniel sat down in front of the box and placed his arm - formerly known as "his right arm," but now, apparently, just "his arm" - through the hole. Dr. Pechardo adjusted the chair so that he could see both his arm on the right side and its mirror image on the left side.

She gestured up to the observation deck, where a few tired-looking doctors sat. Seconds later, classical music came streaming into the room.

Dr. Pechardo stood at his side. "I want you to relax," she said, "and move your arm as though you are conducting an orchestra to this music. Use the mirror image and your imagination to pretend that you are using both arms in coordination."

Daniel was conducting before she finished the instructions. And it worked: the second the false image of his phantom arm met his brain's desire to conduct the music; he felt his other hand relax. His hand opened completely as he progressed through the song.

He closed his eyes, and lost himself in the music.

After two pieces by Stravinsky and one by Mozart, Dr. Pechardo tapped him on the shoulder. The music stopped.

She sat down on a chair next to him.

"How does your arm feel?" she asked.

"Relaxed," he replied.

"But you can still feel it?"

"Yeah, but it doesn't hurt."

She made a note on her chart.

"We're going to continue this therapy," she said. "Over time, you won't feel anything at all."

Daniel was startled. "Why?" he asked. "It feels fine." He didn't like the idea of letting go of these last sensations.

"Within the next two or three hours, your hand will begin to tighten and twist again," she said. "The only real, long-term solution is to repeat the therapy until all the sensations go away. Otherwise, you will feel this pain for the rest of your life."

He didn't have time to process it all. The blond nurse came back into the room with the same, pleasant smile on her face.

"It's time to go to your psychiatrist," she said cheerily.

Daniel hated the shrink.

"Alright," he sighed. He removed his arm from the box and stood up.

He didn't want to go. He hated sitting and talking while the shrink took notes. He hated the shrink's pretend sympathy. If the shrink nodded his head once more, it would fall off.

To the shrink he went. Reluctantly.

Dr. Johnson asked about Daniel's feelings, and Daniel looked around the room. He didn't like being around the short, squirrely-looking man, but he liked being in his office. In a sea of hospital whiteness, Johnson's office was a kaleidoscope. Bright paintings adorned

the walls, multicolored books lined the shelves, and trinkets and knickknacks filled in the spaces between.

"I really like the therapy," Daniel said aloud. He wasn't sure what question he was answering, but Johnson had stopped talking, and he was sure he was supposed to say something.

"This therapy?" Johnson asked, his eyebrows knit in confusion.

"No," Daniel said. "My arm therapy."

"You don't have the arm, remember?" Johnson said gently.

Daniel rolled his eyes. "It's a new treatment for phantom pain." He explained the process.

When he was finished, Johnson nodded deliberately, and looked at his notepad. "Daniel, I think that we have some more important issues to discuss," he said.

This was therapy session four, and they hadn't discussed anything substantial.

"Let's open a dialogue about Jake. Are you still confused about his behavior?"

Yes, I'm confused. Who wouldn't be? Daniel thought.

"Yes," he said.

Johnson shifted in his chair. "Let's return to your last memories of combat," he said. "What do you remember of Jake?"

Daniel sifted through the fragments of that night. "Well, I guess I was driving, and Jake was next to me. That's all I remember. When I woke up in the hospital, the doctor said that a roadside bomb had gone off. That the left side of my body had been thrown against the side of the humvee, and my arm was crushed."

Johnson peered at Daniel over his glasses.

"And Jake?" he asked.

"He was next to me in the hospital, just like he has been since we

arrived.”

Johnson picked a folder up off his desk. He opened it and slowly turned a page, then another. He turned three more pages, quickly ruffled back through two of them, and looked up.

“You said the bomb went off on the right side of the car, and that Jake was in the passenger’s seat?” Johnson asked.

Suddenly, scenes rushed back into Daniel’s mind. Jake in the passenger’s seat. Lying in the car, watching Jake bleed to death in the passenger’s seat. Jake’s burnt skin and hair suffocating him, and the heat from the explosion singing his skin. He remembered the other six soldiers in his section following in their vehicles, and dragging him out of the car. He saw his screams echo off of their terrified faces, saw his arm leak blood and bone, saw the medics cover Jake with a sheet. He remembered people running around, and then the inside of an ambulance.

Instead of telling Johnson these things, he cried.

Johnson was quiet at first, but Daniel kept going for a few minutes, and the Doctor wanted to explain. “The man who sleeps in the hospital bed next to you is Marcell Jones. You have never met him before. You’re suffering from post-traumatic stress, so you repeatedly misidentify him.”

It was too much for Daniel. His head was exploding, and he couldn’t stop crying. He could feel the nurse take him by the arm and lead him to a room and to a bed. He slept for hours.

He woke up to a nurse with a chart. He was in a private room with muted blue walls and a television set. He was hooked up to a heart rate monitor, and he had a throbbing headache.

“Where am I now?” he asked her.

"Well, that is the question, isn't it?" she said. "Let me ask you this, where do you think you are?"

"Well, judging from your hospital nametag, I'm still in the hospital. After my freak out today, I figure I'm probably in the psych ward."

"Honey, that was yesterday," she said. "You've been sleeping for a while. Actually, you were sedated for a while." She noticed his frown. "Oh, don't be too hard on yourself."

She began folding the blankets at the end of his bed. "Yes, you're near the psych ward, but that's just because we thought you'd like to have your own room. You've been through a lot."

"You bet I have," he said. "I'm feeling an arm that doesn't exist and a friend that doesn't exist. All because of a war that, apparently, never really existed."

She shook her head. "Shame," she mumbled. "Your left arm and your right-hand man."

When she was done folding, she told him that it was time for physical therapy.

"Can't I skip today?" he asked.

"Wishful thinking," she said. "Get up."

She marched him down to his therapy room. Dr. Pechardo was there again, but instead of a box, there was a small piano keyboard.

"Daniel!" Dr. Pechardo said excitedly. "It's good to see you. I thought we'd try something new. Here, sit down."

He sat. No use in arguing.

"When I found out that you play the piano, I thought of this. Here, close your eyes. Come on - good. Now - music!" she called off to someone. A stream of "Für Elise" came tinkering into the room. "Do you know this song?"

Daniel nodded.

“Keep your eyes closed and play with both hands,” she said.

He began to play the right-hand part along with the left-hand recording. His phantom fingers unclench, and his whole body relax. His fingers let go of the pain, his mind let go of the pain, and he immersed himself in the melody.