

The Land of Pain

You go for a walk and during the walk something happens: you trip, you fall, you dive off a cliff; you crash, you twist, you type, you age. When you get home you notice that your house looks slightly different than when you left—mushier, if that's possible, with misaligned corners. You open the door and are surprised to find a foil banner hanging over the mantle.

It says: *Welcome to the Land of Pain.*

So you go to the doctor and the doctor has you follow the standard management protocol (ice/rest/exercise/pills/ignore). When that doesn't work you go for the aggressive therapy intervention (surgery/pills/rest/ignore). Unfortunately that doesn't work either, and one bright afternoon the doctor and her entire staff sit you down and explain that you've basically reached the end of the line. Your options are these: 1) nothing, or 2) the brainless clone.

You're trying to be jaunty about this, upbeat and optimistic, and so opt for the brainless clone. Oh, they just call her that—she's not really brainless. She has a wee, reptilian brainstem that attends to her motor skills, her bodily functions, her ambulation and self-care and whatnot. She can be trained to do tricks and loves chocolate. When they pull her out of the vat she is well-formed and healthy and everybody is exceedingly pleased with her, though personally you're freaked out to see this little you, this exact genetic replica of yourself (only much younger, of course, and with no brain save a reptilian brainstem). But you're also excited, trembling with hope, because these brainless clones are state-of-the-art and the next big thing and like a miracle and for the good of mankind and a leap forward for science and all that.

You take her home and put her on accelerator, a clear goo that comes in a green squeeze bottle and is, they've told you, sort of like plant food. With this stuff dripped into her food she grows at a brisk pace. You ignore her for a while, but as she starts to enter various awkward stages which you recognize from your own girlhood, you haul her out of the cage and cart her off to lessons. You make her study ballet. You force her

to do yoga. You have her practice in padded rooms, far from any of the known entrances, pitfalls, chutes or trapdoors that lead to the Land of Pain. You want her graceful. You want her flexible and strong.

Because she's your ticket out, sweetheart. She's your luxury cruise to a tropical island.

Sometimes you sit and watch her to see if you can catch her growing. You drip extra gobs of accelerator into her food (though this is not recommended). Her routine goes: in the cage, eat, sleep, defecate, stare blankly. Out of the cage: *plié*, *relevé*, sun salute, headstand, stare blankly. The legality of the deal is that she needs to grow to adulthood before you can have the operation. This is the operation where they take out your big, thinking-and-feeling brain that possesses humanity and patch it into the smooth cavity inside her head, into that flesh-lined bucket (thwack!), so that from that moment on your consciousness exists inside a pain-free, healthy, twirling and leaping body, identical to your own (except younger, and not in pain). What do they do with your old body? They use it for experiments.

As of yet, no one has successfully undergone the brain transfer operation.

But, they assure you, it's only a matter of time.

Anyway, you enjoy just hanging out and watching your clone practice. She's got those buck teeth and short little legs you had at her age. You cut her hair so she has the dorky bangs you once had. If you toss her a chocolate kiss she'll do a pirouette. For a whole candy bar, she'll attempt a solo from *Swan Lake*.

In the meantime, you undergo a series of medical tests in an attempt to better understand the painful region. The painful region is explored with needles in an effort to isolate the painful spot. If they can pinpoint the painful spot, say the doctors, then they will be able to discuss treatment strategies with you. And if they cannot reach it with the needles they have tried so far, they will just have to try some longer ones.

You say: Any luck yet with the old brain switcheroo, doc?

Doc says: We're close, very close.

The brainless clone continues to ripen. Though the process is accelerated, it nevertheless takes several years, years you spend languishing in the Land of Pain: eating grapes, watching movies, popping pills, worsening, enduring therapies, pretending you are not in the Land, etc. The brainless clone barrels into adolescence, a time you spent slumping through the halls of junior high with a book clasped before your breasts.

She looks better than you ever did, clear skinned and white toothed, and in her own way she's clever too. She's figured out how to open her cage with her feet. You wonder: Why not with her hands? Ah, well, they don't call them brainless for nothing! You try to get her to stay in her cage but you're not much of a disciplinarian. You're supposed to squirt her with water when she's bad, but she looks so bewildered when you do, so wounded and damp, that you give it up. You're also supposed to be able to direct her movements by shining a flashlight in her face (this is also the way you wrangle Sea Monkeys, they inform you) but this only makes her fold into a weeping ball, presenting such a startling replica of your own miserable adolescence that you toss the flashlight in the trash and give her a cookie, vaguely wondering exactly who is training whom.

The result of this is that the brainless clone gains the run of the house. She twirls around all the time. If she walks, she walks on her tiptoes. She takes up more space than you ever imagined possible. It's as though a tiny, wind-up jewelry box dancer has been turned into a giant adolescent monster through the ingestion of radioactive produce. You dodge around her swanlike arms and contemplate how you were never that graceful or slender or pretty. Complex feelings ensue.

You and the other members of the study have been advised not to give names to your brainless clones. Researchers come to the house every couple of months to check up on her progress, her care and feeding, your compliance and mental health. As soon as they leave, you take off her scrub suit and dress her in a silk tutu. You've named her Princess Fifi.

At home, your answering machine says: Hello, you have reached THE LAND OF PAIN, over a background of thundering organ music. None of your callers finds this funny or even particularly comprehensible. It looks like you've failed at the long tradition of cracking jokes in the face of adversity and thus signaling that you're a tough cookie and a brave little bumblebee and a trooper and all that. The truth is you're getting sick of pretending like the Land of Pain is not a sad and lonely place. You're sick of pretending that losing the full use of your body—a pain-free body similar to the brainless clone's—has been anything less than entirely heartbreaking.

Things could be worse, the doctors are fond of reminding you. Chin up! It's just pain, it won't kill you. You decide this is typical of the kind of thoughts people have when they do not live in the Land of Pain. Your thoughts run more along the lines of: Why not do a few

good deeds to boost your karma, then throw in the towel? Maybe in the next life, you'd get a better body. Unfortunately, things look bad all around out there: war, genocide, children with machine guns, rape and plunder and tyranny and epidemics. You don't want to be reincarnated into one of those bodies.

Anyway, you don't believe in reincarnation.

The brainless clone keeps twirling between you and the TV when you're trying to watch the horrible news programs that remind you how much worse things could be. You try to kick her out of the way and get mud all over your socks. Ever since she learned how to crawl through the doggy door, she's been ripping her tutus and dragging them in the dirt. She's been climbing trees and running through the sprinklers, getting sunburned and collecting scars that you'll eventually have to explain, once you inhabit her body. What's more, your assistive animal (which you obtained after watching a videotape of a sweet, serious collie picking up coins with her mouth) considers your leather armchair a chew-toy and has reduced half of it to pulp. Somehow you had the idea that the assistive animal was going to be a terrific help. You had a whole fantasy scenario built up in your mind in which this wonderful assistive animal would do all the things you found difficult—organizing your shoes, picking up coins off the floor, making the bed with its little teeth and paws, dragging the sheets up carefully over the mattress (good dog!), stuffing a pillow into a clean pillowcase with her snout. Then she'd curl up at your feet while you relaxed in a specially designed, inexpensive contraption that suspended you in a warm soothing fluid, relaxed and completely pain-free.

When you try to scoot the chair away, the dog sinks her teeth into the other side, growling happily, proposing a superfun game of tug-of-war. You muse on the fact that something like twenty-three muscles govern the frolicsomeness of that wagging tail. And it's obvious none of them hurt.

You take your medication and sack out in front of the television (which you can only really watch when you manage to nudge the pirouetting brainless clone into a corner). Now is the hour when citizens on talk shows tell their tragic stories in the second person, saying *you you you* about all the bad, traumatic, unfortunate experiences in their lives (“You just feel so betrayed when you see that little panda pulling a gun”) as though they have a genetic defect that prevents them from using the pronoun “I.” This is sloppy and angers the grammar and usage thug in

you. You've concluded that citizens telling their tales of adversity find the second person compelling because "you" is impersonal and removed, yet somehow includes everyone in its scope ("It could be you staring down the barrel at that panda bear next, sweetheart!") whereas "I" is an orphaned baby doe blinking in a dark forest.

"You are always in pain," for example, is a more manageable utterance than the direct, final: "I am always in pain."

At nightfall, you can't find the assistive animal anywhere. Finally, you locate her curled up in the cage with the brainless clone, nose tucked under her tail. They adore each other. And you, you, my friend, are filled with jealousy.

You go to the doctor and the doctor says: Rate your pain on a scale of one to ten, with one being negligible and ten being the worst pain you can possibly imagine—you brace yourself here—*like surgery on your internal organs without anesthesia!* The doctor asks this every time you visit, and every time it horrifies you. You imagine an awful knoll in the Land of Pain where doctors remove livers and kidneys without the benefit of anesthesia while brainless clones dance to the soothing strains of waiting room music. In the foreground, assistive animals grab twitching organs in their mouths and run off to bury them.

You are not being a brave little bumblebee.

What's more, a few minutes later you start crying there on the greenish exam table because the doctor is telling you they have completed the brainless clone study and have concluded that, unfortunately, they cannot, at this time, transfer human brains from one body to another. And there is very little else they can do to help you. When you start to cry the doctor takes a deep breath, and, with a kind of angry glee (similar to when the assistive animal picks up a coin and runs around the house, while you attempt to chase), starts to recite, in detail, a list of all her patients who are worse off than you are. She describes neighborhoods in the Land of Pain more burned out and dangerous than you ever dreamed of, hellish vistas where the afflicted and wracked limp through the streets in hailstorms while gobbling more Oxycontin and forgetting who the president is. Phantom Limb Pain. Fibromyalgia. Double Carpal Tunnel (with a cherry on top), Stiff Person Syndrome. You sniffle contritely and feel a weird, toxic gratitude that goes: Thank God. Thank God I'm only as fucked up as I am and not as fucked up as those other people.

The doctor says: We understand you have a choice when choosing

Lands, and we'd like to thank you for choosing to spend the safest part of your journey here, in the Land of Pain.

Geographically speaking, the Land of Pain is a subcontinent of the World of the Sick. The World of the Sick is a nifty, parallel universe that exists inside the World of the Well. The curious fact is that while most of the citizens of the World of the Well don't even realize that the World of the Sick exists, *all* of the inhabitants of the World of the Sick know about the World of the Well. The Sick live among the Well like spies, pod-people, or daywalking vampires: different, afraid, and isolated; and like spies, pod-people, and daywalkers, the Sick who can manage to mingle with the Well reflexively disguise their identity. And you, with your white picket fence and your neatly trimmed lawn in the Land of Pain, you are no different. There's no little chair on your license plate. You look normal, you are able to leave the house for hours at a time, you've tried to pass yourself off as hunky-dory.

But now everyone knows, because in her maturity the brainless clone follows you everywhere. She won't let you out of her sight. She bellows like a baby calf if you stray too far from her, she bellows so fiercely that you think perhaps she'll go on forever. She's inconsolable and stubborn and unpredictable and thanks to years of physical training she possesses astonishing stamina. Rather than fight it, you do what you've always done and cave in. You take her everywhere with you. She trots beside you, grunting. She won't wear anything now but soiled tutus and you have to attach her to your wrist with a tether because, well, she doesn't exactly have a brain. You find the whole spectacle humiliating: she's an idea whose time has passed, a relic of a failed era. It's like you're this weird person carrying around an eight-track player and truckin' to disco. Certain kids find this cool and follow at a distance, trying to affect her distracted, zombie stance. Far worse are the religious zealots, who bother you constantly. They know where you live. They mobilize when you go to the doctor or the supermarket. They surround your car and chant: *Even without a cerebellum/That young lady's going to heaven!* The nuts are convinced she has a soul (though she has no brain) and even though you have to get a restraining order against them, you're secretly inclined to agree.

So you walk around with this big, grunting, simple ballerina following you and everyone knows there's something so wrong with you that you once actually contemplated having your brain taken out and put into someone else's body, which in fact isn't the worst part. The worst

part is when everyone goes: Oh! She's so cute! Were you ever that cute? There, tethered to you with a piece of coiled plastic, is your lost youth and vitality: a pretty ballerina, arm raised, back arched, foot aiming toward the sky. She's a poet of the body, ignited with life, and despite the fact that she has no brain you're in awe of all she has.

A friend says to you: Oh, these people take them to live on a farm. They have a farm for the brainless clones out in the country where they get to run around in the fresh air, and there are orchards and meadows and pet bunnies and they're well-cared for and all that. A group of bran-eating hippies runs it—they do it for karma credits or energy wavelengths or something weird but reputedly not-evil. A lot of the brainless clones are living there now. They have sing-alongs.

You say: Sounds fishy.

Your friend says: Yeah. Oh but wait—the thing is they grow those pears there, the ones we used to get at the corner market. Remember those pears?

You remember. You used to stop at a little market and buy the most ravishing pears, sweet and crisp, and every time you did the proprietor would roar: *You will be back for more of these pears!* They were yellow-gold. You'd eat them in the park while the juice ran off your elbow. You went back again and again, just as the man predicted. It was the longest pear-season ever. You were convinced it would never end.

But of course it did end, and you moved to another part of the city, and by chance wandered into the Land of Pain and forgot all about the pears, since you had other things on your mind.

So you take her to the farm. She wants to get off her leash and run around all the time now anyway. You bundle up her ballet slippers and her tutus and her bags of Brainless Clone Chow and push her into the backseat of the car and set off for the country. She keeps sticking her entire head out the window as you drive, making that bellowing noise, so awful and familiar and constant. My God, you think, make her stop.

When you arrive, she jumps out as soon as you open the car door. You give her a little kiss on her zombie brow and unclip the leash. She stands for a minute, sniffing the air, chest heaving, fingers trembling, then breaks into a dead run for the orchard. Her tutu is the cleanest you could find, a pink one, and the pears hang above her like yellow lanterns. Her arms unfurl as she reaches up and her fingertips graze the branches. Then she lifts a foot and begins to dance. She's a damn good dancer; breathtaking really, like a scarf drifting through the air. You

watch for a while, trying not to imagine all she could have been if she'd actually had a brain.

There are a couple dozen other brainless clones romping in the orchard too. They all look alert and healthy: they are eating pears, wrestling, singing snatches of camp songs, picking their noses, doing somersaults. It's sort of beautiful but also awful. What if their owners suddenly all showed up? What if they arrived with their crutches and wheelchairs and bad eyes and frozen joints and stood around (if they could stand) and watched (if they could watch) as their clones pranced and jumped and fell down and then got back up again? It would be too much to endure.

The weird karma people appear and offer you a bowl of cereal. She's cute, they say. She'll like it here. Everything will be fine. You all stand for a while watching the clones horse around. Then they tell you that it's time to say goodbye.

Oh no, you say: No. You don't want to say goodbye.

They take away your bowl of cereal and look at you with gentle, patchouli-scented eyes. They tell you that it's good to say goodbye and that you really should.

But no, you argue. Wait. Hold it right there. Just who do they think they are, telling you to say goodbye? There are things in life you never imagined saying goodbye to. How can you say goodbye to your unbroken version? How can it be that people don't get better? How can their pretty ballerinas dance away under the pears while their owners hobble home, on their feet, on their crutches, in their wheelchairs? It's not fair! Only when they're unable to do the simplest things do they realize that the simplest things were so full of joy: taking a walk, picking a pear, picking up a child who says carry me.

So there it is. You don't want to say goodbye.

Chill out, say the weird karma people. No one is making you leave her here. It's voluntary. If you keep her she'll probably still follow you around, bellowing. But (and here they look very sinister) they believe that the universe will be far more peaceful in its vibrations if you can manage to say goodbye. They stand with their wispy ponytails and their heavy bags of granola, perhaps suitable for use as a weapon, so you decide to give it a try. You call out *Goodbye little clone* in a small voice, without much conviction. *Bye-bye Fifi*. You give your brainless princess a wave, but of course she's not looking at you. She's too busy dancing beneath the pears.

*

You accept a bag of cereal from the karma people and start to drive back to town. Your assistive animal sleeps in the backseat, twitching and whining, chasing rabbits or perhaps a flock of brainless clones. Somehow, though you're certain you didn't make any wrong turns, you end up on a strange, unrecognizable stretch of freeway. You realize that you're angry, very angry: wherever you are, you would like to know just how you ended up here! You'd demand to know, if only you could find someone to ask. Then a green, reflective sign rears up along the side of the road. It says: Next Exit: The Land of Pain.

You exit.

This work originally appeared in Willow Springs, and is protected by copyright, controlled usually by the original author, and in all other cases by Willow Springs. U.S. and international copyright laws apply and you may not reproduce this content without written permission from the author.

© 2006 Willow Springs
ISSN 0739-1277