

Ἰστορικὴ

By

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IOTA SIGN

She woke up to doctors conversing above her head. She was still feeling numb and nauseated from the multiple operations she had undergone the last few days. Her vision was blurred and dim, allowing her to only recognize shapes and gloomy figures, though still with great difficulty. Shadows were constantly slithering above her head as she was lying face-up on the bed, immobile, unable to react. The effects of anesthesia had barely started to wear off, but the pain started to kick in already. Steadily, a feeling of rising anguish and discomfort started growing within Irene, as the pain rippled through her entire body. Yet her dismay was not only a result of her aching torso and members; she was naked and uncovered. She looked helpless and vulnerable, as at least a dozen eyes kept staring curiously at her exposed body. The scrutiny she was under was growing more and more indiscreet, incisive one might say, and the shame was almost unbearable. Irene had always been a shy individual and now, with so many strangers chatting feverishly about her, she was feeling ill at ease. Being at the center of attention caused her to feel discomfited and humiliated. That was the price she had to pay for being just careless.

She could only grasp bits and pieces of the doctors' conversations around her. 'The operation went well' she thought she heard. "The neurons were transplanted... functions... mobility impaired... cerebrospinal fluid..." All was hazy and fuzzy at the moment. Her spine kept sending pulses of infliction throughout her whole existence, while she was striving to remember why that was happening. It was so distracting and all the more of a nuisance when the uncompassionate, hostile doctors started fumbling around on her back and thighs, presumably to check her reflexes. She deplorably wanted this torment to cease, yet she was maimed and dazed, incapable of any sort of protest or resistance for that matter.

"Roll her over," one of them requested. And so it happened; An intern or nurse, whatever he was, laid his cold hands on Irene. With a convulsive thrust he pushed her to her side. Then two sets of hands ran across her back. The moment they touched her backbone, Irene's thoughts went rampant; the tactile stimulus triggered a chain reaction, which spread across her neuron system like a pernicious malady, infecting every single nerve. If she could have trembled, she would have done it. The blinding radiance of the room's lights dazzled her, incomprehensible images of people's faces kept flickering in her mind, grins, laughter, agony. She shut her eyes, the light went off. She wanted to scream and to her it felt like she did, but it really only came out as a pitiful moan of a wretched creature in suffering.

Then, an incomprehensible sequence of thoughts went through Irene's mind. It seemed like a set of memories, so real, so tangible, yet definitely not from Irene's past. Those couldn't have been her memories, for she had never witnessed a scene like this: In front of her very eyes, in a dark chamber a man was dragged on the floor by two people that looked like guards. The man seemed half-conscious with his head bent down, as he was involuntarily pulled on the ground. What Irene was experiencing at the moment had to be a hallucination, but it felt so vivid. Irene could not see the man's face, though she could tell he was robust with dark hair and complexion, at least as it seemed under the dim lighting of the chamber. The man's eyes were haunting, not entirely stripped of their liveliness, but not fully alive either.

Irene watched her vision in awe, as the man seemed to withhold a great deal of energy and wrath at the same time. Those eyes of his... Irene noticed a small ornament, a medallion that hung from the man's neck. She could not tell what it was. The odd object broke free from the chain that held it to the man's neck and fell on the floor rolling to the side. The vision dissolved like smoke. At the moment, the doctors kept scrutinizing Irene while talking. "She responds," they exclaimed insensitively. She fainted.

Irene opened up her eyes once more. A familiar face was standing right above her head this time. It was the doctor who had been present throughout all of her surgeries. Just as her sight was getting adjusted to the extreme brightness of the room, Irene tried to examine the man who was in charge of her recovery. Not seeing quite well, Irene saw a bleary face. She thought she discerned a seemingly unappealing mug and a grin on it, an expression not characteristic of hope or optimism, but of slight amusement. As if the doctor was elated to see her suffering. But of course that could be just one of her misinterpretations. After all, she had barely opened up her eyes.

She tried to raise herself upright, but failed when the pain in her back stroke like a whip. Then the doctor spoke: "Easy there, my sweet child. It is going to take a while until you can start jumping and springing and climbing around like a joyful monkey." Irene did not seem to like his tone and attitude. There was nothing blatantly malicious about him. Yet still...Irene did not like him. Even though she did not really have the chance to see his face before, since she was obviously in a come-like state, she thought she knew him well. She was sure she had met him before, though this would be rather improbable. Could it be in one of her dreams? When one is in distress and discomfort, they tend to exaggerate and misjudge. Irene's body caused her so much trouble the way it was. Painkillers did not work miracles and the anguish was acute at all times. Maybe she was thinking ill of the doctor due to her condition. And those memories she had been having for the past few days, those too could be figments of her imagination.

Then she snapped out of her thoughts and decided to ask: "What has happened to me, where am I exactly? You are my doctor, right?"

The doctor replied swiftly: "Yes, indeed that would be me, Dr. Eustace Edingray, at your services young lady. And this is the 'Neurorial Hospital' the best hospital in the world perhaps."

"Why am I here, what happened, where is my father..." Irene requested to know.

"Hold on with those questions, will you? Everything in due time. Be patient-no pun intended. For the time being, let's just say you had some tiny little operations performed on you. You broke your spine, I am afraid. Nothing serious, do not be alarmed. It is treatable, but it shall take time..."

The doctor's words were mere babbling to Irene's ears. She had started feeling really disquieted. Being alone in a hospital was definitely not very inspiring for a 17-year old girl. Irene had always been fragile. This was too much. And the doctor did not appear to be much encouraging either, though he tried to. His words sounded empty

and Irene distinguished a sense of cheesiness and hypocrisy. Then again, this could be just her. She built courage and asked again, “What happened?”

“Let’s just say you had a tiny little accident and apparently you lost your memory. It could be a case of Post Traumatic Amnesia. You will be fine in any case. No need to worry. You know, you are a very fortunate girl. I mean, other than the fact that you had an accident... I mean... you know what I mean,” the doctor stuttered.

“There is no need to worry, really. This is state of the art technology we are using here. You were very fortunate to be hospitalized in our facilities. We use new methods of treatment and cure. Experimental, but surely promising. We, ahead of everyone else, are utilizing the latest advancements of biotechnology and medicine for the sake of humanity. We specialize in transplantations of semi-artificial neurons and nerves. We take a few tiny little neurons from a donor and transplant them to the host with the help of the newly engineered nano-equipment and pharmaceuticals. In other words, you are going to have to take a few substances on a regular basis. We do not want your precious little body to reject the newly added transplants, do we? The cerebrospinal fluid and the rest of them neurons are a little ‘nervous’ sometimes-pun intended. Good news is, though, that you do not have to do this for life. I mean taking pills. The old days when patients had to be drugged for all their lives are over. Now thanks to our leading technology and medical researchers, you will recover in no time. You will be an acrobat again before you even realize it. You, my dear, are a lucky girl indeed.”

Irene did not seem to listen all of it. “An acrobat again,” what was that supposed to mean anyway? Just as she started to show her discomfort, doctor Eustace hastened to reassure her, “Do not worry. Your health lies in good hands now. And surprise surprise, there is someone out there who wishes to see you. I thought you needed some rest, but now I see you can handle visitors.”

“Is my father here?” Irene was quick to ask.

“Oh no, my dear child. It is not your father. As far as I know, he had some trouble...somewhere and he will be a little late to come. But behold! I’ll let you two have some chit-chat as you like it. Off I go now!” the doctor exclaimed and the automatic door of the room opened to reveal someone special.

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“Wake up, you sleepyhead,” said Ceilia with her foxy, cute voice. She was holding a box of chocolates, which she laid on the bedside table. “You’ve been catching some Z’s for way too long. It is high time you got up. Rise and shine, Ire, rise and shine.”

“Ceilia, you are here! For how long have I been sleeping?” asked Irene in joy and surprise, setting aside her discomfort for an instant.

“For two days, the doctors said,” Cecilia replied.

“Two days...,” said Irene with wonder and awe emitted from her light blue eyes.

“How are you? I’ve been so worried about you. Are you feeling ok? How exactly did this happen? Can you walk? Are you in pain? What have they done to you? Will you

be able to party anytime soon? I cannot go to them parties all alone, you know...,” Ceilia began with the interrogation.

“Wow, wow, wow! Slow down a minute there, Ceilia. I wish I knew the answers myself. What happened? I thought YOU could tell me all about it. And forget about the parties. Apparently I am not made for such things,” replied Irene, stunned by the stack of questions she was bombarded with.

“You mean you do not know what happened?”

“I only remember waking up in pain. The doctor told me I had an accident and that I broke my spine and that I had some operations, transplants and...,” answered Irene stressfully.

“Ok, ok. Calm down now!” said Ceilia touching Irene’s shoulder lightly.

“Wow! Look at that room. And they let you have it all on your own. No other patients, no scrawny, sickly people... This hospital is really blowesome and they give you your own luxurious VIP room. I am starting to grow envy of you, Ire. You make me wish I had an accident so that I could enjoy all that too. And look at that humongous ‘Genius-Glass-TV’. Full-cool, as our slummy, penurious peers must be saying. I’ll turn it on,” said Ceilia astounded, as she started observing the room better.

She then proceeded to turn on the astonishing device, which was also the glass door of the balcony. The transparency of the glass immediately gave way to a projected image. The glass turned into a display. A TV show was on: “And now our contestants will attempt to pull down each other’s’ funny-pants.”

“This is what money can buy,” blurted out Irene suddenly in a low, cold voice, almost like a whisper. She did not sound like the regular, kind Irene that Ceilia used to know. The GGTV changed the channel automatically, as it detected that none of the people present in the room was watching.

The news was now on the GGTV: “A new law passed on yesterday regarding the establishment of the death penalty.”

“What do you mean,” asked Ceilia baffled as she was.

The GGTV changed the channel again: “A method for granting extreme physical strength and stamina might have finally been discovered. The new drugs are now being tested on volunteering inmates of the Correctional Facilities that go by the name ‘Innovative Correctional Asylum for Regulation Under Surveillance’. Are we standing on the brink of a new era of supermen.”

Irene, still with a calm, low, but certain voice announced, “This Neurorial Hospital is private right? Not that we have many public hospitals anymore anyway. Almost every hospital in this country is for-profit and as far as I know this ‘Neurorial’ is ultra-expensive.”

“Oh that! Yes I guess it is. But your insurance must be covering it all. I mean...you don't have an issue with money! Why worry about it? Your father must've taken care of everything.”

Ceilia's voice subsided to the GGTV, which had now started playing a song from a music channel, *“In the night In night I'm gonna sweep down on you/ In the dark in the dark I'm gonna creep inside.”*

Ceilia continued, “After all you are very rich. Your dad wouldn't let you.”

“Then why is he not here? And turn this thing off!” Irene interrupted Ceilia in a sudden outburst.

She swiftly grabbed the plate that lay in her food tray and hurled it to the GGTV, which cracked and shut down. For the first time since Ceilia's arrival Irene started moving her limbs. Still maimed on the bed, Irene could not do much, but now she seemed so decisive. Almost immobile but unusually regnant. Ceilia remained stunned for a while.

“Ceilia, where is my dad? Is he not going to come?” Irene asked in frenzy this time. “And will not anyone tell me what happened at last?” Ceilia was shocked.

At that moment the automatic door opened and Dr. Eustace along with a bunch of nurses rushed into the room. “What happened in here?” he asked angrily. Then he pulled out a syringe and injected Irene. The world faded out.

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The anesthetic wore off and Irene was still on her bed, which she had already started growing sick of. The room was now empty and the lights were off, only allowing the moonlight to permeate the room from the high-tech window, which was still cracked. She was left there alone, to rest assumedly. Her head was dizzy, but to her surprise she could now feel a sense of liberating kinesthesia, a different feeling than that of the previous days. She felt as if she could finally move her limbs freely. She concentrated on her movements, but she failed to trigger a response. Her body would not obey her. She did not give up though, for she knew something had changed. She tried for a second time and then it happened; she managed to move slightly to her left, as she pivoted around her pelvis. Slowly but steadily, Irene placed her bare feet on the cold ground. She felt the cold as it moved from her feet to her thighs. It was oddly satisfying. Her newly acquired locomotion excited her more than she would like to admit, she almost felt bliss from something so trivial. She felt compelled to shout it out, that she could move again, but for some reason she held back and refrained from doing it. From the other side behind the door of the room voices could be heard. She attempted to listen closely, but was too far from the door. She gathered strength and courage and stood on her feet. One uncertain step, a second one and then she staggered, losing balance. But she held herself upright. She moved to the door and eavesdropped.

She heard two men talking. “This is my father,” she thought, as she recognized his voice: “He is here at last! And the other man has got to be this doctor ‘Eusless’ I presume.” She waved her hands at the automatic door, which opened for her. Right

outside, at the end of the hallway two shapes could be discerned facing each other. The hallway's lighting was too bright and Irene's eyesight had difficulties adjusting to it. Her hearing, however, was as acute as ever, as if she had gained some sort of enhancement.

Her father and Doctor Eustace did not notice Irene; they were absorbed by their conversation. They spoke in low voices, which Irene could nonetheless hear crystal clear, "How is she?"

"Her health condition is improving."

"But what?"

"Excuse me."

"I can tell there is something wrong. Out with it already!"

"The treatment was successful, governor, but some... implications occurred that we had not anticipated."

"Speak clearly. How is she?"

"She had a breakdown earlier today. She asked to see you."

"And."

"She is fine now. She is sleeping, governor."

"Did it work or did the poor guy go to waste?"

"The donor? The experiment was a success. Subject 'I 99' proved to be a success. His transplants are really durable. Maybe science is up to something enormous this time. Your daughter is very fortuitous to."

"Enough! You had better be right about this. You have no Idea what I did to get this far. For your own sake, I hope your experiment was indeed a success."

"Yes, governor. Thank you, governor."

At that point, the two men moved towards Irene's room. Still stupefied by their conversation, Irene panicked. She used all her bodily strength to get herself back to her bed. For some reason she did not want them to see her. She held the wall and clumsily made it to her bed. Now the pain had started striking again. This time she reached for her pills that lay on her bedside table. She had been told to take one in case she felt ill. Why would they leave such pills unattended within a patient's reach? Irene did not care. She swallowed two or three of them in an instant. This would soothe the pain away for a while. She then immersed into a deep slumber.

Irene immediately started wallowing into the realm of dreams. Sudden recollections appeared in her mind. She found herself in her room, at her house. She seemed frustrated. She was clad in a short crimson dress, which revealed a large portion of her back and not much less of her legs and thighs. She wore a ribbon of the same color on her head and black heels on her feet. In her left hand she was holding a custom rope made of torn bed sheets. She headed to the balcony door, a transparent surface made

of glass. As she approached, the glass turned into a digital display. Various information appeared on it, like temperature, the weather forecast, the humidity level outside and a menu with entertainment programs.

Irene commanded the door to open with her voice. "Genius Glass, open!" she ordered.

It responded with a synthetic male voice, "Good Evening, Irene! It is cold outside. Should I really open?"

"Open," repeated Irene irritably.

"Opening confirmed," said the glass door and it slid open.

Irene got outside to the balcony and glanced around at the night sky. It was a full-moon that night, bright and beautiful. The perfect night for a romantic escapade. She tied the one end of the bed-sheet rope on a pillar that embellished the balcony and she threw the other end over the ledge. The rope reached the ground below.

"I surely am going to the prom. I don't care what my father says, I am going," she said to herself. "Even if I have to do this in the old-fashion. Josh awaits for me. Here I come!" she thought.

She placed her right leg over the ledge while firmly holding the rope she had made. She pulled it just to make sure it would bear her weight. Then she started descending. How skillfully she climbed down, like a monkey on a tree! She had never felt so thrilled in her entire life. Though she knew it was wrong to defy the law of her father, at the same time it felt so gratifying. She thought that destiny had meant for her to carry out her plans that night. But destiny had other plans, in fact; the rope was not as strong as Irene expected it to be. It was torn while Irene was almost midway down. For a moment her head went blank. That moment seemed to last for an eternity, as if time had frozen. Irene was airborne, falling slowly with her long blond hair blowing in the light breeze and her pretty, young face facing towards the full-moon as she fell on her back.

This dream shocked her so much she awoke abruptly, sweating and panting heavily. She had finally remembered what had happened. Her memory had started coming back, revealing many of the recent events.

"Could I be so careless?" she thought to herself "and what did they do to me?"

As she was pondering such matters, the door of the room opened and a woman entered in a hurry.

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Irene was startled to see this woman entering her room. She was no one she knew and she felt as if her privacy was violated once more, now by a complete stranger. The strange woman staggered for a while and then sat on a chair near Irene. "Howdy," she said.

Irene replied, still confound: "Good morning."

"Morning? It is late at night, kid. Look outside," said the woman.

Irene peered outside the cracked glass window shyly; it was night indeed, the full moon was shining bright. Then they started talking.

“Yes you are right! It is nightfall.”

“You seem disoriented, kid. What happened to you?”

“Who is asking?”

“Let’s just say I am a patient, like you. Of course, I am broke. I don’t have the luxuries that you enjoy here. You surely must have an awful lot of money.”

“So, you fell from your balcony and had neurons, nerves, bone marrows and other stuff transplanted to you too?”

“Not exactly, but I have problems with transplants myself, you could say.”

At that point Irene felt comfortable speaking to the strange woman. As if there was some kind of connection, a bond between them. The woman seemed like a motherly figure to Irene, one she never had. A sense of belonging started to grow within Irene as she spoke again, “Since I came here I only face problems. And those visions.”

“Visions you said? What visions?”

“I haven’t told anyone about this, but I am tortured by strange dreams and visions. They just won’t leave me alone.”

“You said you had human parts transplanted to you?”

“Why, yes... I don’t know.”

“Who was your donor?”

“How could I know that? It is confidential I think. What difference does it make?”

The strange woman remained silent and rather grim for a while. Then she asked, “What have you heard about... how do they call it...”body memory”? They say organs have their own little brains and memories.”

“I have never heard of it.”

“Have you read *Les Mains d’Orlac*?”

“No.”

“I didn’t expect you to. You are too young. This book is ages old. The young generation now only watches GGTV shows and junk-comedies.”

“I have had some strange dreams and visions about a man.”

“As I said, the human organs enclose their owners’ behavior and memories. The heart is full of neurons and the stomach is more like an autonomous entity, the enteric brain, as they call it. Well, that sure is autonomous! Mine, for example, demands that I feed it constantly. Maybe its neuron system is intelligent enough to understand its own needs. Haha, it is ‘self-aware’ or any other fancy term you care to call it. It is imposing its own will on me. In other words, I am hungry! What’s for dinner? Will

you eat that?" The woman pointed at the chocolates Ceilia had brought. "Are you sure it is ok to eat those? I mean... your diet, the doctors say transplant patients."

"Screw the doctors. I will live freely the way I want. I can't take it anymore!"

"What?"

"Being told what to do."

"You said earlier that you are 'broke.' I don't speak this 'lingo' in general, but I assume you mean you are poor. Why are you here? I mean the expenses."

"What have you heard of the ICARUS project?"

"I must have heard it somewhere, but . . ."

"Well I am one of their newest experiments."

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"The previous one did not work well... for him anyway!"

"Whom do you mean?"

"Whom' hahaha! Nice words you use there! You mean 'who'? A poor guy from the men's ward. Cannot remember his name, something like Ir... Ig... Cannot remember. But his face...that is memorable! What has become of him, I wonder, even though I can make an educated guess. However I am not educated, as you might have guessed by now. Anyway, that man. I think I saw him here, I keep seeing him after they... Anyway, this pain might have driven me nuts. I do not know what I see anymore."

"What is this project all about?"

"The ICARUS project? Oh, don't trouble yourself with it. I do not want to get you in trouble, the less you know, the better. But if you wanna know, it is an undercover project funded by the government."

"The government?!"

"Yes. What did you think? That our precious state would not have a hidden agenda? Poor girl!"

"If you are part of this "secret project" how come you tell me about it, how did you reach me?"

"No one believes me anyway, so I pose no threat to them. Besides, I have gained a particular set of skills... One of the experiment's side effects. I have some aces up my sleeve, as we used to say once. Do you gamble?"

"What? No, no... It is banned where I live. Tell me about this man...that guy. What did he look like?"

"Tall and sturdy. Black-haired with cunning eyes. Rebellious! That caused him some trouble... He tried to subvert the system. He was the leader of a mutiny that aimed to stop the cruel treatment of prisoners. Here! Take this pendant. It is his and the only

thing I have left of him. Actually the only thing I have left at all. I struggled to keep it a secret, now something tells me I will not need it anymore.”

“Tell me more, I need to know.”

“I am running out of time. Besides, remember: The less you know.”

As she laid out the pendant, Irene took a quick look. A round artifact, gilded it seemed, with a letter engraved on its front surface. The woman noticed Irene’s look and explained, “This is an ‘Iota’ the ninth letter of the Greek alphabet. I do not know what it stands for, but please, do keep it!”

Irene reached out for the talisman, but loud noises heard from outside prevented her from getting a firm grip on it. The woman was startled and so was Irene. The talisman dropped on the floor and rolled under Irene’s bed.

“I have to go,” the woman, now aghast, barely managed to utter.

“What is your name,” she asked Irene.

“Irene,” she responded in confusion.

“I am Renee,” the woman said.

Then the door of the room opened and once again nurses rushed furiously into the room. This time they were escorted by security guards.

“Grab her, she is mentally unstable,” shouted a voice somewhere from behind.

And so they did; they grasped Renee by her arms and almost dragged her outside. Irene’s heart was beating wildly. For a moment she thought they were talking about her. She felt nauseated again. Could it be a panic attack? Dr. Eustace entered the room once everyone else was gone and spoke, “I apologize for your encounter with that lunatic. She is mentally unstable, she thinks she is persecuted. Are you ok? Did she harm you in any way? Here, let me give you this. It shall soothe your pain away. Easy now, my dear! When you wake up it will all seem like a bad dream!”

Once more, Irene was sedated. This time she felt half-awake, as if the drugs hadn’t fully managed to make her to sleep. She was self-aware. Her body was paralyzed, but her mind was fully functioning, or so it seemed. She tried to process all those things that had happened lately; from her accident to Ceilia’s visit to Renee’s apprehension. This all was so confusing and frustrating. The more she thought the more she puzzled herself. The prom she never went to, her father’s absence, Renee’s words, the “ICARUS project” and those hallucinations. Could they be real? Could the cerebrospinal cord carry along the memories of the donor? At that moment the strange man’s face came to Irene’s mind again. He lay on the table of an operation room this time. He looked lifeless but his eyes were wide open.

This image lasted for only a second, but was enough to scare Irene awake. She started screaming and her shrill voice echoed in the hallway outside her room. Two nurses rushed in to see what was happening. Irene had fallen off from her bed, still screaming. The two stout nurses tried to grab her and inject her with a tranquilizer. She resisted. They tried to pick her up, but she kept falling down. Then all the pieces of the puzzle fell into place for Irene: “The man in my visions...is the donor,” she

exclaimed.

The nurses were still fighting to tranquilize her, thinking that she spoke gibberish. She continued resisting and talking, "They lynched him to save me. Let go of me!"

One of the nurses responded, "Calm down, Miss! Everything is fine. It was just a nightmare."

But Irene knew deep inside that this was not just a dream. Then it occurred to her; "The necklace," she thought and immediately bent to look under the bed, always making sure the nurses could not inject her. She saw it down there, lying on the floor, glistening. She reached out for it and grabbed it along with a piece of glass that had fallen down there when the GGTV had cracked. Irene held both the necklace and the piece of glass tightly. Her hand started bleeding.

At that moment she felt a great surge of strength filling her whole body. A sense of untapped, unleashed power she never had before. Where it came from, she could not tell. But she took advantage of it. With a sudden thrust Irene kicked one of the nurses in the face. She got up and pushed the other against the wall. Just as he tried to push back, Irene snatched the syringe from his fingers and stabbed him in the neck. He immediately fell unconscious to the ground. The first nurse tried to raise himself from the ground. With lightning speed, Irene rushed towards him and kicked him to the head so hard, that she left him unconscious too. Everything happened blazingly fast. Irene had gained strength and kinesthesia she could not even have imagined before. She took the robe one of the nurses was wearing and she put it on herself. She then calmly exited the room, leaving the door to close behind her.

As she walked across the hospital's hallway, a man appeared behind her, "Nurse, go to room number 473. A patient needs help."

It was Dr. Eustace talking. Irene stood still and made no sound. The lights in the hallway flickered. Dr. Eustace repeated, "A patient needs care at room 473."

As Irene remained silent, the doctor approached her. "Do you even listen to me?" he asked irritably.

Irene had turned her back to him so that he wouldn't see her face. Then she spoke grimly and slowly, "Is the money in your pocket, doc?"

Dr. Eustace was confused. He approached a little more. "Who are you? I haven't seen you around. Do you work here?"

"No, I am just looking for a friend."

"Who?"

"The one you killed so that I would be alive and you would make a fortune!"

At that point Irene got out of her robe the piece of glass she had collected a moment ago. She turned abruptly and faced the doctor in the eyes. With a quick movement she hurled the piece of glass. It landed straight on the doctor's neck. He fell down bleeding. He was dead. "See? I have an ace up my sleeve, doc. Farewell!" she said with a vengeful grin on her face.

She found the stairs and started descending until she reached the rooftop. She walked slowly to the edge and looked down. The Hospital building consisted of 100 stories and she was standing on top of all of them. She glanced around. The full-moon was shining bright. It was a beautiful night. Then she spoke to herself as if she was addressing someone, "I do not wish to live forever; All I wanted was to lead a peaceful life. Iota, Whoever you are, you were most probably misunderstood. A victim of our foul, unjust world. You've been maltreated, I'm sure. I am glad you had the chance to live on vicariously through me. May my disease and your demise unite against this battle for freedom. I will seek for liberation from my pain and sickness, just as you sought for your salvation. For you, for Renee and everyone else. Farewell, stranger!"

About “Iota Sign”

The title of my story is “Iota Sign.” For this piece I have chosen to use the genres of mystery and social drama. I focus on medical issues and more specifically on nerve and spinal fluid transplantation. This theme allows me to explore narrative medicine and delve deeper into sensitive issues related – but not limited – to mental and physical health. At the same time, I endeavor to approach the social aspect of healthcare, disease and misfortune.

The story begins in a slightly futuristic setting with Irene, an adolescent who has had a terrible accident. Irene wakes up at a hospital to doctors conversing above her head, only to find out that she has gone through a series of successful reconstructive surgeries. Her spinal cord and nerves have been restored to some extent, but Irene is still in a lot of pain. She is prescribed with quite a few drugs so that the transplants will not be rejected by her system. She is shortly to realize, however, that a lot of peculiar incidents happen after the operations. Strange visions, alterations in personality and above all, the persistence of a mysterious figure and his distinctive mark, the Greek letter “iota” are all part of an unraveling enigma. “Iota Sign” is not yet another melodramatic story of death and decay or at least I hope it is not. I want to believe it sheds a different light on transplantation with the use of intense dialogues and some supernatural/metaphysical elements.

Generally, I explore the concept of “body memory,” or whether our body parts (except the brain) have their own memories. In the story there is a point where Irene exits her room in the hospital and wanders in the halls, where she meets an old woman who speaks to her about how the heart transplant of a deceased person contains their memories. Similarly, Irene’s change of personality could be attributed to the transplants she received.

Therefore, I choose to touch upon the theme of transplantation and how it affects patients. In my story the protagonist receives bone marrow and nerve transplants from an unknown donor. It all comes down, then, to what happens afterwards. Though mainly fictional, “Iota Sign” includes various scientific truths or hypotheses. For those elements I use the work of a medical professional, whom I consider my “medical ally.” For the concept of body memory I am inspired particularly by Thomas Fuchs’s article “The Memory of the Body.” In that article Fuchs explains the various kinds of body memory. Two types that are of great interest to me are what Fuchs calls the “procedural memory” and the “traumatic memory.” The procedural type deals with “sensorimotor faculties,” in Fuchs’s own words. It has to do with motion, perception and bodily habits, like movement patterns and skills. This kind of memory is responsible for the idea I draw from in my story about inherited skills. In “Iota Sign” the hostess of the transplants seems to acquire a new set of skills that she did not have before the operations. This could be attributed either to the medication that she is taking or to the fact that the transplants she has received are “full of memories” from the donor.

The other type of body memory is the “traumatic memory” which is associated with physical injury. As Fuchs suggests, for people who have suffered some kind of trauma “[t]he most indelible impression in body memory is caused by trauma, i.e. the experience of a serious accident [...] The trauma withdraws from conscious recollection, but remains all the more virulent in the memory of the body, as a foreign

body, as it were” (8). In my story Irene’s memories are triggered violently, when doctors touch her damaged spine. And later when she recovers her lost memories it is due to her body being in pain, which brings back the memories from her accident.

This concept of body memory proves useful to me, because in the story Irene, the protagonist, gains kinesthetic abilities and recovers very fast from otherwise permanent damage. She becomes agile and swift after the surgery, a fact which could be supported by Fuchs’s analysis of body memory. As Fuchs states, there is the so-called implicit memory that is responsible for “motor execution.” This implicit memory is unconscious, so perhaps it does not require the brain. While Fuchs’s explanation of Body memory has helped me structure my piece, it has not however proved that inherited memory is a real thing. I just combine the theories regarding body memory and an assumption that this memory is carried by the body parts to a new host. This assumption, however, is not scientifically proved, and I should thereby call it mere fiction.

Irene starts out as a juvenile kid who later evolves into a dynamic, reckless person who seeks to find the truth behind the world and behind her dubious surgeries in particular. Tortured by horrendous visions, she decides to investigate the details concerning her treatment and more specifically, her donor. We see, then, some sort of rite of passage for Irene. Her excruciating pain and her frightful experiences with her trauma cause her to transform and change. She becomes tougher, while at the same time, she loses much of her innocence and joviality. For this change, I was inspired by everyday people who strive to surpass their health issues and difficulties associated with them. I do believe that conditions cause people to change and mature, live more on the edge and dare for things otherwise considered unthinkable.

The story is placed within a rather dystopian fictional future, which resembles much of the real current present. In this setting technology and medicine have progressed further due to amazing breakthroughs. Yet, only a select elite has access to those “luxuries,” often leaving the rest diseased and dying. I therefore choose to explore this aspect of the story, where discrimination and power relations determine even life or death matters. Irene comes from a wealthy and influential family, and she is thereby able to benefit from medical advancements and technologies. Irene’s father is a governor and thus possesses much power to heal her daughter, whatever that takes. He seems to be using contemptible means to achieve his goals, and there is even an innuendo that he filibusters laws to have things happen his own way.

Technology, though advanced and helpful, also proves to be alienating, suppressing or even dangerous and life-threatening. In the story Irene takes medication so that her transplants will not be rejected, but those drugs she takes seem to have side-effects like nausea, confusion and even hallucination. Another motif in the story is the high-tech gadgets and equipment, which however fail to make Irene feel better about her condition and recover. For example, her room in the hospital is fully equipped with cutting-edge technological advancements (automatic security doors, giant glass windows that become displays), but all those do not soothe her pain. One comes to understand, then, that technology does not always benefit humanity.

Though the advent of technology allows for extreme surgeries to be performed successfully, the humanist side of the world has been greatly degraded. Irene survives thanks to the doctors’ help and avoids paralysis but she is not provided with any

particular psychological assistance. Pharmaceutical substances are prominent in the story, but no one really stands by her side, not even her father who takes care and pays for her treatment. Irene is left alone to deal with her mental trauma.

Throughout the story the protagonist starts wondering about her past life. At the same time, quite a few philosophical queries arise, like what makes one who they are. In the process of reevaluating and redefining herself, Irene stumbles across difficulties related not only to her health, but also to her very identity. The story, then, moves on two planes, one being the plot and the other being a general exploration of various existential matters. The style I primarily use for this exploration is naturalism, but I am not confined entirely to it. Vicariously through Irene I wonder what it is that makes people who they are; is it genetics, is it the environment or is it something else? I am interested in the human nature and the factors that contribute to its shape. Irene is born and raised in a strict environment, which has caused her frailty and lack of confidence. Always frightened by her austere father, she would not dare defy his words and orders. She is obedient, and that is only natural considering her background. This is until she decides to disobey her father's orders and go to the school prom. It is after the accident that she changes completely. The harsh situation that she finds herself in reshapes her mentality. She is no longer the frightened teenager, but she is a decisive adolescent who demands to find the truth about the world she lives in. Where is this shift of personality really attributed to? Is it the shift in the environment, the mysterious transplants that she has received, a well-hidden predisposition towards rebellion or is it free-will and infinite human potential which prevails at the end no matter what the conditions are?

What is certain is that a figure keeps appearing in Irene's visions and that person plays an important role in her development as a character. She keeps seeing a robust, dark haired figure who is supposed to be the involuntary donor of the transplants she receives. In a metaphysical way, since this person is allegedly deceased, Irene manages to find the truth about the origin of the transplants. She finds out that the donor had been lynched illegally so that she could receive his cerebrospinal fluid, neurons and nerves. Amidst her confusion and illness she overhears her father, an influential, powerful governor, talking with the doctor in charge of her treatment. This is when she discovers that the man she had been seeing in her dreams and visions has been the unfortunate donor. Her reactions to her discovery are immense. She seeks to find liberation for herself and all who suffer, because she knows the truth; or maybe she thinks she does.

As further inspiration for this piece I have used a few known works of fiction as references. Among those are *V for Vendetta* by Allan Moore and David Lloyd, *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, and *Les Mains d'Orlac* by Maurice Renard. I have chosen them for different reasons. The graphic novel *V for Vendetta* has helped me lay down the progression of my own characters, like Irene who changes in a similar way to Evey Hammond from the graphic novel. Moreover, the mysterious person who keeps appearing in Irene's dreams is similar to "V" from the graphic novel: He is an anonymous prisoner who fights for justice and revenge. I use the same pattern with "Iota Sign" since the mysterious prisoner of my story leads the protagonist to take his place through the memories that are allegedly inscribed in his body parts.

The Hunger Games has inspired me with sketching the social background in my story where there is a clear distinction between the rich and the poor. As for *Les Mains d'Orlac*, this is a story which has popularized the idea of body parts carrying their owners' behavioral patterns.¹ In both that story and mine inherited behavior derives from the transplants. In my story, however, Irene receives not only experiences, memories and behaviors she did not have before, but she also gains a new set of skills, like agility and strength. At some point, two nurses enter her room and try to sedate her with a tranquilizer, but she manages to knock both of them unconscious.

Another genre I have chosen to draw from for "Iota Sign" is science fiction. That genre has allowed me to better depict the problems that might arise in a futuristic world, and especially those problems related to healthcare. Irene is hospitalized in one of the greatest hospitals of the world and also one of the most expensive. She manages to recover pretty fast, at least physically. However, in this world where Irene lives not everyone has a chance to convalesce. Irene becomes part of a devious experimental treatment, which very few can afford. What is more, it seems that this treatment has side-effects (disorientation and maybe hallucinations). So, even the rich are not secure in this dystopian future. Irene does not seem to recover mentally, although her father has paid large sums for his daughter's treatment.

Another issue I have tried to shed light on is human rights. There is a point in the story when a strange woman enters Irene's room at the hospital and tells her that she is there because of an experiment that is being conducted on inmates of a correctional facility. Human rights, then, are violated. The human life is of no particular value, especially the lives of criminals and prisoners who are considered expendable and are being sacrificed in the name of science. As George Orwell has said in his book "*The Animal Farm*", "all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" (112). This is what I have also tried to elaborate on in "Iota Sign," and the genres I have turned to have helped me achieve this goal.

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¹ "The Hands of Orlac": The story features a pianist who loses his hands and has them replaced with the hands of a murderer. The new hands cause the new owner to kill, just as the previous owner did.