

Sleeper's Crown

A short story by Yossi Karp



Darla snuggled into bed. The room's lights were dimmed all the way down and the fresh, crisp sheets wrapped tightly around her.

"Daddy?" she turned her head, "Today was really hard. Mrs. Swinston gave us so much work. We had to write a whole page! Last year, we never had to write more than half a page."

"That's because you're big now. Last year was last year. You're 12, and at your age, the teachers expect more."

"But it's so much. My hand hurt writing all those words."

"You'll get used to it. One page isn't so bad."

"Daddy?"

"Yes, Darla?"

"I'm tired. Can I sleep now?"

"Of course! Are you comfortable?"

"Yes."

"How's Mr. Buggles?"

She patted her toy rabbit on its head, "Mr. Buggles is ready to sleep."

"OK, Darla. Put on your Crown and close your eyes."

Darla reached in front of her and picked up her Crown. She turned it over in her hands and said, "It's pretty, isn't it, Daddy?"

"Yes, I guess it is. That's why it suits you so well."

Darla smiled, yawned, and rested it on her head. The Crown fit neatly over her hair.

Darla's blonde fringes peeked out from beneath it.

"Good night, Daddy."

“Sleep well, Darla. I’ll see you soon.”

Darla hugged Mr. Buggles close to her and closed her eyes. The Crown pulsed a gentle soft blue light. Soon, Darla’s grip on Mr. Buggles loosened slightly as the blue light gave way to a pale green steady glow. The bedroom door creaked open and Darla’s dad turned towards it.

“She’s in REM, darling,” he whispered to Lynn.

“OK, Dexter. Don’t be too long. We’ve got that documentary we were going to watch. I’ll wait for you to join me.”

Dexter smiled back as his wife gently closed the door. He leaned back in his comfortable chair and drew his own Crown from his pocket. It unfolded and he felt around it for the button. He depressed it and held it in place for a few seconds. His Crown paired with Darla’s, both of them now glowing a soft white. Dexter placed his Crown on his head, lay back in the chair, and closed his eyes.



Darla sat at a school table. She was wearing her pajamas, fluffy slippers, and a plastic beaded necklace. Mr. Buggles lay upside down on the floor next to her. The table was littered with beads and string. A soft white surrounded Darla as she hummed to herself, busily tying the end of another necklace.

“I knew you were coming!” said Darla excitedly as she continued her arts and crafts, “I saw the green change to white and I knew you’d be here soon, Daddy.”

“What are you making, Darla?” Dexter couldn’t place this particular memory.

“Don’t you remember? When I was at day camp I made beaded necklaces for you and Mommy.”

“That was years ago. But, yes, I do remember now. You wore your necklace for weeks after camp. You wouldn’t take it off, not even for a bath.”

“It fell off me in the park somewhere.”

“Right! I remember we looked for it until it got dark, but we never found it.”

“I made another one. I know it isn’t real, but I felt like it.”

“It’s a good one.”

Darla continued beading. She stopped, looked up at Dexter, and said, “I’m ready now, Daddy.”

“If you’re sure.”

“Yes.”

Dexter closed his eyes in thought and soon Darla’s arts and crafts memory gave way to a forest of Eucalyptus trees. Darla stood next to Dexter holding Mr. Buggles by his ear.

“What scenario did you make, Daddy? Where are we?” Darla looked down at her clothes. She wore a brown top and a black skirt.

“We’re in Australia. It’s 1788. Captain Cook has just discovered this continent. He came here on a boat called The Endeavour, and that’s when the Europeans began to colonize this place.” The air was fresh and the ground crunched beneath their feet as they walked between the tall, dry trees. “It will be many years until the Europeans establish a city here. Where we’re standing now is eventually going to be the port city of Melbourne. 1835, to be exact. If you concentrate, you can smell the sea.”

“Where are all the people?”

“There were indigenous people who lived here. They were called the “Kulin” nation.

Look, over there!” Dexter pointed to a group of Aborigines sitting casually on some logs.

“Can they see us?” asked Darla.

“Do you want them to?”

“I don’t think so.”

“We’ll be invisible, then. Remember, we have to consciously want to be hidden or they’ll see you as part of their world.”

They watched the men for a while. One was carving out a tree branch. The others were sorting some sort of berries into piles.

“Do you want to see more?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

The landscape slowly shifted and the men dissolved into the background. When the environment came back into focus, Darla and her father were standing on a rocky mound, overlooking a sparkling river. Darla shifted her weight to maintain her balance.

“This, Darla, is Ballarat. It’s now 1850 and the Europeans have discovered gold in this area. Look at all the tents. See the horses over there?”

“There’s a lot of people!”

“For sure. When people heard there was gold to be mined, many people rushed to Ballarat and other gold fields to strike it rich. That’s why they called it the Gold Rush. Some people wanted to get out of poverty, but for some, it was pure greed.”

“So, all these people got rich from digging for gold?”

“Not everyone. Well, some found gold, but most didn’t find enough to make the effort worthwhile. And there were also robbers called Bushrangers. It was a rough time.”

“Daddy, what’s that wooden door over there? It doesn’t look like it belongs in this scenario.”

“Ignore it, Darla. It’s not part of this scenario. Anyway, that’s enough for tonight. I’m going to go now. Mommy says she needs me for something.” The scene faded and the soft glow returned.

“OK, Daddy. I love you.”

“Love you, too.” Dexter opened his eyes and took the Crown from his head. He depressed the button and his Crown turned off. It’s interesting she noticed the door. She’d never been aware of it before in any other scenario he’d made. No matter, Darla would dream the entire interaction over and over again all night until the lessons soaked into her subconscious.



“Daddy, I wish I could do what you do. I can only make small things from my memory. You can make big things from your imagination.”

“You will, one day, when you’re ready. You’re not big enough yet.”

“I want to be big enough.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll be big before you know it. Now, are you all snuggled up and cozy?”

“Yes.”

“What about Mr. Buggles?”

“Him, too.”

“Goodnight, Darla. See you soon.”

Darla placed the Crown on her head and, when she'd fallen asleep, it glowed soft green. Dexter paired his Crown with Darla's and found himself in the white void. Darla was standing next to a tree. A tire on a rope swung gently from a branch. Mr. Buggles was stuffed into the tire's cavity, where the inner tube would go. Darla stood behind it swinging Mr. Buggles back and forth. Her summer dress rustled in the breeze.

"Daddy, you're here! I was playing with Mr. Buggles."

"I remember this memory."

"Yeah, it's one of my favorites. You were at your work over there in that building." Darla pointed to the distance where a building appeared. It looked somewhat like the one Dexter worked in many years ago. "Mommy and I waited for you at the park. She swung me on this swing."

"And then there was a summer rain and you sat in the lobby."

"Yes! You brought me hot chocolate from your office."

Dexter looked around at the recreation of the lobby. It was quite good, at least from the perspective of a child. There were more elevator banks than there should have been, and the reception desk was a lot higher than was practical, but it was a pretty close approximation.

"You were cold and you wore my coat from the lobby to the car," said Dexter.

"Yeah, it was so big on me. And warm!" It wasn't exactly his coat she was now wearing, but it was an excellent likeness.

"Are you ready for our adventure?" Dexter held Darla's hand as he spun the scenario in his mind. They were standing at the foot of a grassy hill. Darla wore a flowing dress. It

was blue with purple accents. She spun on the spot and her dress billowed up around her.

“I love this dress!” she giggled with delight.

“Oh, you’re going to love this even more. Look to the top of the hill. What do you see?”

“A castle! With unicorn flags!”

“Yes, you’re the Princess of Unicorn Land. Up to the castle?”

Darla skipped along the path towards the large castle doors. Standing at the drawbridge, she announced to everyone and no one, “I am the Princess! I command you to open the doors!”

There was a heavy clanking sound, followed by a grinding noise. The massive castle doors creaked open. A full regal band, complete with trumpeters and crashing symbols honored Princess Darla as she walked along the royal red carpet. There were cheers and flowers and lots of clapping. Royal unicorns bowed their horns in respect as she passed. The smile on Darla’s face was sunshine itself as she made her way to the throne at the top of the steps. Darla sat down and the cheering crowds calmed in anticipation.

“Your majesty,” a regal gentleman in an opulent outfit of green and gold bowed low, “we, the people, welcome you back to your kingdom.”

“I’m delighted to be back,” she returned, getting right into the role, “how have things been in my kingdom?”

“Very good. Very good. Well, that is, except for one thing.”

“Oh?”

“The Buggles monster has been stealing all our grain and we don’t have any left to feed our unicorns.” Darla glanced across to the row of unicorns. One of them shed a large rainbow tear.

“So we must stop the Buggles monster. Didn’t you try?”

“Why, yes, but even our bravest knights couldn’t fight him. I’m afraid, Your Majesty, our fate is in your hands.”

Darla looked out at the expectant crowd. If a hero Princess of Unicorn Land is what they need, that’s what they’re going to get. “Prepare my unicorn! I will face the Buggles monster on my own and bring back the grain for the unicorns!” The crowd erupted in cheers of “Brave Princess Darla!”

Princess Darla stood before her unicorn. It smiled at her and she gently patted its back and hoisted herself into the saddle.

“Be careful, my Princess,” said the gentleman as he handed her a wand. Darla sheathed the wand and commanded, “Let’s go!”

The unicorn set off at a gallop and slowly lifted into the sky. Below her stood a crowd of people, cheering her on. Darla circled the top of the castle and headed for the thick woods where the Buggles monster was sure to be hiding.

The unicorn descended gently to the ground and landed at the edge of the woods.

Princess Darla took her wand, patted the unicorn on the nose and told her to wait.

Darla spotted a house in the distance. It was small with two windows, a door, and a smoking chimney. She headed towards it. Darla knocked on the door, but there was no answer. Circling around the back, she stopped. This was no time for Princess Darla to freeze, but it was a frightening sight. There, atop a huge pile, sat the Buggles monster, a

giant rabbit-like creature, tossing handfuls of grain in the air and singing how happy he was that he had all the grain for himself.

She steeled herself and marched purposely towards the Buggles monster and the treasured pile of grain.

“Buggles!” announced Princess Darla in her most authoritative voice, “I’ve come to take back our grain. It doesn’t belong to you!”

The Buggles monster was startled, but responded sharply, “Oh, it’s you, Princess Darla. I took this grain so now it’s all mine!”

“This grain belongs to our unicorns. If they don’t get it, they’ll starve!”

“If I don’t have it, I’ll starve! I’ll never give it up!”

“I don’t want to fight you, Buggles, but I will if I have to. My people are depending on me!”

“Your bravest knights couldn’t defeat me, and neither can you!”

Princess Darla thought for a moment and decided. She waved her wand at the Buggles monster, who scratched his head, quite confused. The Buggles monster coughed a little cough. As it did, it shrank a bit. Then another cough and it shrank a bit more. Then a few more coughs and the Buggles monster shrank to no larger than Darla’s actual Mr. Buggles.

“What have you done!”

“I shrank you. Now I’m going to take almost all of the grain. But because you’re so small, you won’t need a lot, so I’ll leave you a little bit. It will be enough for you, and we can both get what we need!”

Princes Darla's unicorn sidled up to her, no longer afraid of the Buggles monster, and crouched, ready for the Princess to mount it and fly back victoriously to the castle. But then, out of the corner of her eye, Darla noticed something oddly out of place. She walked towards a door which stood on its own, dismembered from any structure. She remembered this door from Australia and how her father told her to ignore it, but she was curious. Darla stood before the wooden door. It said, "Private" on an engraved plaque. She reached out to twist the door knob.

"Darla, that's not for you. You can't go in there."

"Why not, Daddy?" she turned to her father who had been watching her from afar.

"It's private."

"If it's private, why is it in this scenario?"

"Because when I make these stories for you, I need to draw on my entire knowledge and experience to be creative. I have to access that knowledge and experience somehow, so there's a door."

"So what's behind the door?"

"Everything I know. Everything I've experienced. My personality. My creativity. Everything that makes me me."

"So why can't I see it?"

"Because it's mine and I can't share it with you. When you get older and gain knowledge and experience, you'll have a door of your own. But this is mine and I can't let you in.

Anyway, that's enough for now. Goodnight, Darla."

"Goodnight, Daddy."

Dexter opened his eyes and unpaired his Crown. She's a curious one, for sure. He looked over at Darla, sleeping gently. She'll enjoy reliving this story. It will teach her responsibility, bravery, and, above all, creativity. He left the room to tell Lynn how the latest scenario he built instilled self-confidence in Darla and how she's learning to solve problems. It's exactly the progress they hoped for her. He put his Crown into the charging bay and silently left the room.



Darla stood next to the tire swing. As the rope creaked back and forth she pondered her latest experience. She knew she was supposed to remember the flowing blue dress and that would bring her to the foot of the grassy hill. She knew if she commanded it, the great doors of the castle would open and she would be received as a princess. She'd already done that several times tonight, she was sure. She couldn't remember. Maybe it was twice, maybe it was two hundred times. She knew what she was supposed to do. And why wouldn't she? Every part of her was excited for the blue dress and for a ride on a unicorn, soaring above her very own castle. But she also remembered something else, something she was certain she wasn't supposed to remember. The door. That strange door. She'd seen it before. The memory of it flickered in the back of her mind. The part of her memory she wasn't supposed to access. But there it was. A door. Solid wood with a handle you turn. Darla tried to remember what her father had said about it. She couldn't quite remember. It wasn't part of the scenario, yet it was. It was Daddy's place — yes, his memories and knowledge. That would be wonderful to see! Her Daddy

was a good man and he could only have become good from having good experiences. Darla knew if she wanted to grow up to be strong like her Daddy, she'd need good experiences.

The swing faded away, leaving Mr. Buggles sitting alone on the floor. She scooped him up and gave him a squeeze then she reached out to the handle of the heavy wooden door that materialized from the depths of her subconscious.

Click.

The door's latch retracted and Darla pushed against the heavy wood with all her strength. Whatever's inside would be something Darla hadn't seen yet. And at her stage of development, she couldn't possibly imagine it into being. So everything she was about to see had been created by her Dad. The door opened just wide enough for Darla and Mr. Buggles to slip through.

It was dark and musky. Darla tried to imagine a light globe, but even though she concentrated hard, it remained dark. Slowly adjusting her eyes to the blackness, Darla found a switch and pressed it. She took in her surroundings. She was standing in a vast room, filled with filing cabinets of the sort she'd seen when visiting the 1950s with her Dad.

There was a window, but Darla couldn't see through it. A water cooler bubbled, startling her, and she gripped Mr. Buggles even tighter. Darla took a few tentative steps forward. An overhead fan clacked.

Darla noticed that the filing cabinets were sorted in reverse chronological order. If she wanted to see her father's experiences that made him what he is today, she'd have to access a cabinet labeled a date before she was born. No sooner had she thought this,

than the filing cabinets came to life. Some disappeared altogether, others vanished and reappeared elsewhere in the room. After a few minutes, the shuffling subsided and Darla surveyed the newly configured cabinets. The one directly in front of her was labeled “Just before Darla was born.” Darla pulled on the cabinet’s drawer.

She was in a hospital. Bright lights and out-of-sync beeping noises surrounded her. Mr. Buggles pulled himself close to Darla.

There’s Daddy, talking to a doctor. He shook the doctor’s hand. He was smiling. Darla followed him. Does she want Daddy to see her? No. Some doors opened and Daddy was standing next to a bed. Mommy was there, holding a baby close to her chest. Darla peered down into the baby’s eyes. She didn’t recognize herself at this age.

“She’s beautiful,” said Daddy, “gorgeous.”

Mommy looked down at the baby. “Yes,” she agreed, “She’s a little darla.”

“A little what?”

“Darling, honey, a little darling.”

“That’s not what you said. You called her Darla.”

“Did I? I’m so tired. I don’t know what I’m saying.”

“No, it’s perfect. We’ll call her Darla.”

“I always thought choosing a name was going to be hard. But, there you go. It’s Darla. I love it.” Daddy rested his hand on the baby’s head for a moment.

“I need to make a call. I’ll be back in a moment.”

“Really? Now?”

“Yeah, I’ll be right back.” He smiled at his family and left the room. Darla followed.

Daddy stood in the corner, trying to distance himself from the business and clatter of the maternity ward. He pulled out his phone and tapped in a number.

“Volume up. I want to hear what Daddy’s saying,” whispered Darla. The sounds of the ward faded into the background. The cries of newborns melted into the rear of the soundscape. Darla heard the digital tone chirp.

“It’s me,” said Daddy, “It’s a girl.”

“Do you expect congratulations?”

“I can’t do this anymore. I’m out.”

“No.”

“What do you mean no?”

“Just what it sounds like. Look, I’ve been telling you for the last nine months —”

“— and my answer stays the same.”

“It wasn’t a question; it was a statement. I’m out.”

Daddy hung up the phone.

The maternity ward gave way to the filing cabinet room of Daddy’s memories. Darla opened one labeled “Two weeks before Darla was born.”

She was now sitting at the edge of a swimming pool. Her feet dangled in the water. The sun was hot on her skin, but the water was a cool relief. Mommy was sitting on the steps in the shallow end of the pool. A friend said something funny and Mommy’s head lolled backwards in laughter. Mommy loved a good laugh. Darla scanned the poolside for her father. He was at the barbecue. There were lots of people around. She swung her feet out of the water and padded across the decking.

“You must be one of the neighborhood kids,” a tall man with a mustache, holding an iced tea, addressed her.

“I come here sometimes when it’s hot...to swim,” she replied immediately getting into character.

“Well, you’re tracking water all over the place, young lady.”

“Yessir. I left my towel somewhere.”

“The sun will dry it off, but you have to be more careful.”

Yes, she would. If she didn’t consciously decide to remain hidden, she’d be part of the scenario. It was too late now. She’ll have to be discreet.

The man with the mustache considered his empty plate for a moment and headed for Daddy at the grill.

“Nice turnout.”

“It’s the weather — and the pool,” Daddy replied as he shifted sausages around the grill.

“The last report you sent in was very encouraging, Dexter.”

“Look, William, she’s due in two weeks. I’ve been trying to tell you I can’t keep working on this project.” Daddy pointed his utensils at the mustached man, “The work’s too dangerous. I can’t risk it.”

“Risk it? You’ve nearly perfected it! Your work will change everything. You know how important — how monumental — this project is for the company — for you!”

“The more I use the device, the higher the risk, and you know *that* already.”

“Without you, the project dies.”

“Get someone else.”

“There’s no one else.”

“Cancel the project.”

“No can do, my friend.”

“Hey!” interrupted Mommy, “You serving those sausages or waiting for them to burn?”

“Oh, yeah, of course. Here you go.”

The pool party dissolved into nothing and Darla was once again standing in Daddy’s memory room. She yawned. The morning was coming and she had to wake up. No time left to explore further. She’ll have to find her way back to this room somehow.



“Sweetheart, you look distracted. Something I can help with?”

“Just school, Daddy.”

“I’m good at school. Maybe I can help?”

“Can you help me get into the musical? I auditioned today. Mrs. Swinston said my effort was ‘interesting’.”

“Um, yeah. Maybe not that. But you’re good at other stuff. You don’t have to be in the musical.”

“So you’re saying Mrs. Swinston is right and I have a terrible voice?”

“No. I’m saying you have a lovely voice and Mrs. Swinston has questionable taste.

Maybe it’s best to find a different activity?”

“I think without me the project dies. There’s no one else.”

“Where’s that coming from?”

“Oh, something I heard.”

“Heard where?”

“I don’t remember, Daddy.”

“Sure, sure,” then, “Hey, Darla? You ready to put on your Crown?”

Darla placed her Crown on her head and it soon glowed the familiar green color. Dexter hesitated before pairing his Crown with hers. What did Darla mean by her comment about the project dying? It was an almost verbatim quote from one of his memories.

Certainly, Darla couldn’t have forced her way into his memories yet — she wasn’t strong enough, was she? Dexter put on his Crown without pairing it and found himself standing in an endless corridor. He was wearing a lab coat. His shoes clacked as he strode down the hallway until he found the heavy wooden door, which was locked tight, just as he’d left it. He placed his palm on the round doorknob and twisted. There was a familiar click and the lock disengaged. Dexter pressed the door open. As expected, rows of filing cabinets stood before him. He noticed the labels on the drawers were no longer years, but descriptions. And they weren’t in the right order. “She did it. Well, that’s a step…”

Dexter disengaged from the room and woke next to Darla’s bed. He removed the Crown from his head and considered its soft lines and sleek appearance. A few thoughts crossed his mind: it was the first time Darla had done anything sneaky, it showed a level of independence he hadn’t expected from her at this stage, she was powerful enough to open the door, and she might have started to uncover the truth.

His first instinct was to call Lynn. This development wasn’t expected for quite some time, and maybe she would know what to do. On the other hand, if Darla’s strong enough now to open his memories, at least the ones he meant for her to see, perhaps she’s ready to know the truth? He glanced over at her. Darla was hugging Mr. Buggles

close to her chest. So young. Maybe still too young to know? No. Darla wasn't mature enough yet to know the truth. She still needs to grow. She might find out by herself and it would be a shock, but to get so far, she'd need to develop some serious skills, so if she does manage to get there, by then she'll be able to handle it. Dexter decided not to say anything yet, but he'd still add extra layers of security.

Dexter replaced the Crown on his head, this time pairing it with Darla's.

"Daddy, there you are!" Darla knew he was there even without turning around. She was sitting on a unicorn, stroking its mane. Mr. Buggles was tucked into her jacket pocket, his top half flopped around as the unicorn pranced.

"How did you create that unicorn, Darla?"

"From my memory! Last night you took me to Unicorn Land. I remembered what a unicorn looked like and here she is!"

"Incredible!" Dexter whispered to himself. Darla should only have been able to create from her waking memories, not from her dreams. "Are you ready for our adventure?"

The unicorn dissolved away and Darla found herself sitting in a small boat. Daddy rowed and the boat headed towards the river bank. Women washed clothes at the river's edge and small children played with sticks and rocks around them. Nobody paid them the slightest bit of attention.

Daddy beached the boat far from the women and they disembarked. The foliage was unexpectedly lush. Darla and Daddy walked into the rainforest along a well-trodden path. They soon found themselves in the center of a large village.

"This is the Amazon rainforest, and this is a typical Mayan village. Before Europeans arrived, there were millions of Mayans living in this area and also further inland. When

the Spanish found this civilization, they encountered an intelligent race with a rich heritage, culture, and traditions. That's not to say the Mayans were peace-loving people, they had their share of tribal battles. The Mayan temples were often made of gold, like that one over there," he pointed to a structure in the center of the village. "Gold was considered sacred, not valuable economically. The Spanish, with their advanced weaponry, thought otherwise. They plundered the golden temples and if the Mayans weren't killed over gold, they died from diseases the Europeans brought with them." "And the children?" asked Darla, taking in the scenario around her. She scanned the village, noticing all the details. Men carried wood, great stalks of corn grew at the edge of the village, and women carried buckets of water from the irrigation channel. But she finally found what she was really looking for — the solid wooden door, standing incongruously against a pile of stones.

"I know you see it," said Dexter, "Ignore it."

Darla wasn't sure if this meant he knew she'd been sneaking around his memories. She bit her lip and looked away. Darla knew she had to find out more, but if Daddy knew what she was up to, she wasn't sure she could manage to keep up the deception.

"That door isn't for you, Darla. You mustn't open it."

"Yes, Daddy."

Despite himself, he said, "I mean, you mustn't open it again."

"Oh..."

"I know you're curious, but I can't have you looking at things you're not supposed to see. I added extra protection."

“But how am I supposed to become a stronger Crown user and create from my imagination without them?”

“Those are my memories and experiences, not yours. You’ll build your own memories and, in time, they will make you strong. Don’t try to take shortcuts, Darla.”

Darla had heard it all before. She leaned against a tree trunk, “But that will take too long. I need to know what you know so I can be as good as you.”

“You’ll be better than me, Darla, but not yet. You’re too young.”

“What was so dangerous you couldn’t continue the project, Daddy?” There. She flat out asked him.

He considered answering her directly. Instead, he said, “Just don’t go poking around in places you’re not supposed to be. Learn what I teach you, then you’ll know what you need to know. I’m trying to give you a good, solid, moral base for you to build on. History is full of colonization and conquests, greed and ego. Selflessness and treachery.

Heroes and villains. When you master empathy and kindness, when you know in your heart what’s right and what’s wrong, that’s when you’ll be ready for the next step.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

Dexter opened his eyes and removed his Crown. He’d better discuss these latest developments with Lynn. He knew Darla would someday get to this point, so he’d planted faux memories for her to find, but what if she stumbles upon the real memories, the ones she shouldn’t see?



Darla must have visited the rainforest hundreds of times that night. The stories of the ancient Mayans and the Spanish invasion seeped deeply into her subconscious. But on each visit to the Mayan village, the wooden doorway called to her curiosity. This last time, the call was too strong to ignore. She promised Daddy, but she had to know more. The wooden door was shut tight. It was impenetrable and surrounded by rock. Darla reached for the door handle, hoping to hear the satisfying click. Instead, the brass door knob delivered an electric shock, and she pulled back. "Daddy's extra protection," she said aloud as a woman passed by unawares, carrying a baby in one arm and a basket of fruit in the other. To her, the door and Darla didn't exist. Darla focused on the door and tried again, but her second attempt didn't go any better. Hands on her hips, Darla stood helpless before the barrier, behind which lay the answer to her questions — what was Daddy working on? What was so dangerous about it? And why was he trying so hard to keep this information from her?

Darla contemplated her situation. She needed an insulator, something to absorb the shock, like a pair of insulated gloves. If only she could imagine a pair, but she couldn't create anything new, only what she remembered. But, wait! There was one memory buried deep in her past. Daddy was fixing something electrical in the house — yes, a blown fuse! She was playing close by and remembered trying on her Daddy's insulated gloves. Of course, they were oversized for her hands and Daddy snapped a photo, which was now buried in an album at the bottom of a bookshelf somewhere in their house. Darla remembered the gloves and how they felt on her hands, enveloping them completely. She remembered the color, the stitching, how her fingers didn't even reach the ends of the fingertips which were left dangling.

Looking down at her hands, the insulation was rough against her skin. The gloves on her hands were far too big for her now, as they were in her memory. Darla reached for the doorknob and when she touched it without getting shocked, she smiled in satisfaction at her creativity and twisted the brass bulb until she heard a click. Darla entered her father's memories.

After quickly organizing the filing cabinets, Darla found a drawer marked "Two years before Darla was born". She pulled it open. The room around her gently disappeared and she found herself standing at a coffee machine in the kitchenette of an office building. Willing herself to be a third-party observer, she turned around at the sound of her father's voice.

"The prototype works, William! The tests were all successful!"

"Not here, Dexter. In my office."

Darla followed them down the corridor.

"I'm telling you, William, it was incredible. I learned more in eight hours of sleeping than I could in eight years in a classroom. And it's all still there," he pointed to his head.

William raised his eyebrows as if to say, "What do you mean?"

"I mean that I remember everything — absolutely everything."

Darla looked down at Dexter's hands. He was holding a Crown. Its wires were exposed and it wasn't glowing.

"The Board is going to love this, Dexter. We should commercialize it as soon as possible."

"I wouldn't do that, William. I think we just scratched the surface. We can take this way further."

“How far?”

“As far as you want. I used this, this — I haven’t named it yet — this device to learn Namo Plus programming. Then I used my newfound knowledge to design a pairing interface to connect two devices together.”

“Incredible. And it’s completely safe, right? No exploding brains or other side effects, right?”

“Well, no immediate side effects.”

William raised his eyebrows again.

“No side effects that can be immediately observed following the use of this device.”

“That’s one hell of a disclaimer, Dexter. So you’re saying we’re not ready for FCC, FDA, or CE certification yet.”

“If I’m being honest, we’re not even close. We have to fully test its limits, see what else we can do with this device. There are so many possible applications. We have a lot of work to do to tap into its full potential.”

“What’s next?”

“I’ll have to do another MRI to compare it to my baseline. That’s the first step. Then we’ll need to test it on a wider sampling of people from different backgrounds, etc.”

“Sounds promising,” said William, “but considering what you just said, we’re going to have to take this slowly. The tech is too new. We’ll need to make sure it’s watertight-safe before we release it to market. If we’re messing with people’s brains, we have to be damn sure it works as advertised.”

“Oh, it works, Will.”

“Tell me that when we lose our first billion-dollar law suit. Get it right, then we make money.”

Darla found herself standing next to the filing cabinet back in her father’s memory room. She knew she didn’t have much time left before waking, but if she didn’t find out the whole story now, maybe she’ll never be able to get back in and she’d never know. Daddy is going to be so mad.



One year before Darla is born.

“But you were the one who was so cautious!” Dexter’s jaw clenched, “This tech isn’t anywhere near ready.”

“Relax, Dexter. Look, we’ve seen the potential the Crown has for learning, but — and you told me this yourself, don’t forget — the AI implications could be astronomical.”

“I don’t think it’s safe, William. We’re pushing the extreme edges of bio-tech boundaries, here. The Neurology department analyzed my MRIs from over the past few months. So far, I’m okay, but there’s real danger that —”

“Good, so so far you’re okay. That’s a great sign and the Board is going to love hearing that. Dexter, we’ve got the best team. The best. You’re spearheading a brand new field of human-AI interface. It was always going to be risky, but you’re managing it responsibly. Step by step.”

“I don’t know, William. It’s uncharted territory.”

“And so was space before Yuri Gagarin and Neil Armstrong. That’s what being a pioneer is all about.”

“I want to start a family. How’s Lynn going to take it when I turn into a freaking vegetable?”

“You’re exaggerating, Dexter. Step by step. Slow progress. That’s how you got this far, and that’s how you’ll do the as-yet unthinkable: pure human-AI interface, the first of the last steps towards the Singularity. Augmenting human thought with the power of Artificial Intelligence has barely been studied. But you’ll be the first to merge with a machine so your thoughts and the thoughts of the AI will become indistinguishable. It’s the next step in the evolution of humankind. The Board is behind you 100%. I’m behind you 100%. Trust me, your wife is behind you 100%. It’s going to be a history book moment.”



“I know what you did last night, Darla.” She was tucked tightly into bed, the sheet folded crisply over her chest. Mr. Buggles’ ear brushed against hers as she turned away from her father.

“I couldn’t help it. I had to know.”

“You’re not even going to say sorry?”

“Daddy, I’m sorry.”

“But do you mean it, Darla? Because if you’re sorry, really sorry, deep in your heart sorry, you won’t look for the wooden door and try to go inside. I could leave it wide open and, if you really truly are sorry, you wouldn’t even go near it.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you, Daddy, I just needed to know.”

“You could have asked me.”

“You wouldn’t tell me. You’re trying to stop me from knowing whatever it is you’re hiding from me.”

The wall clock ticked. Then it ticked again.

Finally, Daddy said, “I talked with Mommy about it. We agreed I can tell you everything. She said it’s time. Given your recent behavior, I’m not sure, but I trust Mommy.”

“So tell me, Daddy.”

“I’ll show you.”



Darla wore denim overalls and sat cross-legged on the floor holding Mr. Buggles by his ears and dancing him like a puppet. “I’m ready,” said Darla when she sensed her father’s presence.

A room appeared around them, one Darla hadn’t seen before. There were computers, wires, and Crowns in various states of assembly littered the desks around her.

“This is my lab, Darla. That’s my station over there. This is where I invented the Crown.”

He picked one up. Its casing was open and the wires criss-crossed each other in an orderly mess. “At first, I invented the Crown to speed the pace of human learning.”

“Like the scenarios you show me! I can easily remember the details when I wake up!”

“Exactly. I started by experimenting on myself. In only one night, I learned everything there is to know about Namu Plus programming — the latest computer language for programming AI. Only a few people in the world have mastered it because it’s so complicated. I’m one of them, because of the Crown.”

“But what’s so dangerous about that, Daddy? We use the Crown every night.”

“William, my boss, wanted me to take it to market. Can you imagine how much money my company could have made from it? And how much better humanity could be because of it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it, Darla. If you wanted to learn everything there is to know about any topic, all it would take is one night of sleeping and you’d be an expert.”

“I could learn anything? I wouldn’t need to go to school?”

“Anything. And then you could solve all sorts of problems, like cure diseases, invent new ways to do things, like faster-than-light space travel, or how to grow food in a desert.”

“That sounds cool.”

“Yeah, but I wanted more. I wanted to infuse the Crown with AI. I wanted to build the first machine to enable me to think as fast as an AI, but with the creativity of a human. It worked, at first, and it was amazing. I can’t describe how it felt to combine my own brain power with the power of AI. The problem, Darla, was this.” Darla followed Daddy to the far end of the room. He switched on a monitor and a brain scan appeared. “This, Darla, is my brain. The red areas show degradation from the baseline.”

“What does that mean?”

“The more I used the Crown, the more I hurt my brain.”

“But that’s easy! Use the Crown to solve the problem!”

“That’s it, Darla. The more I use the Crown, the sicker I get. This problem is so hard to solve, not even the Crown can help. If I use the Crown to solve the problem of the Crown, I could die.”

“William wants you to solve it, so he wants you to die?”

“Not quite. But, yeah, he wants me to solve it. That’s what I want to show you next.”

The lab dissolved away and they were now standing at the end of a conference room.

William was paying attention to Dexter’s presentation. Nobody else was there.

“We can’t use the Crown to solve the damage the Crown does to the brain. It’s impossible. The human mind can’t assimilate so much data in such a brief period of time. Humans aren’t built that way. We’ve evolved to learn at our regular pace.

Prolonged Crown use will, let’s say, overload it.”

“So the project is dead?”

“It would be, except I came up with a solution. Actually, Lynn thought of it.”

“Your wife? Okay, what’s the solution?”

“Meta AI.”

“Meta AI?”

“An AI within the AI.”

“Explain.”

“I use Namo Plus to build a program — another AI — which works together with the AI I was interfacing with.”

“So you’re just going to connect two AIs together to solve the Crown killing its user problem? That doesn’t sound smart. How is more of the same going to help? If AI could have solved this on its own, you would have fixed this problem already.”

“True, but this new AI will think it’s human. I’ll give it memories, history, and experiences, make it feel like it’s learning and growing like a person. I’ll pique its curiosity, give it questions to answer, teach it empathy, challenge it with problems to solve, moral difficulties, the works.”

“And that will give it the creativity humans have but traditional AI doesn’t have?”

“Exactly. For all intents and purposes, this meta AI will be a person. And when it’s ready — mature enough — I’ll give it this problem and it will have the knowledge, experience, feelings, thoughts, and creativity like any human. So instead of an actual human, the human-like AI will be able to use the Crown to solve the problem of the Crown.”

“That’s incredible! Can you do it? How long will it take?”

“Actually, I’ve already done it.” Dexter spun his laptop around to face William. I call it the Dynamic Artificial Relational Lifelike Algorithm - DARLA.



Lynn removed the Crown from her head. The pain was worse after each use. Her temples throbbed and she rubbed them gently with the tips of her fingers. The doctors said she didn’t have much time left. It had taken years, but now that DARLA was finally aware, there’s hope.

Lynn was a little surprised that Dexter had given her credit for the meta AI solution. Didn't he come up with it? After using the Crown for so long, it's hard to tell anymore where her thoughts ended and where the AI's began.