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she, myself and I

EMMA YOUNG

Stripes

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April 22.

Imagine being conscious but hearing nothing, seeing nothing, feeling nothing, tasting nothing, touching nothing, having the awareness of being awake but unable to move or sense a single thing – and then, every few seconds, or minutes or hours, because you have no sense of time, a wild explosion of light rocks your mind. The silence and the stillness are absolute. Then a grenade fires through what someone else might call my soul. Am I alive? Perhaps I'm on the point of death.

May 8.

A hum. It's all I'm aware of. I can't see anything. I can't touch, taste, or move anything. But I can detect that vibration, and somehow I know it's external to me. I can sense *something*. And I realize: I'm *thinking* about the hum. I'm thinking half-normal thoughts in undeniably normal words. I am alive. I *am* alive.

Dr. Monzales told me it would take time for my brain to connect with my new body, and my experiences during that process would be very difficult to predict.

Explanation A: That is what's happening right now, and gradually it'll get better.

Explanation B: I've survived the operation but my brain was injured. I have a degree of consciousness, but a permanent inability to move or communicate.

Either way, they'll know that something's going on in my head, because they had the world's most sophisticated brain scanners all lined up to use on me. They'll see activity in parts of the brain used for thinking, not just breathing and sleeping.

Which means Dad will be crying. Mum probably will be crying. Elliot? I have no idea what Elliot will be doing. I wish I could see him. *Right now*. I really wish I could see his face.

May 25.

A whining. It sounds like an insect, only it's higher-pitched, and it's … yes, it's changing. The pitch is changing. And I *feel* something. Pins and needles all along my left arm. *My arm*. I just thought: *my arm*. But can I read anything into that? Does my brain know what it's sensing? Did I really just feel something in *my arm*? High up. Near my shoulder. The exact spot where they

were going to attach one of the electrodes for the brain-stimulating therapy. Am I dreaming?

June 7.

A voice. Low. Slow. I can't make out words. Dad's? No. I feel a trembling where my body should be. I can't pinpoint it. Could be legs, or torso. Could be purely imaginary. The voice, though – I *know* that voice. Elliot? No. Dr. Monzales? No. It's British. No – *ha*! But I can't make out the words. What's Jeremy Clarkson saying?

June 9.

There's a flare going on and then off in front of my eyes. Bright white, then black. Bright white, then black. If it's real. It could be my mind hallucinating to escape the darkness, my equivalent of a desert traveler's mirage. But if I'm sensing the position of *eyes*, does that mean something?

June 14.

A scent: sweet, fresh. Familiar. My candle?

A voice: "I don't know if you can … me, so I'm not going to … yet. When … wake up, Rosa, I'll tell … Come on."

That was Elliot. That was *Elliot*.

June 22.

"You remember that time I took you swimming at the King Edward baths? You must have been three. You'd only been in pools on holiday before. It was the first time I ever took you swimming in England. We got in there and you said, 'Swimming pools live outside!' And afterward all the mums had bananas and healthy stuff for their kids, and I had nothing and you were starving so we went to the closest place, which was a fish and chip shop, and it was getting dark, and you said, 'The streetlights are on. We're going down the road to a café and I want sausages and chips and ice cream.' And I knew you were thinking of that book – the one about the tiger who came to tea. He drank all Daddy's beer and I changed the words so Daddy wasn't watching a fight on TV. He was watching a documentary on giant redwoods— Oh, but that was the other book – the one about the cat—"

"Da…?"

"Rosa? Rosa! *Rosa!*"

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The first face I see with anything like clarity is Drema's – though only her suddenly crazily wide eyes, then Dad's after she runs off and calls him in. Then Mum's. She cries. Even Elliot cries. I watch the tears run down behind the fabric of their masks, worn, I know, to help protect my immunocompromised body from infection.

"Rosa," Elliot says, "you can *see* me?"

"Yeah…" Though it comes out more like "yuh".

He says something, but I don't hear him. The voice wasn't mine. *My voice wasn't mine*.

The first time I truly fear for my life is on June 29.

I'm in a different room, still hotel-like, beige with a window-wall, but bigger, so that everything I need can be brought to me.

I'm looking at that photo of Mum, Dad, and Elliot by Whitby Abbey and wondering what they'll do with old family photos that include me, when my vision clouds. The room starts bleeping and nurses burst in. Later – I

have no idea how much later – Dr. Monzales is beside my bed. "We have changed your medication, Rosa. Please, try to rest now. I am convinced you will be fine."

The first time I move one of my new limbs is on July 16.

I'm dressed in new black leggings and a new loose blue top, chosen from a wardrobe full of presents from Elliot and Mum, as well as things that I've ordered online, ignoring Mum's advice but listening to Elliot's. Well, some of it.

"No, no skinny jeans, Rosa!"

"…OK."

"That jersey jumpsuit!"

"You're joking, right?"

"I wouldn't joke with you about something this serious, Rosa."

"In whose life exactly is the question of a jersey jumpsuit serious?"

He shook his head mock sadly. "Rosa Marchant, you have some really tough priority-reassessment work ahead."

So – I'm in new black leggings and a loose blue top, and my physical therapist comes in. She's grinning an excited smile that I can properly see, now that the immediate high-risk infection period has passed, and the masks have been ditched.

She straps me into something they call the exoskeleton. It's a robotic, battery-powered frame that walks for you. It moves my new limbs while I watch, helping my brain gradually remember what to do. Eventually she reduces the input from the motors – and my right leg twitches.

The first meal I eat by myself – moving *my* hand, with a little help from Dad putting the spoon to my mouth – is tomato soup. Memories rush back. Being seven or eight, coming back chapped-lipped and starving from the park, asking Dad to open a can of Heinz. The taste is incredible.

Dad grins the way a dad might grin if his one-year-old just fed herself for the first time. I smile back. He says, "You still smile just like you. I'd know you anywhere, Rosa, just from that smile."

By now the muscles required to move my mouth have improved dramatically. I'm even getting used to hearing a different voice speak my words. My brain means I still have my English accent. But my new vocal cords, throat and nasal passages are shaping my voice to a higher pitch. It sounds sweeter. The tones are more rounded.

The first time I see myself in a mirror is on August 7.

I've seen that photograph of Sylvia, of course, and parts of my new self.

My legs. A little longer than my old legs. Slim feet.

Longer toes than mine. My arms. Three moles on the right forearm, a wishbone of veins around the thumb and forefinger, strangely similar to mine. My hands. Long, slim fingers, with whorls on the tips that are proof of an identity that was hers and is now also mine.

But my face? They've been careful. Will I look *just* like her? I know I should. But will I?

Mum comes into my room as I'm struggling to get dressed. "Here, let me help you," she says.

"It's OK," I tell her. Awkwardly, I pull the end of a legging over my right heel. Then I shuffle forward to the edge of the bed and drag the waistband up.

"It's a big day, I know." She's trying to sound bright.

I nod and reach for a T-shirt that Elliot gave me with a block print of a girl curled in an armchair, a cat on her knee.

"You want to talk anymore about what this could be like for you before we go through?" she asks.

"No."

Her turn to nod. I guess she's got the message that I'm nervous and I just want to get this done. But now that she's got it, I feel bad for forcing it on her. "Maybe you could help me up?"

So it's Mum I'm leaning against, her clean-skin scent that I'm inhaling, her arm that I'm gripping a little more tightly than maybe I need to, as I make my way unsteadily

down the corridor to a door marked STAFF ONLY.

Dad and Dr. Monzales are waiting outside.

"It's a nurses' changing room," Dr. Monzales explains. "A full-length mirror is on the wall at the far end. No one is inside. We have it to ourselves."

He pushes the door open, and with Mum's help, I half walk and am half dragged past a wall of white lockers, chairs, and hooks – to the mirror.

I look at "myself" – my – her – body – properly for the first time.

I stare for a few wild, disorienting seconds. Then dizziness sweeps up through my brain. I might even pass out for a moment, because suddenly I'm in a chair, Mum crouched in front of me, Dr. Monzales's hand gripping my shoulder, his deep voice intense in my ear.

But I don't hear him, and Mum's face is overlaid with this image, burned into my reeling mind: a girl, average height, slender, olive-skinned, with those wide-set eyes, a mass of dark chocolate hair, and a narrow-lipped mouth open in what *I* know is a kind of anguished amazement. A girl. Sylvia – me, half ghost and half alive.

Taking on this new appearance, leaving behind my old skin and emerging butterfly-like from my cocoon of sensory deprivation, is a thing of wonder, no doubt. But seeing myself in the mirror, another question hits me. I can only think I've been so concerned with the future

that I've somehow neglected to process the fact that part of me will stay forever in the past.

*

That night, when the nurses are gone, the lights have been dimmed, and only Mum is left, looking tired, leaning over my narrow bed, stroking my forehead, murmuring "good night" like you might to a small child, I ask her: "What happened to my body?"

She stops mid-stroke. Pulls back. "*This* is your body."

"What happened to my dead body?"

"Your dead body?"

"What else would you call it?"

Mum doesn't answer.

"Did they bury it? Do I have a grave?"

"Rosa – "

"Has anyone brought me flowers?"

"Rosa – " Her forehead knots.

"Is there an inscription?"

Why didn't they raise the issue? Why didn't Dr. Monzales talk about what would happen to my body?

"Mum?"

She whispers, "It was cremated."

"…Cremated. What happened to the ashes?"

Mum shakes her head slightly. "They weren't kept."

They weren't kept?

"They belong to the past, Rosa. It's so important to focus on the future." She looks a little bewildered. Gently, she says, "What would you want them for?"

"I don't know – put them in an urn. Put them on the mantelpiece!"

They weren't kept.

In fact, someone threw them away. Somewhere in a biohazard landfill are the burned remains of my body.

Tears run from my eyes onto my cheeks. I taste the salt on my lips.

"Your body wasn't *you*, Rosa," Mum says, her voice breaking. She's losing her iron control… *She's* losing control.

It's like witnessing a skyscraper collapse or a bridge crumble. The crack inside me fractures right down to my core. I'm shaking from the shock of it.

"You're still here," she whispers. "And we're so lucky you are." A tear falls from each of her eyes.

I manage to reach up and use my hand to wipe Sylvia's – my – face. Then with her – my – thumb, I wipe away Mum's tears. This only makes them come faster, which obviously wasn't my intention.

For the first time in a very long time, I tell her a heartfelt truth: "I don't know if I'm crying or she is."

"*You are*, Rosa. *You're* crying. *You're* alive. *You* can walk, and with more therapy, you'll be running. You'll have your

whole life to live, however you want to live it, with all the choices and all the future you should have at eighteen. This is *your* life. *Your* second chance."

And Sylvia's? I think. But I don't say it.

I want to believe Mum. I really do.

But when she finally goes, reassured that I'm calm and safe to leave, everything disintegrates. I start crying again. My chest is heaving. I'm not sure I can breathe.



Emma Young is an award-winning science and health journalist who has written for the *Guardian*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *BBC Online*, *The Atlantic*, *Mosaic* and *New Scientist*. She has also written fiction and non-fiction for adults and children. Her books include the STORM series of science-based thrillers for 9-11 year-olds under the name E. L. Young. Emma lives in Sheffield with her husband and two children. *She, Myself and I* is her first YA book.