





STEVE TOUTONGHI

SOHO

Copyright © 2016 by Steve Toutonghi

All rights reserved.

Published by
Soho Press, Inc.
853 Broadway
New York, NY 10003

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Toutonghi, Steve
Join / Steve Toutonghi.

ISBN 978-1-61695-670-7
eISBN 978-1-61695-671-4

1. Self-consciousness (Awareness)—Fiction. 2. Humanity—Fiction.
3. Science fiction. I. Title
PS3620.O923 J65 2016 813.6—dc23 2015037546

Interior design by Janine Agro, Soho Press, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Monique.

Join me for a story.

P
A
R
T

What is truly radical about Join is not the miracle of united perspective. What is truly radical is that the network, in accordance with the laws of physics, is ethical.

—Excellence, CEO of Vitalcorp,
Secretary of Join Affairs

/ Enumerate the mysteries. */*

—Code comment from a test
harness written by Hamish Lyons

O
N
E



FROM ONE OF HIS FIVE childhoods, Chance remembers his bare feet, wet and shining on the flat white surface just beneath a thin layer of water. Then he looks up at a sky of intense blue, flecked with bright clouds. The sky is reflecting on the sheet of still water below. The sky and mirroring water extend to the horizon.

His patient's voice interrupts the memory. "Just when you think you've hit absolute rock bottom," his patient Lucky Four says, "you fall again, and farther than you ever thought was even possible. You just keep going."

"I see," Chance Three says. He's having difficulty reviewing Lucky's test results.

Lucky's a six, and Chance finally has results for all of Lucky's six drives. Each of them—except this one, Lucky Four—has the same flulike symptoms and similar microbiome anomalies. After nearly a decade and a half of practice, Chance should recognize Lucky's condition. But the numbers and symbols aren't making sense. Chance is having trouble piecing the data together with a narrative that explains them. He stares harder, but the collection of paragraphs, rows, and columns just doesn't connect.

"Hey," his patient says, "are you all right?"

“No,” Chance Three says. He’s surprised that Lucky has noticed. Lucky Four has spent every previous moment in Chance’s company describing the slow deterioration of his complex personal life, in obsessive detail. He has been incessant and thoroughly self-involved. Joint pathologies can be unpleasant, and the obsessive personal focus is probably a symptom of Lucky’s illness. Lucky’s five other drives may be simultaneously boring five other people.

“I just found out that I’m sick,” Chance Three says—the words dodging his better judgment and speaking themselves. He takes a breath. “Just this minute.”

“You’re sick too?” asks Lucky Four.

“I have cancer,” Chance says. “My Five, my most recent join, does.”

“I see.” Lucky says. “You might need a day or two off.”

It takes Chance a moment to understand what his patient is saying. “Well,” he says at last, “it’s actually terminal. I may need more than that.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that was still a problem. That cancer can be terminal.”

“Yeah, it’s rare. I’m with a doctor right now—”

“Like I am.”

Chance is surprised. “Yes,” he says. The man’s face is guileless. Chance understands what he’s trying to say. Chance needs to focus on his own patient. But he can’t stop thinking about the cancer diagnosis. His arms and legs feel heavy. He wants to sit down, but Lucky Four is watching him expectantly.

Chance says, “My doctor and I are just going over test results—”

“Oh! Just like—”

“Yes,” Chance says, interrupting, and then immediately

regretting it. He clears his throat. “That’s right,” he says. “Like you and I should be doing. My doctor is covering options for care. He wants to keep me comfortable.”

“I see. So, same sort of thing here. We’ll be talking about treatment.”

“Yes,” Chance says. “After I’ve had some time to fully review your test results. Excuse me, just a moment. I’m going to step out of the room.”

“Why?”

“I’m not feeling well. Someone will be in soon.”

“Okay. But I think whoever I work with should know my story. It might be important.”

As Lucky Four is speaking, Chance Three turns toward the door—which slides open—and then steps into the hallway. He steps to the side so Lucky can’t see him, and backs against the wall. He puts his hands on his thighs and leans. He’s a broad man, with a substantial presence. If people see him like this, they’ll worry. They’ll ask what’s wrong. He doesn’t want to talk about it.

Chance Three hears the exam-room door slide open. He straightens quickly and walks away from his patient.



CHANCE TWO FLICKS OFF HER retinal display, even as her broadcast gets its first sympathetic response—a glowing exclamation mark briefly suspended in the sunlight that’s warming the plane’s cockpit. Then there’s only the muted, predictable instrumentation of the airliner’s consoles and the bright fields of cloud they’re flying above.

“I know someone named Cancer,” her copilot, Leap Two, says, “like the crab, though, in the Zodiac.”

Chance is taking a break from flying the plane. After Chance Two told Leap about Chance Five's cancer, they talked a bit, and then Chance composed the broadcast for friends and family. It has been interesting to note the odd, almost detached sensation of observing each of her five drives—three male and two female—responding to news of the cancer. Chance closes her eyes and settles back in her chair.

"Hey, you want to pay attention to your job there, cowboy?" Leap Two says. The flight AI, Autonomy, is passively monitoring cockpit activity and pilot behavior and will note if a pilot appears to be dozing.

A few months ago, Leap suggested that Chance take a vacation. Leap said, "Get some time on the range." It was kind of funny at the time but also an odd reference. Since then, Leap's been calling Chance Two "cowboy." Chance imagines her own fine, curly blond hair weighted by a big straw cowboy hat that she'd probably have trouble keeping straight on her small head.

Chance Two rubs her forehead. It's difficult to focus. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do," she says.

"Let's see," says Leap. "Intro to Atmospheric Aviation, I remember this bit particularly. Paragraph three, 'The qualified atmospheric aviator understands distraction and boredom as primary enemies of economic prosperity.' Yes, 'economic prosperity.' The world's economic fate is in your hands. So I'm sorry you're sick, but suck it up, cowboy, and do your job."

Chance Two laughs. Chance wonders which of Leap's other drives looked up the note in their old text. Leap might have just remembered it. Leap is capable of holding long grudges against offensive bits of cultural flotsam.

"Thank you, Mistress Baton," Chance says, "but at the

moment, I'm selfishly thinking about my terminal cancer. Not so much of the world at large."

That earns a soft chuckle from Leap. *Mistress Baton* is another bit of cultural flotsam—a reality program that had particularly appalled Leap.

"Okay," says Leap. "Here's what you do: read the research, plan, act. Like everything else. And by the way, I really am sorry."

"Yeah," Chance says, "okay, thank you. Anyway, I know what to do, ideally. But it's the damn meat gap. Getting drives to do the things."

"Yeah," agrees Leap, and then she makes a smooth transition to salacious. "It's all about the meat."

Chance laughs for the sake of the friendship, but her heart really isn't in it.

Leap Two is doing a quick panel check, flicking through reports on the left-side copilot screen and checking off steps on the right side. As Chance watches, she takes a moment to admire Leap Two—the quiet self-awareness that's so natural and unself-conscious, the narrow, classically elegant nose, sharp, high cheekbones, and clear light brown eyes.

Most people would probably consider Chance Two attractive, despite the slightly severe cast of her face. Chance Two is average height, forty years old, and in good shape, with pale skin, a narrow forehead, and a strong, high nose.

But Leap Two is something else entirely, a gorgeous statistical anomaly, a physical outlier whose vitality is animated by Leap's relaxed intelligence. Leap may be vain about Leap Two, but the vanity is justified. Even the grace and physical economy of her arms and hands as she gestures her way through the midflight checklist are almost breathtaking. It's all rote after so many years, but Chance still enjoys watching Leap Two.

Leap is used to people watching Leap Two. She flicks the displays to the dashboard, then repeats herself, muttering, “It’s always the meat gap.”

Then her head jerks forward and back, and her upper lip rises, showing her two front teeth. It all happens so quickly that Chance isn’t completely sure that Leap actually did anything.

It forces a surprised laugh out of Chance, who asks, “What was that?”

“I said, ‘It’s always the meat gap.’”

“But what was that thing you did? With your head and your teeth.” There’s a long pause. Leap stares at Chance. Then Leap Two’s face hardens.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Leap says.

Chance hesitates. Leap has always been private about her personal business, often marking a topic as “not to be discussed,” as has clearly just happened. But this was a small spasm. Chance saw it. It’ll be on the flight vid. There’s no point denying it happened.

It was like a sneeze. Too insignificant to consider private. But if Leap doesn’t want to talk about it, then it almost becomes interesting.

Chance says, “You had a little . . . it was like you sneezed, or hiccuped.”

“Whatever,” Leap says.

Leap Two settles back into the copilot seat and presses a spot to request coffee.

“What do you mean, ‘whatever?’”

“What are you talking about?” Leap is irritated. She turns to face Chance, unblinking, her eyebrows raised in a challenge.

“What? Don’t give me that look,” says Chance. “I saw—”

“You didn’t see anything,” says Leap Two. She turns back to face the fields of clouds, putting an end to their conversation.



BEFORE JOINING, CHANCE FIVE WAS an eighteen-year-old named Javier Quispe who had already completed two years of college study. He could play ninety minutes of nonstop football and follow up with a workout. He loved playing in community leagues. He also had a seven-point plan for reintroducing the Andean condor to the wild.

Javier wanted to join despite a fear of losing himself, his individuality, during the procedure. The joins he knew assured him that what he had read was true: each individual’s perspective coheres through the procedure, and every individual in the join is also the joined result. There is only gain, they said, and, with the rich interplay of memories from so many people, a deeper understanding of life’s irreducible mysteries.

His parents used metaphors—it’s like being more attuned to all of who you are, all your different desires and fears; it’s like clearly remembering who you were ten years ago, before events changed you. They said the awareness of being more than one person included a comforting sense of companionship.

Now, as Chance Five changes out of his hospital gown, he touches the short hair at the back of his head and rubs his thumb over the scar where his skull was opened to adjust his caduceus. Chance learned in medical school that the caduceus—or “caddy”—got its name because a member of the original team thought that the scar left after surgery resembled the ancient symbol of a winged staff with entwined snakes. Javier always liked snakes.

As a child, Javier had been envious of everyone, joins and solos, who had a seemingly magical ability to pick data out of the air. He got his first caddy when he was twelve, so he too could connect directly to the biowave network.

When he decided to join, Vitalcorp replaced parts of that original caddy with the components required to connect minds. Then he and Chance Four received complementary adjustments and underwent the rigidly controlled protocol of psychotropic drug therapies. As a result, Javier Quispe ceased being a solo and became Chance. His body became Chance Five.

Chance Five soon began experiencing persistent stomach pain. Chance dismissed the pain at first and only barely modified his regular, arduous workouts. Chance thought it might be an injured rectus abdominus or internal oblique. But the pain intensified. Tests found an aggressive, recently identified strain of cell mutation. Chance's oncologist has just told him that it's a cancer that can be triggered, or aggravated, by the join procedure.

If Chance Five dies, then Chance—and therefore Javier Quispe—will live on through other drives in the join. That can continue forever. In a perfect join, human beings lose both their existential sense of isolation and their mortality.

Chance faces the prospect of dying and surviving his own death. "Volatile emotional response with significant drive variability" is how Chance might characterize his reaction to Chance Five's diagnosis, if this were research.

.

Chance One, trim and naturally charismatic, is possessed of innate self-assurance that inspires confidence in others. He

works as a data scientist at a public-private cooperative. When he told his supervisor about the cancer, she was surprised. She asked—though he was certain she already knew—how long he'd had his fifth drive.

“About six months,” Chance One had said. And then Chance had to worry about embarrassing himself by crying. That level of instability was very surprising in Chance One.

His supervisor nodded and said, “I see. I’m so sorry.” But there was a different message in her look. She was thinking, It’s better that it’s the new drive.

And maybe it is better. Chance Five is a student, just starting out. Losing him might be less disruptive. No one would say something like that, of course.

.

Before joining, Chance Two was quick-witted, opinionated, and given to crafting exceptionally well-reasoned arguments for preserving the status quo. Chance Two continues to give an impression of reserve and matter-of-fact competence. She’s an airline pilot with a specialty in long-haul atmospheric aviation and has been the least affected of Chance’s drives.

.

Chance Three is currently splashing his face with water from a cold tap in a hospital restroom. His straight black hair lies neatly flat on his squarish head. He is a large man, and though he appears stolid, he is the most emotionally responsive of Chance’s drives and often has powerful, sometimes-distracting, reactions to trauma.

Chance Three is a specialist in the quantum personality matrix—a “join doctor.” It’s a job that requires presence and empathy. Chance is having trouble focusing, and Chance Three has evaded his patient.

•

When she is awake, Chance Four is about motion and precision. A short (close to the Earth), thirty-eight-year-old woman who is fast and light on her feet. The fact that Chance Four is currently sleeping is helping Chance deal with the traumatic news.

•

The year before he joined, Chance Five and a girl named Shawna flew a pod over the salt flats to a place that Nana called *llanura de las bestias*. The plain of the beasts. Beside scattered steel beams and shattered pyramids of yellow, crusted soil lay rotted, riveted husks—the loosely articulated bodies of ancient locomotives.

“I love it here,” Shawna said, one hand against a pitted gray-and-orange plate. “This is everything that came before. But we’re so lucky. We can live forever now.”

And then in cool shadows, he reached for Shawna’s warmth, her soft skin, her breath on his neck and cheek.

And in the heat after, he felt a leaden pull into the drifting world, where long molten channels creep through their fiery beds, where blast furnaces roar, and there is the deafening whine of disks biting steel and a flaring out of burning swarf.