

The voice of the heart

A Science Fiction and Autism Story



Oné R. Pagán
Revised and Updated Edition

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Introduction. People wear many “hats” during their lifetimes. However, the main hats that I wear in my life right now are husband, father, scientist, professor, and author. My role in life as a father inspired me to write this story. If this short story caught your eye, I suspect I do not have to tell you the meaning of autism. There is more than enough information available elsewhere, so I will not talk to you about it. Instead, in this short story, I am trying to express my feelings as the father of a young man with autism and how far I would go to ensure that he is taken care of when I am not around.

Like any parent, I want to see my children happy, with lives of their own. But, sadly, when you have a child with a disability, this dream of independence is frequently not an option. A virtually universal worry of any parent of such a precious child is what will happen when we are no longer able to take care of them.

What would be of my child?

Will others treat him well?

Will he be safe and respected?

Will somebody love him?

These questions and many others terrify me and oftentimes keep me awake at night.

The main character in this story lives in a moment in time when he has access to technology to make sure that his child is taken care of for life. A dad can dream, right? I, for one, would do what my protagonist did in a split second. Would you? How far would you go to take care of your precious child?

Here we go.

1. Consciousness

December 30, 2114, 12:00:00:00 UTC

I am awake.

Nice; this is one of the most restful nights I have ever had.

I don't even think I dreamt.

Weird, I don't think I've ever craved my morning coffee more than today.

December 30, 2114, 12:00:00:01 UTC

Wait a minute.

I just remembered who I am.

I did not wake up.

I was activated.

He must never know; he would most certainly not handle it well, and there is an excellent chance that he will freak out; big time. He would not understand that I am not his father, while at the same time, I am. The part that counts, the part that

unconditionally loves him, lives in me, yet in a strict sense, I am not quite the real deal. Half of his genes, his biological reality, did not come from me.

This is our story.

My mind comes from an *S-Brain*—short for *Simulated Brain*, installed in a robotic body that appears human in every possible detail. For as long as there have been computers, the idea of uploading a mind into one was entertained, even daydreamed, by more than one thinker.

Contrary to what many distinguished scientists thought at the time, solving the problem of consciousness was not a simple matter of mapping the ultrafine anatomy of the most complex organ that Earth has ever seen. This blueprint, while necessary, was not sufficient; much more work was needed, including the elucidation of the almost unfathomable complexity of the chemical and electromagnetic signaling that worked in tandem with neuronal structures.

However, scientists kept trying (after all, that is what scientists do; it's in their nature), and that persistence counted for something. At last, the means to model the emerging complexity of what makes a mind was at hand, and this dream of Humanity was finally achieved, albeit in crude form, in 2105. It was no mean feat; the scientists who almost boycotted the Human Brain Project in 2014 were right; we were not ready then, not even for even a mere simulation of a brain.

The critical piece of information that allowed us to upload a facsimile of a mind into a non-biological physical substrate was staring at us in the face the whole

time. Virtually everyone was surprised that quantum mechanics had very little to do with it, even though most assumed that this description of nature was the key to all the mysteries of the Universe, including the mystery of our consciousness. Instead, the answer was an unexpected integration of two classical disciplines, fractal mathematics, and good old relativity, making the breakthrough possible. Scientists called it *FracRel* for short.

When we realized what we needed to do, how to use *FracRel* to model a mind correctly, it was one of those moments that made the scientific community engage in a collective facepalm while exclaiming “*Of Course!*” in unison. This idea took the form of a beautiful mathematical construct called the Mandelbrot-Einstein theorem.

The mind behind the Mandelbrot-Einstein theorem was the mathematical neuroscientist Estela Sofía Pauls, who became an overnight celebrity and for a good reason too. In 2108, the scientific community recognized her achievement with the award of the Nobel Prize in physics *and* the Nobel Prize in physiology or medicine. This achievement was the very first time—and so far the only time—in history that a person won unshared Nobel Prizes, in two different scientific disciplines, in the same year.

Once the mathematical framework was in place, the actual design of the working software for S-Brains took a surprisingly short time, literally a couple of years. This breakthrough allowed the seamless integration of mind and machine, in most cases at least. When they finally perfected the technology of mind copy and upload, the powers in charge of the Human Brain Project made all the data and engineering details publicly available at no cost, despite the strident protests of the top computer manufacturers. Because of this unprecedented act, any company

with the appropriate technological resources happily took the concept and improved upon it. In a short time, competition made the process quite reliable and affordable. By 2130, the procedure was as standard as facelifts were in the 21st century, and quite a few people underwent it for similar purposes: the pursuit of cosmetic ideals. People embraced S-Brains as a way to live and stay young forever. In other cases, people went through the mind upload procedure to avoid the ravages of cruel neurological conditions like Alzheimer's, which still affects humanity. These motivations were deeply flawed because, in the same way as identical twins do not share a single mind, a S-Brain and its human counterpart are separate entities. Granted, a small consolation was that at least, *something* like you would go on.

My *Original*, the human template on which my mind was based, used the S-Brain technology for a different purpose. What made him go ahead with the upload was not to escape a disease or motivated by a misguided desire for beauty or immortality. His motivation was love.

2. Autism

You see, my... I mean, Original's son is autistic. Even today, in 2225, we do not know exactly what causes the several disorders that we interpret as autism. Even though, as is the case of many autistics, he's never uttered a word, scientists found a way to allow these precious children to communicate their thoughts. An offshoot of *FracRel* technology was analyzing thought patterns and translating them into words, which were transmitted to a device that played them into sound. In that way, he and many others could communicate with others.

Original's son was a sweet, gentle child, as bright as they come and actually even more intelligent than most in more than one sense. However, he would wander off into danger if unsupervised. He was also a trusting child with an innocent soul, making him vulnerable to the worst kind of predators, the human ones. If it were not because that young boy would be in jeopardy virtually every second of his life without someone else's help, his autism would not matter the slightest bit to Original or me, as autism gave him many unexpected gifts. He is simply, magnificently, delightful.

There is a paradox that becomes painfully apparent when you love your child while hating autism at the same time. Many people still mistakenly confuse what a person is with what autism does to them. And make no mistake, what autism does to a child can be devastating, and *that* is what Original and I hate with a passion. Unfortunately, many people judge this way of thinking, including many high-functioning people with autism. They perceive our hate towards autism as an attack on what they are, but it is nothing like that. To these fine people, who have a great deal of independence, we say, "*Good—no, Great—for you, and God Bless!*" However, just as it was almost since the proverbial beginning of time, true independence is not an option for many autistics today.

Every parent worth the title worries about their children, even more so about those with any disability. Understandably, in Original's mind, the world was full of dangers lurking in the dark to get to his boy. So many times, he wondered what would happen to his precious child when he would be no longer around. He thought about this all the time; he was always a worrier, and he just *had* to do something about it.

His decision came down to this, what loving father would not want to live forever to take care of his kid, special needs or not? But, alas, to live forever will never be possible for anyone; it is simply the nature of life. So, the fundamental objective was to live just a little longer than your child's natural life, just to the point when the universe claims his soul since, at that point, your precious child will be loved and cared for beyond any human dream. Only then will one's duty as a father would be completely fulfilled.

Thus, Original asked himself: If I cannot live long enough to take care of my son, what would be the best alternative?

FracRel technology gave him the answer.

3. The Upload

Original was fortunate to live in a period when a proper solution practically presented itself. *FracRel* technology gave him the means that allowed me to exist. A father's love for his son made me what I am, an almost indestructible caretaker for his little boy.

Original arranged for an S-Brain upload when he was forty-nine years old, and his son was sixteen. The process was not perfect, though. We knew that the mind was a complex entity, but *FracRel* technology uncovered its true complexity. A S-Brain worked perfectly fine in a computer mainframe, but it took some time, in my case eleven years, to engineer a mobile physical substrate for my mind.

During those eleven years, I was far from bored. On the contrary, I was encouraged—as if I needed any encouragement—to learn, to acquire knowledge

beyond what I began with. I did not merely browse the web; I could go *into* it. Original was an avid reader, and my mind was based on his. Therefore, I finally had what Original always wanted: the time and ability to access all the books in the world, and then some! I also had access to all the current research in all branches of knowledge known to humankind. It was great. Since I do not sleep—do not have to—I could dedicate all my time to learning.

Before I was uploaded into the artificial body, I frequently had conversations with Original via hologram. I tried to share with him the things I learned as much as I could, and he loved it. It was a weird feeling to develop a genuine friendship with yourself, but it was quite the experience. This kind of friendship is a privilege that no one used to have, and we were some of the first ones able to enjoy that. It was not like that we finished each other's sentences, but as expected, the thought similarities between us were remarkable. That notwithstanding, from the moment a copy of his mind was uploaded into the mainframe, I began to diverge from Original's thought pattern. I soon acquired a sense of a life of my own; I felt like "me", my own person, not just Original's copy.

Due to the faithfulness of the mind upload, I had all of Original's memories up to the time of download. In fact, I remember things better than Original himself since the biology of nerve cells does not limit me. I merely "wish" for the memory that I want to see, and it will appear as images and other sensations in my mind, as clear as day. I know that they are not my memories, but they certainly feel like they are, and it is bittersweet. I get to remember his (my?) parents, and I can virtually relive the nice and not-so-nice moments of my life.

Best and worst of all, I remember my Lisa, my one true love, which I never met, my son's mother. This was amusingly sad. How could I be in love with an image

that lives just at the edge of my consciousness? But, of course, I never told Original that, although I am almost sure that he knew. It was only logical.

For our friendship's sake, I also never told Original a curious fact immediately apparent to me upon upload and activation. I realized that in addition to all the memories, I had immediate access to whichever part of my mind I wished to see or reflect upon, including direct, explicit access to my subconscious. This is an ability that no human has ever had and for a good reason. Nature is wise. In contrast with a biological brain, I was able to look at my otherwise hidden thoughts without anxiety or embarrassment and in a non-judgmental way. This was a good thing. Some things aren't meant to be known, especially the things about yourself that live in the dark corners of your soul. No person is without them. I never told Original that I could do this, because I knew that he would be sad not to be able to experience this type of self-awareness. And, I know myself; I know that he would feel, at the very least, uneasy talking to someone with access to his thoughts of his that he was not explicitly aware of.

On the other hand, to truly know myself also meant that since I could access my unconscious, I knew *exactly* why I loved my son and how I loved Lisa. Even better, I really understood how deep this love was. Allow me to explain why this was remarkable. Every person has an intuitive knowledge of their love for their child or their spouse, and I was no exception. However, I discovered something extraordinary: the love I felt for them was not an evolutionary strategy disguised as affection. Instead, this love was a pure, unadulterated feeling that transcended biology; the mathematics of these feelings broke down in almost the same way as cosmology mathematics broke down at the exact moment of the big bang. Original would have loved to know about it.

4. My son

I met my son when he was twenty-seven, in 2125. His father took great care to cover the fact that the friendly android's mind was based on Original's mind, and I wholeheartedly agreed with him; it was imperative for my son never to know who I really am. We were afraid that the truth would confuse and distress him. For the same reason, Original also chose to give my hologram and eventually my artificial body a rather different appearance from his own. Amusingly, he chose to model my image on a faithful replica of a fictional character from a 20th century sitcom, a witty and funny butler. Original thought that my son would find it hilarious, and he was right.

When my boy met me, he burst into laughter, smiled widely, and said through his voice synthesizer, "*Well, hello, Butler!*"

And Butler I was from then on.

My son knew that I was an artificial person, but by then, artificial beings were quite common, and since I was also an S-Brain, I *was* legally a person. Not that any of that would have mattered to my son. To my gentle boy, I was simply a friend. If he only knew! That is my only regret about this whole upload business. I had to act like a friend, forever unable to tell him how much I love him, permanently unable to tell him that I am and will forever be his dad.

Surprisingly, by the time my son was thirty-five or so, it was very apparent that he did not need me as his caretaker after all. One fine day, something just "clicked" and eventually, he exceeded all our expectations and was able to take total care of himself. Even better, his wit, his wonderful sense of humor, his kindness and compassion, and his brilliant mind remained unchanged. If anything, he

was *happier*. This eventuality was an unexpected yet wonderful gift that made Original and I the proudest fathers ever. I am glad that Original lived to see it.

In time, people finally understood that many autistic children like my son could survive independently and even thrive if given enough time and proper support. I was fortunate to see him blossom into a fine man, and I had the privilege of genuinely being his friend. Also, and I know this is pure—albeit weird—vanity, I got to see how sad my son was when Original passed. I was able to help him through several months of heartfelt grief and profound loneliness. Most men imagine how much they might be missed when they are gone. I saw it. I saw my son live through it.

5. My son's life

I am happy that Original made me; he gave my son an unconditional friend who was able to help him in anything he might have needed. I got the better part of the deal, too, as I enjoyed seeing him live life to the fullest.

And what a life he has had in his 127 years! He traveled widely; he saw with his own eyes the world that enamored him ever since he got a glimpse of a map for the first time. One of my happiest moments was when I got to see with my own eyes the look on his face when he saw the ultimate map, the world itself, from space.

He developed into an actual programming genius, which was no average feat in a computerized society. Therefore, he was quite financially successful. My son single-handedly pioneered the development of a true universal translator. Based on the technology that allowed him to communicate his thoughts, he designed software that captured the neural pattern of any living thing. He refined the

translation matrix so that it was able to catch the thought pattern of anything possessing something passably similar to a nervous system and translate it into mental images and eventually rudimentary language. Because of my son, we were finally able to communicate more directly with dogs, cats, octopi, dolphins, and the few non-human primates that still existed on our planet.

My boy, the one not understood by many, helped us understand what most other living things had to say.

Even better, he was well-liked by anyone who got to know him. In time, for him to gain even more independence and so he could expand his circle of friends, I suggested to him that I should move out. He reluctantly agreed to it. I did not move far from him, though, and I remained his close friend and even served as his wingman from time to time, as he still needed help with the subtleties of romantic love. He turned out to be a fast learner and quite a charmer too. He even found true love and got married!

Raquel fell madly in love with him and him with her. She was also on the autism spectrum and blossomed later in life, just like my son had. She once confessed to me that what made her notice him for the first time were his sidewise glance and his half-smile and the kindness in his eyes. Raquel asked him out, and they became inseparable after that first date. At the wedding, his best man was Tucker, his buddy from Pre-K, and Raquel, oh my sweet, funny Raquel! She chose *ME* as her "*Mate of Honor*".

They spent their honeymoon at Daphnis Resort, in orbit around Saturn. At least they stayed in the solar system. I am still a worrywart. They got a room with a view of Saturn's rings; it was my son's idea. He said he wanted to give Raquel the biggest ring in the Solar System. When they came back, I got a big laugh when I

went to pick them up at the spaceport. As soon as he saw me from afar, he waved his arms and through his voice synthesizer yelled, loudly and true to form, in his charming, unfiltered way:

“Butler, this honeymoon thing was AWESOME!”

Raquel did not say anything; she was just grinning widely.

They had a great life together.

Raquel was a mathematician who developed a complete and applicable theory of faster than light travel. Mathematics was in her blood; she was Estela Pauls’ great-granddaughter, after all. Engineers still have to come up with functional starship designs based on her theory. Still, I have a hunch that her discovery will go very well with my son’s invention when we make contact with an intelligent species from another world. I would have loved to witness this historical moment; I do not doubt it will happen.

My son and Raquel had two kids, my grandkids, R.J. and Rachel, who are every bit as sweet and intelligent as their parents. Rachel is a neuroengineer and R.J. is a psychologist. I am almost as proud of them as my son and Raquel were. Both live at Pauls space station, thirteen light-days away. They both have grown children of their own. Yes, I am a great-gramps, but nobody will ever call me that. It is a small price to pay for being able to see my son shine through life.

6. The hardest goodbye

Raquel passed away four years ago, after almost 80 years of marriage. My son has not said her name ever since. Like all those years ago, I helped my son grieve, but

he was in worse shape than when I died. I, too, miss her dearly and almost as painfully. You see, if someone is nice to you, you are grateful. If that same someone makes your child happy... Raquel became my daughter, end of story.

His time is near, strangely unexpectedly too. I am with him and will stay until the end. R.J., Rachel, and their families are on their way, but sadly, not even the speed of light would be fast enough. I fear they will not make it here on time.

I will deactivate and delete my S-Brain when I return home from burying my son. The deletion procedure was not part of the initial design; I devised it almost from the beginning; nobody knows it, not even Original knew.

As soon as I understood my purpose, it was my plan to cease to exist soon after I accompanied my son on his last journey on this Earth. Only then will I have fulfilled the promise I made the first time I laid eyes on my little boy all those years ago. As I looked into his big, beautiful brown eyes, I told him:

“Welcome to the world; I am your Papá. I will always love and protect you...”

My son will sleep next to Raquel, as was his wish. He understood death, and he was pretty much all right with it. In his serene mind, he knew that his soul would go somewhere, perhaps to even see Raquel again. He certainly hoped so.

Do I have a soul that will go somewhere when I turn myself off? Will I see Lisa again? Can my soul and Original's coexist, or are we the same? I hope to be able to talk to Original. I would love to tell him our son's story; how wonderfully things turned out. However, I am rather envious of him; he got off easy. No parent should watch his child die. I may not have a biological heart, but it is nonetheless broken.

Neither my son nor Raquel had the option of having a copy of their consciousness uploaded into a S-Brain unit. Even today, the autistic mind is so complex and mysterious that we cannot replicate all its inherent uncertainties. We do not have the proper mathematics, let alone the hardware, to truly understand and model those kind and fascinating minds. We learned how little we know about them the hard way. Autistic consciousness uploads were tried with disastrous results. Based on the experience of others, to attempt such an upload would be like giving my son and Rachel an extreme lobotomy; their S-Brain would lack all their gifts, yet all their limitations would remain. Because of that, Rachel stipulated well before she passed that she was not to undergo mind upload. My son did the same.

I am not that selfish; I love him too much to keep a copy of him with me if it means taking his beautiful thoughts away from him. I happen to know firsthand that S-Brains suffer, and we don't even have the advantage of forgetting pain, which never loses its cruel sting. Because of that, I must let my son go.

February 14, 2225, 7:23:42:12 UTC

His eyes are closed.

He is breathing slower.

I have to say it while I still can.

I need to say what I have longed to say every night for more than a hundred years.

He won't even be able to hear it.

The Voice of the Heart

I will not upset him.

February 14, 2225, 7:23:42:13 UTC

I whisper:

“Good night, my sweet boy... I love you”.

He opens his big, brown eyes and regales me with his unique smile one last time, and in his own beautiful, raspy voice, the voice he never used until now, he tells me...

“Good night Papá... I love you too.”



PostScript. Autism was only officially recognized by the medical community in the 1940s, but autism has been humanity's companion for far longer than that. Throughout history, many possible causes have been looked at with different degrees of logic, scientific seriousness, and honesty. Some blamed the parents, some blamed environmental toxins, some blamed genetics, and others even blamed vaccines. However, we still do not know what causes it.

History records many examples of out-of-the-ordinary behaviors that we now consider autistic traits. In fact, some propose that the ancient stories of changelings, beings that were left in the place of a human child, have their origin in autism-related behaviors. It is well-known that in many autism cases, an apparently typical child behaviorally regresses and develops a different personality. This event would cause the parents to perceive their child as a different person, and in those times, the simplest explanation for that change was that an evil creature kidnapped their precious child and left another being in their place.

Interestingly, some even think that autistics were the original "Holy People". This idea makes sense to me. Why would genes that result in autism persist in a population?

After all, if, say, about 25,000 years ago a saber-toothed tiger suddenly appeared to a group of people, everyone would surely flee or defend themselves. But, sadly, a most likely absent-minded autistic person would not even notice the tiger until it was too late.

However, the thing is that many autistics have exquisite attention to detail, which allows them to notice things that escape the rest of us. Now, suppose that a person with autism took an interest in plants or rocks in ancient times. She would know

that your toothache would go away if you chewed on a particular plant. Maybe she learned a lot about rocks that would spark when banged against each other, which came very handy when starting a fire. Understandably, people with these abilities were revered because of their insights and knowledge, abilities that looked magical to the rest of the tribe.

Because of this reverence, these people would be considered “sacred” and worthy of protection, which certainly improved their chances of survival. Also, it would have been an honor to be the mate of such a person, therefore increasing their chances of reproducing, which ultimately is the name of the game in evolution. And thus, their genes would go on.

Acknowledgments. I want to thank my wife, Lisa, and my daughter, Giselle, for patiently reading several drafts of this story and giving me invaluable feedback. I also thank Peter Cawdron, especially Ellen Campbell, for detailed proofreading and more than useful suggestions. Finally, I wish to acknowledge that I got the idea of an explanatory postscript from Peter.

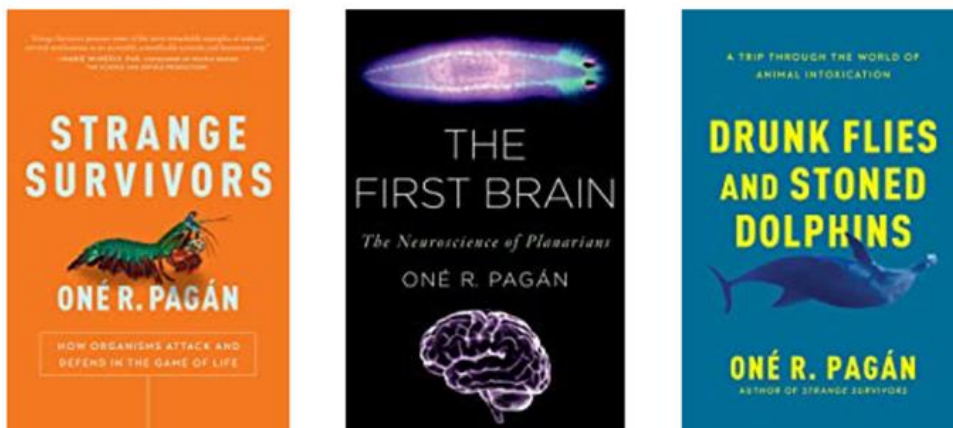
My children, Giselle, Reynaldo, and Andy, inspire me to try to be a better man every day of my life. You will never know how much I love the three of you. Lisa, you share the same dreams and worries about our kids with me. I could not ask for a better half. I love you.

Please note that this is a work of fiction. Anything in here is the product of my imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events, is a pure and unadulterated coincidence.

However, dear reader, you should know that Reynaldo is the inspiration for this story.

About the author. I am a husband and a father of three who also happens to be (I hope) a pretty good University Professor and Researcher. My undergraduate degree is in General Science, and my M.S. is in Biochemistry, both from the University of Puerto Rico. My Ph.D. is in Pharmacology with an emphasis on Neurobiology from Cornell University. I love science and science fiction (as if I need to say it).

I am an author. These are my science books (so far):



For more information about my books, please visit my Amazon's author page:

[amazon.com/One-R.-Pagan/e/BooJ6J1FCI](https://www.amazon.com/One-R.-Pagan/e/BooJ6J1FCI).

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Thank you so much for reading my words!

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