

A person in a dark suit and tie is shown from the chest up, holding a human brain. The brain is rendered in a light, translucent blue color and is filled with a complex network of mechanical gears and cogs of various sizes and colors, including shades of blue, grey, and white. The background is a blurred cityscape with a bright light source, possibly the sun or moon, creating a hazy, atmospheric effect.

THE PICOBEE DILEMMA

A NOVEL BY STEVE LEGOMSKY

What does it mean to be “living”?
And can brilliant neurosurgeon Jason Stramm create
eternal life without destroying himself?

*“Very impressive: energetic, suspenseful, and
(maybe most importantly) born out of a truly clever & original concept.
It made me think, in places, of Poe...”*

— Ben Dolnick, AUTHOR OF *You Know Who You Are*,
Zoology, and *At the Bottom of Everything*

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PROLOGUE

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I'm a brain surgeon. Seriously. I always laugh when that term is used pejoratively, as in "he's no brain surgeon." Some people seem to think you must be especially brainy if you make your living cutting into other people's brains, a lot smarter than the surgeons who operate only on "dumb" body parts like knees or gall bladders.

That said, I must admit with all due humility that I actually *am* very smart. And not just smart, but on the verge of a scientific breakthrough that will transform the world we live in and move humankind closer than we've ever been to the dream of eternal life. At least I *will* be on the verge of accomplishing this if the folks who claim to care about me will stop berating me about my "obsession" with this project, or about my becoming "detached from reality."

I'll give you the details later, but my journey began when I discovered that the human brain electronically stores every memory it has ever processed. And it stores them permanently – even after death. I have now figured out a way to extract those electronic memory data from the brains of deceased humans and preserve them digitally. Soon I will be able to translate them into English. I will be able to reproduce a person's whole life and save it forever. *I am about to test this on the brain of my own mother.*

The moment I grasped the enormity of what I had taken on, I knew I would need to chronicle these events in real time. Warts and all, the highs and the lows, the technical and the personal. I'm baring my soul to the world because I want those who study the history of science to be able to retrace the path that led me to this revolution. Hence, this journal.

I confess I also have a secondary motive for recording these events. Biographers have always relished writing about the personal lives of those who changed the world. As soon as I go public with my discovery, they will be dissecting my personal life in every which way. The world will want to know how I even came up with the idea. They'll want to know what inspired me to keep going in the face of continual setbacks and amidst deep skepticism from the few around me who knew what I was up to. They'll want to know everything about my core philosophy, my values, my life experiences, and how they shaped my life's work. Only through this account can I hope to preempt some of the more irresponsible speculation.

As you're reading this, you might be thinking I'm narcissistic, maybe even delusional. I would strongly advise you to reserve your judgment until you see for yourself what I have achieved. I think you will be embarrassed that you ever doubted me. As will the others.

But in order for any of this to make sense, I first have to tell you a little about my early life. When you get to chapter 2, you'll understand why.

CHAPTER 1

THE SEEDS ARE SOWN

It happened on my very first day of high school in University City, Missouri, an inner suburb of St. Louis. The year was 2005.

I remember it vividly. The high school was a typical 1950s brick building with long, dark, cavernous hallways and linoleum floors, flanked on both sides by endless rows of metal lockers and combination locks. I was in Mrs. Aruna's 2 pm English class on a hot, muggy August afternoon. The air conditioning had failed. My seat was in the leftmost aisle, about halfway back, next to a west-facing window through which I could see the black asphalt parking lot filled with teachers' cars and with the sun blasting against the side of my head.

Joanie, who sat in back of me, and Carla, who sat next to her, were whispering things to each other and giggling virtually nonstop. Mrs. Aruna either didn't notice or pretended not to. At every brief pause I hoped they were finally finished, but within seconds their conversation would resume, and it was really getting on my nerves. I was sweating profusely and very sleepy. I kept checking the clock, but its creep toward the end of the period was ever so slow.

At some point, a secretary entered the room and handed a note to the teacher. The secretary was an obese middle-aged woman, and some of the boys snickered to each other. One of them, Alan Olson,

whispered something crude. I saw him at my fifth high school reunion, and he denied ever having said that, but I know he did because I heard him.

Mrs. Aruna read the note slowly, nodded, and asked that Jason Stramm please come to the front of the room. That's me. I walked up to her desk. She told me in a soft, kindly voice that the guidance counselor needed to see me.

I didn't know where the guidance counselor's office was. Mrs. Aruna told me the secretary who had just handed her the note would escort me there.

The secretary was very kind as well. I asked her what this was about. She just said it would be better if Mr. Marson told me. I asked her who Mr. Marson was. She said he was the guidance counselor. And she said my mother was with him in his office.

I assumed my doting mother had come to the school to give the guidance counselor all kinds of information that would help my teachers "understand" me and my "special needs" (which, for the record, were in fact quite normal). So I wasn't alarmed – just embarrassed.

But the moment we entered the office and my mother saw me, she burst into tears. Mr. Marson rose and handed her a tissue. He then turned to me.

Mr. Marson was a handsome man, tall and trim, I would guess in his 40s. His short-sleeved white shirt exposed dentist-like hairy arms. I couldn't make out his features well, because the sun was streaming through the window from behind him, directly in my eyes. For some reason I was surprised when his voice

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turned out to be high-pitched and somewhat scratchy. "Hello, Jason. I'm Mr. Marson, the school guidance counselor. Please have a seat."

My mother, still sobbing, told me that something terrible had happened.

"Your father was on his way to meet a friend of his for lunch today. He was running late, and he ran across a busy street. The car couldn't stop. It hit him. An ambulance rushed him to the hospital. Daddy didn't make it, sweetheart. He passed away about two hours ago."

And then she gave me a very tight hug that she desperately sustained for what seemed like a very long time.

The whole episode was so other-worldly. I was in this strange new building, in a strange office, with a man I didn't know and my crying mother telling me that my healthy, vigorous father, whom I adored, had suddenly died. Just like that. It was the first time I had experienced the death of anyone close to me. Not even a pet.

The whole thing wasn't registering. I remember asking my mother whether I should go back to class now. She said no, I should come home with her and we need each other now more than ever. She told me how much my father loved me and again burst into tears.

I loved my dad dearly. He was an easy-going, smiley kind of guy, with an odd-looking, asymmetrical mouth that seemed to extend further

toward his left side than his right. He had reddish hair, which he kept very short.

Dad was on the short side, but he had a muscular athletic build. One time I saw my mom smile and tell him he had great abs. He usually wore polo shirts or T-shirts that were always neatly tucked in, which made him look like a gym teacher.

Everyone liked him. He and my mom seemed to have a good relationship, though every once in a while she would comment to me that he was not an "ambitious" sort of man. She said this in a tone that suggested at least mild disappointment.

He was a very engaged father. During baseball season we were forever playing catch. He taught me how to hit. "Keep your eye on the ball until the very last moment. Don't worry about the bat. It will go where it needs to go. Same when you're fielding. Watch the ball, not your glove. And get down low. There's no excuse for letting a ball go through your legs."

Dad used to say I was a chip off the old block. In some ways, I am. I too am short and on the slim side and have red hair, though I wear my hair longer than he did and I definitely don't have his muscular physique. I also wear glasses; he never needed them. And I'm asthmatic; he was always in perfect health. Anyway, I'm a very different person -- more ambitious, more intense, a bit fidgety, sometimes uncomfortable in social situations, and not physically graceful the way he was.