

## THE BANQUET

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A group of programmers and neuroscientists colloquially referred to as the Red Door did the impossible. By wiring a secretive machine to your brain they would be able to gradually upload your mind to a digital space, effectively performing a fluid brain upload. In contrast to previous methods, like mind copying or destructive uploading, this brain upload kept the continuity of your mind intact. Or to put it another way, where other methods destroyed your brain and made a digital clone, this method moved your mind from your brain into the computer. This had powerful implications.

No longer were volunteers bound by the fragility of their meat bodies. By accidents, sickness, or aging. This was immortality. Keeping the virtual mind connected to multiple servers meant that the mind would live forever so long as there was an internet. And if their fellow Silicon Valley visionaries were to be believed, the coming singularity would ensure that the internet was eternal.

However, the process was irreversible, effectively killing subjects in the eyes of the legal world despite keeping them more than alive in the virtual world. And if anything went wrong they would be dead in both. It was all extremely illegal, forcing the Red Door to operate underground. This secrecy would in turn keep their subjects underground as well, unable to contact loved ones. This made the procedure a tough pill to swallow for the first group of volunteers. They would have to give up their old lives in order to cross the river to a digital afterlife. For those who had little to lose, however, this was of no concern.

But there was another glaring flaw. The machine had to be hooked up to your brain. Into your brain. Physically. A process that was unavoidably destructive, though it could be minimized with some effort. Damage to the olfactory nerve and pressure on the frontal lobe meant that volunteers were left without a sense of smell. And without a sense of taste. A small price to pay, but still a cause of frustration in their coming infinity. What is a royal throne without any grapes? This was a surprisingly large turnoff for prospective volunteers.

Furthermore, this technology was costly. The power bill stretched into the infinite. And the blatant illegality of the procedure made most investor funding unattainable. If the Red Door was to have any hope at keeping the power on then it wouldn't be enough for volunteers to pay with their lives, they would have to pay with their offshore bank accounts as well.

Perhaps owing to the enigmatic CEO's eccentricities the Red Door came up with a solution that would kill two birds with one stone. The banquet.

If the afterlife took away your senses then the Red Door would just have to satisfy your senses in the beforelife instead. The prelude to the procedure would be an experience so rich and pleasurable that you could happily retire your senses at their peak. A banquet where you could gorge yourself on the greatest dishes you could ever possibly lay your tongue on, eating to your heart's content at the peak of cuisine until you were satisfied. And you would be. Much like the Red Door's technology, their cuisine would be one-of-a-kind. World class. Even the biggest neurotech sceptics would be tempted to sign up as volunteers and empty their bank accounts just to try a bite. It was to die for. And it was priced accordingly. Only the most willing, most trusted, most dedicated would be able to apply, and the Red Door would make sure the experience was wholly worth it.

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As the rumours grew, so did their influence. The exclusivity became a bargaining chip. Everyone who knew wanted to know more, and inside information attracted high bidders. Leaks began to circulate. A geneticist claimed to have engineered cows for the Red Door whose udders dripped the most divine milk. A robot engineer claimed to have repaired the honey harvester in one of their bee rooms. The head of a gourmet vending startup claimed to have sampled just one of the Red Door's chocolate-coated dates, and that this alone tasted greater than anything he had encountered in his travels. These truffles are a close second though, you should really give them a try, he would also claim. It was clear to anyone in the know that the Red Door had friends in high places and that getting on their good side was good for business.

Not to mention that Red Door held the key to immortality. This was not discussed as openly as the banquet, however. To speculate about their technology for too long, to ask out loud what it would be like to step into the digital world, this quickly became taboo. Everyone wanted to live forever, but they couldn't admit it too openly because that would make them seem desperate. No, the food angle was much more convenient. More exciting, more outrageous. Imagine a full course meal where the gravy alone would make you cry, they would sigh. I would love to sit at that table, they would say, perhaps with a bit of irony, or perhaps not.

The secrecy of the banquet grew ever more convenient. For prospective patrons the secrecy made it easier to hide your intentions, be it to fulfill your senses, to live forever, to ally yourself with the powerful, or to die happy. For the Red Door the secrecy was a veil that protected them from industry espionage, as well as lawsuits from their patrons' loved ones. And the law.

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You had taken out several loans, but it's not like you were ever going to pay them off. You had kept your own intentions secret. To your contacts, to your friends, maybe even to yourself. But you still couldn't contain your excitement when you finally met him and he whispered the instructions into your ear. Every story about the Red Door had its own embellishment, but they all shared the same set of verifiable details. And he had verified them. Even the price. You don't have to tell me why you're going, he said. It's all supposed to be secret, remember? You waved, both of you in your plainclothes, smiling. You were careful not to be spotted as you ran off.

You had wandered into the corridor with printed directions in your hands, the ink smudged by your fingers who gleefully wandered the page before it had time to dry, the cursive barely legible enough for you to solve its riddles. You folded the paper into your pockets and took a deep breath. You grabbed the gold key with your right hand, your left hand shading your eyes from the boiling sun. Through the windows you heard the bustle of traffic, commuters on the highway. When you unlocked the red door and took your first nervous step into the afterlife you were surprised to see nothing. Hear nothing. There was no golden light from the chandeliers, no candles cowering beneath towers of food, no chatter and laughter from famous guests who would tell you their life stories before walking hand in hand into the next world as equals.

Before your eyes could adjust to the dark you had already been dragged onto the floor with the door shut behind you, your surroundings lit only by a broken lightbulb and its tired moth. The back of your head throbbed with spreading pain. You smelled dusty, stale air and plastic followed by the stench of iron. Your blood had started to pool onto the tarp and with your senses fading the last sensation you could remember was grasping at the rim of a sticky ice cooler, the key sliding out of your hand, leaving behind golden flakes that painted your clammy palm a garish yellow.