

# A Change of Mind ©

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I can still hear some words as the voices fall away.

'... indulge!'

'... just whisper!'

'Enjoy! You deserve...'

The only dissenting one would be that of my grandmother. "You've a great life," she'd be saying again. "Why do you need this?"

It's quiet and I'm at the beginning of my two hour, fourteen minute journey into my donor's brain. This is '*Operation Thin*', my fabulous 30<sup>th</sup> birthday present from my mother. *Operation Thin* will allow me to live for six months inside the mind of Heerash, my donor, and her perfectly formed, naturally thin body.

*Operation Thin* is a taste of Utopia or so the advert goes. We certainly live in a beautifully fortunate age. There was a time, before the turn of the century, when you couldn't have *The Operation*. You had to be fat or you had to diet – yet everybody told you dieting made you fat. At best, it was confusing. This way, I can have my cake, eat it and the only residue is the memory.

There are lots of *Operations* nowadays, of course. You can journey into the mind of a Psychic, Egotistical, Energetic, You-Name-It-Person, but Thin Person is by far the most popular. The donors come from the Ridiculously Rich set, loaning themselves to those less fortunate. It's a much more personal way of giving back to society than a random act of charitable giving. Recipients live inside their donor's mind for a mutually agreed period of time and are not believed to impinge on the donor's life in any way. Except, of course, in having access to their every single thought.

"A great sacrifice," Gran usually interjects, "when it used to be the only thing in the world which wasn't for sale."

Sometimes my grandmother's alternative tendencies are a little illogical. She yearns for the beginning of the millennium when she was a young mother and *Operations* were something for the future. Scientists were still experimenting with tubes to suck out fat and injections of chemicals to freeze the forehead into a permanent state of surprise.

What Gran forgets is that she and her peers weren't so very different from us. Their obvious dissatisfaction with their own bodies is worn like a badge through the scars of their surgery. I can hardly stand to look at their translucent skin pulled taught over their cheek bones, their eyes in a static pose of bewilderment, the flesh on their legs in pitta bread pockets at the point where the skin laments the loss of the fat which previously held it tight.

To transport me into my donor's mind requires no knives, nor deposits of unnatural substances and my heart beats continually throughout. To say that the old system of

body transformation was a superior way to achieve contentment, seems, at best, a little misguided.

It took me four years to convince my mother of the *Operation's* suitability as a birthday present. My friend, with a compulsive apology disorder, spent a month in the mind of a man who never felt remorse and found it incredibly refreshing. I just want to spend a few weeks of my life without a thought for the size of my thighs. And there's no other birthday present which could afford me more joy than that.

Heerash is my choice of donor because, size of bottom withstanding, there are some obvious similarities. She likes to socialise and shop and play Sky Tennis too but isn't averse to a Friday night indulging herself in a weepy movie in the company of a Chocoreamie. If you've never had the fortune to taste a Chocoreamie (and what, pray, have you been doing?), prepare for a celestial experience. It's the clone of a walnut, magnified ten times, and filled with hot creamy nutmeg and fudgy chocolate. The price? 1,100 calories.

Although Heerash's perfect shape can be more attributed to strong genes than hefty willpower, the wealth is a more recent phenomenon. After ten years as a PA with an animal cloning company, she progressed into the Ridiculously Rich league through a reality programme based in her office. It achieved such a great web audience that their working day was turned into the regular soap opera, Office Affairs. It made stars of everyone and only broke up a couple of relationships.

It's with a great whooshing through my ears and pins and needles in my legs, that I realise that the first stage of *The Operation* is over.

"Hi Thiora," I'm sure I hear. "Welcome to my mind."

I've been advised that it could take a while to master Heerash's thoughts but I quickly have the general gist: she's excited about tonight's party, not least because she's attending with Iann, the new man in her life. She hasn't time for supper but a couple of alcoholic bubble sweets will re-energise. Besides, there will be lots to nibble on at the party. I find it extraordinary to witness the preparations for a date with a new man that contain not a single thought for the cellulite inducing properties of a cheese straw.

Heerash has two wardrobes, not one for fat and one for thin days, as you might normally expect, but one simply for day and the other for night. She delves into the back of the second, speeds to the end of the rail and places her hand on a turquoise, glitter-festooned dress. She doesn't give a single thought as to how big her stomach will look, nor does she search for a mirror in order to assess the size of her bottom. There are no previous garments tossed despondently onto the bed and no aftermath of a panic that satin trousers, which were a perfect fit last week, appear to highlight every pound of sagging fat tonight. It doesn't matter when she last went to the gym and she doesn't waste precious time in complex mental arithmetic ascertaining her total calorific intake thus far today. It's wonderful! I delight in the exquisiteness of not having to care.

With the dress slipped over her immaculate body, Heerash paints on red shoes and takes a seat to construct her hair. She plumps for alternate turquoise and red spiral curls, which she carelessly, but artistically, draws on to her head. Beautiful.

As Heerash picks up her finance and key card, she takes a glance back towards the mirror before closing the door behind her. I think I see her wince as she traces a finger around the edge of her ear but it must be the inexperience of living inside her mind.

The party leads to more dates with Iann. We take afternoon tea in an old-style café and I eat something called a 'scone' – a deliciously creamy, sugary dough with raisins

– à la turn of the millennium. Heerash smears hers with butter - no idea that it causes the calorie total to hike to over 300. We watch a live Sky Tennis match from the front row seats outside the gravity-less bubble, visit the editing suite of Office Affairs, and we go dancing. Iann doesn't really dance, rather plays with his phone while Heerash pulses around the floor with her friends. She's dances well, save for the odd awkward manipulation of her body to catch her side profile again.

Steady Iann isn't making her happy. She switches between fear that he will never fall in love with her or that she has fallen out of love with him. I wish I was allowed to shake her but, instead, I give myself an imaginary tap on the back. I may not be gorgeous and thin but I can spot a bore at ten paces.

I am happily amazed that Heerash, too, has days at work when she can't string a simple Twiit together, let alone a Netconference. She considers herself a failure, worries that she works too slowly, believing everybody else in the office to find their job easy. She struggles to restrain her temper with the colleague who listens simply to the first three words of every sentence and finds herself returning ever more frequently to the Chill Out Zone. After the ancient panpipe music and infusion of lavender have pieced her back together, she's ready to face the outside world again. She straightens her uniform, takes a sideways glance in the mirror and starts to whimper once more.

"Have some chocolate," I say quietly, "works for me, every time."

Tonight I'm joining Heerash for a meal with her best friends in the Cuisses restaurant. I can't wait to luxuriate in the process of ordering from the menu without any regard to fat content or portion size. I'll bask in her order of three plump courses, as opposed to my usual request for a salad starter and the consequent salivating over other people's stuffed filo pastry, culminating in the announcement: *Thank you, I won't have a dessert.*

But I quickly realise that Heerash appreciates none of this. She allows me no time to dribble over the menu; it's closed once she's reeled off the first item. I can't drool over her food because she doesn't even register it's there. Her thoughts float away from the meal and her friends and I have to go with them: she must tell her mother because the appointment is imminent and her friends are certainly not going to support her. How will she be able to work if she goes ahead and would she miss listening to music?

I can't help but smile as our first Chocoreamie together is placed in front of Heerash. But she doesn't savour a single mouthful. Instead she is fixated with a mirror the length of the door to the kitchen. Constantly, yet discreetly, she cranes her neck in order to catch a glimpse of herself again. This isn't what I signed up to. I waited ten years for a guilt-free taste of Chocoreamie and Heerash affords the moment all the concentration of washing up afterwards. I am only three weeks and one day into Heerash's mind and *Operation Thin* has got to get better than this.

Heerash has just finished a gripping game of Sky Tennis doubles. Iann and her father are in their changing room.

"They'll be devastated we beat them," laughs Tia, Heerash's mother. "But will it be worth the bombardment of reasons behind their poor performance?"

"Such as lack of talent," Heerash squeals and the women burst out laughing.

Heerash's smile drops, however. "Ma," she starts. "I have to tell you something."

"Yes?"

"My ears, you know, with them being so large..."

"Sorry?" Tia's face scrunches so tightly, it almost all meets in the middle.

"...I've arranged to have ear clones installed."

Tia gently places her bottle of Coca on the bench to the side and shakes her head slowly. “No,” she whispers.

“No knives,” Heerash says, “no scars.”

“But no hearing, darling, for a year while the clones adapt to your brain.”

“No!” It’s me. I’m not allowed to join in. “No,” I say much louder. “Your ears aren’t even big for God’s sake!” It’s just like someone asking me for the tenth time about the size of their pert bottom. This time I’m screaming, so loud that Heerash clutches her hands to her temples. I must have given her a headache. “Good,” I murmur, “that’s for being ridiculous.”

I’m stunned. Here I am on the experience of my life and I find that my donor, who has everything, is no happier than I am. Instead of fussing about curvilinear hips, she’s obsessed with enormous ears. And that’s worse. At least everyone I know can contribute to a bad body day conversation.

This isn’t how it’s meant to be. *Operation Thin* should be a happy time. It was my birthday present for goodness sake! I feel cheated. I feel crushed and I feel distinctly panicky. Heerash’s mind is even more troubled than mine and I don’t want to be a part of it. So I break the rules again.

“It’s not worth it,” I shout. “Don’t risk it! You’ve a great life.”

I’m ordered to take the journey back into my own body and I’m banned from any further *Operations*, ever.

The return has none of the adrenalin rush of the way there, just the heavy feeling of doom that accompanies the realisation that, yet again, I have failed at having anything to do with being thin. Nonetheless, two hours fourteen minutes later and five months, two weeks and six days early, I’m relieved to be home and talking to Gran. I tell her everything and she purses her lips to tactfully prevent the words, ‘I told you so,’ from slipping out. She hands me a cold beer. It slides effortlessly down my throat. It’s good to be back.

“How many calories in the beer?” Gran scoffs.

“210,” I say, “and I’m having another!” I let out a huge sigh of satisfaction. Gran strokes my cheek.

“It was horrific,” I say finally, “I was a fat person trapped inside a thin person’s body.”

My Gran lets out a great peel of laughter. Her head flung back she apologises and mops her eyes before releasing another great guffaw.

“That’s lovely,” she squeaks eventually. “Priceless.” She pats the chair beside her and chinks glasses with me once I’ve moved to the spot.

“I’ve waited all my life to hear someone say that,” she says.