“Kid looks like you,” says Jitney.

“Kid looks like you,” says Cletus.

Jitney and her grown twin brother, Cletus, are cleaning out their mother’s attic. Cletus has found a photograph of a child with a squirrel in one hand, a meatball in the other, and a nametag that reads ‘Kid’. Cletus and Jitney mull over the photo from the comfort of two ragtag armchairs.

“I vaguely remember one of us being called ‘Kid’,” says Jitney.

“I might be Kid,” says Cletus.

“Kid’s body was different from yours, Cletus. Kid’s body was small and youthful, with flawless skin. Your body is big and old, with spots.”

“I might be Kid.”

“Kid’s mind was youthful and innocent. Kid lived in the moment, with thoughts of slingshots and bubblegum. You live in the past and future.”

“I might be Kid, Jitney.”

“You might be, Cletus. After all, you’re just that kind of a guy.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“You’re the sort of thing that could survive significant physical and mental changes.”

“So are you, Jitney.”

“Thanks, Cletus.”

“Just how significant do you reckon these changes could be?”

“That depends on just what sort of thing you are, Cletus.”

“How about one of them rapid, complete, body swaps, like in the movie Freaky Friday? Could I survive one of them?”

“Not if you are your body. And not if you are one of its organs—say, its brain. If you’re either of those sorts of things, you could not survive having one living body, with one set of organs,
one moment, and a numerically distinct living body, with an entirely different set of organs, the next."

“So what sort of thing am I?”

“That’s no easy question, Cletus.”

“I’ve got all day and plenty of gin. I’ll think real hard.”

“A full day of thinking by you might not be enough. In fact, an eternity of thinking by someone even smarter than you might not do.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because the question of your nature might not be the sort of question that can be answered by thinking alone. Take one candidate answer: that you are a human brain. Thinking alone can’t even verify that there exist such things as brains, so it surely can’t verify that you are a brain. If you’re a brain, the only way you can know that you’re a brain is to get out of that chair and take a look in that thick skull of yours.”

“Already done that.”

“And?”

“Doctors say there’s a brain.”

“What else did they say?”

“Doctors say what the brain does seems a pretty good sign of what I’m about to do, what I’m thinking, and what I’m feeling.”

“Well, then, maybe you are that brain.”

“Maybe I’m just a prisoner of that brain, made to be how the brain makes me be.”

“Did the doctors find anything else in that skull?”

“Nope.”

“Then maybe you’re that brain.”

“Maybe I’m invisible.”

“Right. And maybe you’re a squad of cheerleaders.”

“I’m not that kind of a guy, Jitney.”

“I was being sarcastic. Is it any less absurd that you might be invisible than that you might be a squad of cheerleaders?”
“My being invisible may seem unlikely, but it doesn’t seem impossible. My being a squad of cheerleaders seems unlikely because it seems impossible.”

“Look at you, Cletus, a real philosopher, making distinctions.”

“And look at us, Jitney: sittin’ here, sippin’ on gin, thinkin’ hard, and we’re two steps closer to knowing what I am.”

“How’s that?”

“As you said, I’m a real philosopher, a distinction maker, a thinking thing. That’s one. And by your own sarcastic tongue, whatever the doctors say, I’m no squad of cheerleaders. That’s two.”

“Fine. You’re a thinker and you’re no squad of cheerleaders. But that leaves more than a few options open, including your being a brain—and you’re not going to settle whether you’re a brain without listening to the doctors.”

“Maybe the doctors are wrong. Maybe that oversized camera of theirs is broke, and inside my head is something other than a brain.”

“Right. And maybe there are no such things as doctors. Maybe your senses have been deceiving you your entire life. Maybe you are, and always have been, dreaming. Maybe I’m just a figment of your imagination.”

“Good point, Jitney. You might be that kind of a gal. And I just might be that kind of a guy.”

“Sarcasm, Cletus. While it may be less likely that your senses have been deceiving you your entire life than that your doctors are deeply mistaken about what’s in your head, neither idea is worth taking seriously—both are absurd.”

“You mean impossible?”

“No. I mean very unlikely.”

“Then we’ll throw ‘em together with the idea of my being invisible; all three seem possible, but unlikely. And we’ll keep ‘em separate from the idea of my being a squad of cheerleaders, which seems impossible and thus unlikely. Now, from these chairs, with this gin, let’s get thinking. Let’s take every possibility seriously. Let’s not trust the doctors or even our sensations, past or present. We’ll forget about what’s actually going on out there and think hard on what is and isn’t possible. Then maybe—just maybe—we’ll narrow down the range of things I might be, so that we know somethin’ worth knowing about the sorts of changes I could survive.”

“But Cletus, just as things might not be as they seem with your sensory experience, they might not be as they seem with your intellect: what seems to you to be possible might be impossible, and what seems to you to be impossible might be possible.”

“Fair enough.”
“So why trust your intellectual seemings but not your sensory experience?”

“Because my sensory experience takes a back seat to my intellectual seemings. No sensory experience is going to convince me that I am a bunch of cheerleaders. Why? Because it seems impossible, in the first place, for me to be a bunch of cheerleaders. So what seems possible or impossible limits what, by the lights of my sensory experience, seems actual.”

“Are you claiming that what you can learn from your armchair, through hard thinking about what’s possible, limits what you can learn from your sensory experience about what is actual, but not vice versa?”

“I am.”

“And what if the best explanation of all your sensory experience, past and present, is that your seemings about what is and isn’t possible and are inaccurate?”

“Then I’d be in a bit of a pickle.”

“Then we’re back to where we started, Cletus. Thinking alone may not be enough to answer the question of what you are. Thinking alone may deliver plenty of seemings about what’s possible. But, first of all, what’s possible, from the perspective of that armchair, regarding your nature, may be too broad to bear in any meaningful way on what sort of thing you are and what sorts of changes you could survive—so you may need to call on your sensory experience to narrow down the possibilities. Second, your armchair seemings about what’s possible may ultimately be undermined by past, present, and future sensory experience. So before you draw any hard conclusions, you’d better get out of that ragtag chair and check in with your five senses.”

“But if we agree to pay heed to our sensory experience, then we ought to do a whole lot of poking around in the world—something I ain’t up for today.”

“Me neither.”

“So let’s have a gin-and-thinkin’ day today, and see where it gets us. Tomorrow we’ll start checking our results against as much sensory experience as we can gather up.”

“Deal. Today we’ll stick with the following question: if things are as they seem to you, from a perspective in which you’ve set aside all knowledge that depends on the past or present accuracy of your sensory experience, regarding what is and isn’t possible, then what sort of thing might you be and what sorts of changes could you survive?”

“Bingo. I’ll start by saying that I’m not just any old thinking thing; I’m a conscious being, the sort that has sensory experience, including the taste of sweet gin. I’m that kind of a guy.”

“Not so fast, Cletus. You agreed to set aside the deliverances of your sensory experience. So on what grounds do you know that you have sensory experience?”

“I agreed to not trust the accuracy of my sensory experience. I didn’t agree to ignore the fact that I’m having sensory experience. That much I know from the chair.”
“Fine. I’ll grant that you’re a thinking, conscious, being. Now, let’s return to the idea of a rapid, complete, body swap—Freaky Friday style. What’s your feeling on it?”

“Seems possible. Seems that a conscious being—a being of my stripe—could have one living body, with one set of organs, one moment, and a numerically distinct living body, with an entirely different set of organs, the next. So I’ll go with yes, it’s possible for me to survive such a swap. I’m that kind of a guy.”

“Slow down, Cletus. It seems to you that you’re a conscious being, right?”

“Check.”

“And it seems to you that a conscious being could survive a rapid, complete, body swap?”

“Check.”

“Could conscious beings come in more than one stripe?”

“I reckon so.”

“Could one stripe—say, an embodied angel—be capable of surviving such a swap, while another—say, a conscious brain—be incapable?”

“I reckon so.”

“Have you established, from that chair, which stripe you are?”

“I reckon not.”

“Then you better slow down. Granted that your armchair seemings are accurate, all you know so far is that it’s possible for there to be a sort of conscious being who could survive a rapid, complete, body swap. You don’t know that you are that sort of being.”

“Point taken, Jitney.”

“Let’s turn next to brain transplants. Imagine there are two conscious beings, Elrod and Cooter. Each has a relatively normal human body. Elrod has two green eyes. Cooter has one brown eye and one blue. The doctors knock Elrod and Cooter clean unconscious, scoop their brains out, and swap each one back into the other’s skull. Elrod’s original brain is now part of a body with mixed eyes; Cooter’s original brain is now part of a body with green eyes. Cooter wakes up and looks in a mirror. What color eyes does Cooter have?”

“Green.”

“Why do you say that?”

“In my experience, people tend not to stray far from their brains.”

“You mean in your sensory experience?”
“I do.”

“So, based on the deliverances of your sensory experiences, you would say that it’s very likely that Cooter goes with his brain?”

“Yep.”

“And, for present purposes, you have agreed to set aside the deliverances of your sensory experiences?”

“Yep.”

“What’s wrong with you, Cletus?”

“I’m drunk.”

“Get it together. I’ll forget your first answer and let you try again. For all I’ve said, might Cooter be the sort of thing that could wake up with green eyes?”

“Yep.”

“And might Cooter be the sort of thing that could wake up with mixed eyes?”

“Yep. As I said already, it’s possible for there to be a conscious being that could survive a rapid, complete, body swap. Surely, then, it’s possible for there to be a conscious being that could survive a rapid, partial, body swap—a mere brain swap. For all you’ve said, Cooter might be that kind of a guy.”

“That’s better, Cletus. Now let’s talk about the celebrated brain chop for a moment. What are your feelings on it?”

“Tell me more.”

“Earlene is a conscious being with a relatively normal red-headed human body. Earlene’s not feelin’ herself today. Doctors say she’s got a stormy brain, so they chop it in two, right down the middle. One half they put into a new blonde-headed body; the other into a new brunette-headed body. Someone wakes up with blonde hair; someone wakes up with brunette hair. Which one’s Earlene?”

“Which one acts like Earlene?”

“Both.”

“Which one claims to remember things that happened to Earlene?”

“Both.”

“And what about from the inside? Which one seems to remember things that happened to Earlene? And which one feels like Earlene?”
“Both.”

“Then it’s impossible to know.”

“Agreed.”

“So I’ll go with neither: Earlene got split into oblivion.”

“Where’d that come from, Cletus? Suppose I’m about to flip a fair coin. Will it land heads or tails?”

“Impossible to know.”

“And by your lights, it follows that it won’t land heads or tails. But of course it will.”

“Good point, Jitney. Let’s back up. All I know is that, before the chop, Earlene was a conscious being with a relatively normal human body. I don’t know her exact relation to that body. Could be she was that body. Could be she was its brain. Could be she was merely a prisoner of that body and its brain, something like an angel with a human body. If she was merely a prisoner, then, after the chop, she could get the blonde’s brain; she could get the brunette’s brain; she could get some other brain; she could be liberated from the material world and sent to Heaven; she could go entirely out of existence. For all you’ve said, there’s some sort of conscious being for which any of these outcomes is possible.”

“Sounds right to me. From these chairs, we are in no position to say that Jitney has the blonde’s brain; we’re in no position to say that she has the brunette’s brain; and we’re in no position to say that she has neither.”

“The sweet taste of progress.”

“Progress? So far it seems that just about anything goes when it comes to mixing and matching conscious beings with bodies and their parts—at least if we leave open the proper type of conscious being that’s up for mixing and matching. How this counts as progress toward figuring out what sort of thing you are, and what sorts of changes you could survive, I don’t know.”

“Feels like progress to me, Jitney. Let’s not lose our momentum. What’s next?”

“Teletransportation. You got a feeling?”

“Star Trek style?”

“Close. Suppose that Rubyjane is a conscious being with a normal human body. She steps into the entry module of a teletransporter. The module surveys the complete physical state of Rubyjane’s body, destroys the body, and sends the information at the speed of light to an exit module, where a perfect physical duplicate of the body is constructed out of new material. Out walks a girl. Who is it?”

“The girl looks just like Rubyjane from the outside, and she feels just like Rubyjane from the inside?”
“Right.”

“Is teletransportation a normal happening where Rubyjane's from?”

“Let's suppose so.”

“Then I suspect her folk would say the girl who walks out is Rubyjane. And I suspect the girl who walks out would say she's Rubyjane.”

“I suspect so.”

“And I suspect you suspect I'll conclude that the girl is Rubyjane. But I'm reformed, Jitney. I'm not about to make that mistake. For all you've said, Rubyjane could be something like an angel with a human body and brain. In which case, when her original body is destroyed, any of a number of things is possible: she could pop out of existence; she could continue to exist in a disembodied state; or she could take on a new body, including the body that just stepped out of the exit module. So it's possible that Rubyjane is the girl who walks out of the exit module, and it's possible that she's not.”

“Seems right to me.”

“Could be this gin, but I'm pretty sure I taste another wave of progress.”

“Speak for yourself, Cletus. I'm about to call it quits. From these armchairs, it seems that just about anything is possible. There could be a sort of conscious being who could survive a rapid, complete, body swap; a sort who could survive a rapid, partial, body swap; a sort who could survive a brain chop; and a sort who could survive teletransportation. But all this is consistent with there being a sort of conscious being who could not survive any of these events. And we're no closer to knowing which sort you are, so we're no closer to answering your question.”

“Knowin’ what we can’t know is knowin’ something, Jitney. We know that, from the armchair, we can’t know who goes where in a brain swap, a brain chop, or a teletransportation, at least not without knowin’ more about the sorts of beings involved in such antics. And we know that we can’t, from the chair, know that rapid, complete, body swaps are beyond my repertoire. That's a lot of knowin', in my books.”

“Whatever tickles your fancy. Let's shift gears and talk about mental changes. What's your take on complete amnesia?”

“Do I know you?”

“Let's say that Trixie-Lynn has a normal human body. She swings a baseball bat at a basketball. The bat bounces back into her face, knocking her clean out. Someone wakes up in a dizzy, with a purple knot between her eyes. She doesn’t know where she is or how she got there. She has no memory of anything that ever happened to Trixie-Lynn. Who is she?”

“If I had to bet, I'd say she's Trixie-Lynn. But this bet would be based, once more, on the fact that folks don't usually wander far from their brains—a fact I know by my past sensory
experience, and I'm not about to make that mistake again. So all bets are off. From the chair, given only what you've said, all I can say is that the purple-headed gal might be Trixie-Lynn, and she might be someone else—some lucky lady who happened into Trixie-Lynn's former body."

“And what if I told you that this gal acts nothing like Trixie-Lynn acted before the accident? This gal is polite and generous. Trixie-Lynn was rude and selfish. This gal is witty, creative, lively, and engaging. Trixie-Lynn was dull, boring, and aloof. This gal excels at math and baseball. Trixie-Lynn couldn't add 2 and 2, and didn't know the difference between a baseball and basketball. In fact, Trixie-Lynn's friends and family say that, ever since the accident, Trixie-Lynn is a totally different person.”

“Are they drunk?”

“No.”

“And yet they think that Trixie-Lynn was one person before the accident and a different person after the accident?”

“Be charitable, Cletus. They think that Trixie-Lynn is, and always has been, identical to one and only one person, namely, herself. However, they believe that, qualitatively speaking, Trixie-Lynn is radically different since the accident: her memories, personality, and abilities are nothing like what they were before the accident. This is upsetting to her friends and family, all of whom formed close relationships with Trixie-Lynn based largely on their appreciation of her personality before the accident.”

“You mean their appreciation of who Trixie-Lynn was?”

“Loosely speaking—or, rather, qualitatively speaking—yes: I mean their appreciation of the family of mental characteristics by which they—and Trixie-Lynn herself—distinguished Trixie-Lynn from other people in meaningful ways, and on the basis of which they formed intimate relationships with Trixie-Lynn.”

“For all practical purposes, Trixie-Lynn is dead to them.”

“That's right. All that they valued in their connections with Trixie-Lynn is gone. And all that Trixie-Lynn valued in her connections to herself at earlier times is gone. For all intents and purposes, Trixie-Lynn is dead.”

“God bless.”

“God bless, Cletus.”

“She didn't have to die.”

“What?”

“Sorry, I meant to say that she didn't have to go changing like that.”
"Sounds like you agree with her friends and family that, strictly speaking, Trixie-Lynn survived the accident with her original body, and that it’s not the case that a numerically distinct conscious being has taken over her body. Numerically speaking, the person after the accident is the same as before. Qualitatively, the person is very different. Is that your view?"

"I suppose that would be my view if I were a member of the scenario who witnessed the events, or if I were considering the scenario with the aid of my past sensory experience. But I am no such person. To repeat: from this chair, given all you’ve said, it seems possible that the purple-headed gal is Trixie-Lynn, and it seems possible that she’s not. Without the aid of sensory experience, the facts of the story don’t tip the scale one way or the other."

"Then consider a different story, Cletus. This one starts like the last: Trixie-Lynn whops herself unconscious with a bat, and thereafter the person with Trixie-Lynn’s original body has a very different personality from the one Trixie-Lynn had prior to the whopping. What’s more, at the time of the whopping, Trixie-Lynn’s mother is across town, in a wicker rocker, on her front porch, in her pajamas, snoring like a walrus."

"Doesn’t change my view."

"There’s more. Some kids are playing rock-ball."

"Like baseball with rocks?"

"Yep. One smacks an egg-sized rock straight between the mother’s eyes. The snoring stops; the rocking stops; the dreaming stops; the breathing stops—everything stops. A couple minutes pass. Then, just as Trixie-Lynn’s body comes back to life, so too does the mother’s. Only, mentally speaking, the person with the mother’s body doesn’t resemble the mother prior to the event. Her personality is totally different. And yet it’s distinctively recognizable to her friends and family. Guess what they recognize it as?"

"No!"

"Yep. Trixie-Lynn’s personality, prior to her accident."

"Freaky."

"The gal with the mother’s body is now rude, selfish, dull, boring, aloof, mathematically inept, and unable to distinguish a baseball from a basketball. Did I mention that the gal with Trixie-Lynn’s body has the personality the mother had prior to the accident? And we’re not even to the freaky part yet."

"Let’s get our freak on!"

"Alright, Cletus: the gal with the mother’s body appears to remember all sorts of events that Trixie-Lynn experienced prior to her accident. And these appearances ain’t but a stone’s throw from the truth."

"No!"

"They’re as accurate as anyone’s."
“And the gal in Trixie-Lynn’s body? Does she seem to remember what the mother experienced prior to her accident?”

“Yep. Last thing she seems to remember from before the accident is falling asleep in a rocking chair on a porch.”

“Who do these gals think they are?”

“Trixie-Lynn and her mother. That’s who. They think they’ve swapped bodies, Freaky-Friday style, only their apparent swap happened on a Sunday, not a Friday.”

“Freaky Sunday. And what do their friends and family think?”

“Most are body swappists. But a small group of dissenters maintain that body swapping is impossible and unscientific.”

“How do they explain the fact that each gal seems to remember things that really did happen to the person with the other body prior to the accidents?”

“Coincidence. Remarkable coincidence.”

“So they deny that these are genuine memories?”

“Yep. They say that each gal appears to remember experiencing all sorts of events that she never experienced. By remarkable coincidence, for each apparent memory, the other gal did in fact experience an event quite like the one apparently remembered. Trixie-Lynn seems to remember falling asleep in a rocking chair just before the accident, even though she never experienced this. By remarkable coincidence, her mother did experience an event of just this sort.”

“Seems these dissenters have some explaining to do.”

“They do. But so do the body swappists. How in the world—the natural world—do two people just swap bodies like that?”

“Maybe the people are like angels—non-physical souls—with human bodies. Then there wouldn’t be much preventing such a swap, except maybe some angel-physical laws of nature.”

“Or maybe they are like restaurants. Restaurants can swap buildings without a hitch. One day Denny’s is here and Taco Bell is there; the next Taco Bell is here and Denny’s is there. No big deal. No souls. No mystery. Everything is natural. Except the meat.”

“Mmm... meat...”

“Focus, Cletus. Are you a swappist on this one?”

“If I were a member of the scenario who witnessed the events, or if I were considering the scenario with the aid of my past sensory experience, then there’s a good chance I’d be a
swappist, as the swappin’ hypothesis would explain a lot. On the other hand, I’d be open to a remarkable coincidence hypothesis, with a no-angels clause, as it sure would simplify things. I might even want to hear more about your people are like restaurants idea, since it might make for a simple story too.”

“But you’re not a member of the scenario, and you’re not considering the scenario with the aid of your past sensory experience. You’re a chair-bound, gin-soaked, amateur thinker. So what’s it gonna be?”

“Same as usual: from this chair, given all you’ve said, it seems possible that the purple-headed gal is Trixie-Lynn; it seems possible that she’s Trixie-Lynn’s mother; and it seems possible that she’s neither. The same goes for the gal with the older body: could be the mother; could be Trixie-Lynn; could be neither.”

“Love this progress.”

“Feels good, doesn’t it?”

“Sarcasm, Cletus. You’re no closer to knowing what you are and what sorts of changes you could survive than when we started. The most you know, even granting the accuracy of your armchair seemings, is that there could be a conscious being who could survive a rapid, complete, body swap; one who could survive a rapid, partial, body swap; one who could survive a brain chop; one who could survive a teletransportation; and one who could survive a rapid, complete, personality change. But all this is consistent with there being a sort of conscious being who could not survive these sorts of events. And we’re no closer to knowing which sort you are, so we’re no closer to answering your question.”

“Slow down, Jitney. What sort of conscious being could not survive a rapid, complete, personality change?”

“Suppose Trixie-Lynn is nothing but a collection of her beliefs, sensations, memories, and personality traits. If that’s all she is, then what sense is there to the idea of her surviving a rapid, complete, change in beliefs, sensations, memories, and personality traits?”

“But you said Trixie-Lynn was a conscious being.”

“I did.”

“How in the world could a collection of features be a conscious being? How could a collection of sensations itself experience the sensation of getting hit in the face with a baseball bat?”

“Just playing Devil’s advocate, Cletus. I agree that the idea seems rather preposterous on its surface, but maybe it’s a possibility nonetheless, in which case, you might be that sort of a guy. And if you are that sort of a guy, then perhaps you’re not the sort who could survive a rapid, complete, personality change.”

“I’m startin’ to see what you mean about the lack of real progress. We need to narrow the possibilities, Jitney.”

“You ready to get out of that chair and see what you’re made of?”
"No, mam."

"Then how are we going to narrow the possibilities?"

"Let's quit focusing on the positive. It's overrated. Let's focus on the negative. Rather than asking what's possible, for some conscious being or other, let's ask what's impossible, for any conscious being."

"Sounds like six of one, half-dozen of the other, to me."

"What I mean, Jitney, is that we should stop assuming that, when it comes to conscious beings, anything goes: it's possible for them to be human bodies, human brains, non-physical souls, restaurant-like things, or even collections of features. Maybe not anything goes. Maybe it's impossible for them to be restaurant-like things, souls, or collections of features."

"Instead of asking what's possible regarding the changes a conscious being could survive, on the assumption that just about anything is possible regarding the nature of conscious beings, you want to back up and question that assumption, by asking what sorts of things no conscious being could be. Do I have it right, Cletus?"

"Bingo. If it turns out to be impossible for any conscious being to be, say, a restaurant-like thing, that's one less possibility for this conscious being."

"So what sorts of things could no conscious being be?"

"Let's start with a squad of cheerleaders. No conscious being could be one of those. I don't need to know what stripe of conscious being I am to know that I'm no squad of cheerleaders. From this chair, by pure thinking, I know I'm not that kind of a guy."

"You're a true visionary."

"So you agree that it's impossible for a conscious being to be a squad of cheerleaders?"

"I agree; I'm just not impressed."

"Let me tell you a story, Jitney. There's a squad of cheerleaders. The end."

"Now I'm impressed."

"Given only what I've said, can you know, from your chair, without the aid of any past or present sensory experience, that you're not that squad of cheerleaders?"

"I can."

"But I haven't even said what team they're cheering for."

"Doesn't matter, Cletus. I'm not their squad."
“I haven’t told you what color their uniforms are.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“But there’s so much I haven’t told you, Jitney. Maybe you should hold your judgment until you find out whether they have human bodies.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m not their squad.”

“You don’t know their number, size, or location.”

“Doesn’t matter, Cletus.”

“For all I’ve said, they could number in the billions.”

“Fine.”

“They could be really small.”

“Fine.”

“They could live in your skull.”

“Fine.”

“They could have spooky-shaped bodies.”

“Fine.”

“They could be caught up with one another in a twisted, complex, web of relations…”

“I don’t care, Cletus. I’m not their squad!”

“…while they’re dead!”

“Now that’s different. Why didn’t you ask me in the first place whether I might be a squad of billions of miniature, talented, zombie cheerleaders, living happily inside my skull?”

“If they’re happy, they’re not dead. And if they’re dead, they’re not happy, Jitney.”

“You’re missing the point. There’s no need for you to fill in any details of your original story. You’re wasting your breath. All I need to know is that there is a squad of cheerleaders. I don’t need any more details to know that I’m not that squad.”

“That’s progress.”

“How so?”

“If you can know that you’re not that squad of cheerleaders without knowing the number, location, or skillset of the squad, without knowing whether its members are dead or alive,
miniature or gigantic, and without knowing what their bodies are like, then surely the fact that they are *cheerleaders* is irrelevant to what you know."

"Seems right. Could be a squad of child soldiers, matchbox cars, or dead ants for all I care. I’m no squad of *anything*, Cletus. I’m not that kind of a gal."

"Then you’re no squad of neurons."

"And I’m no squad of sensations, beliefs, or personality traits."

"And you’re no squad of cells."

"Or atoms."

"Or living organs."

"Or particles."

"That’s a lot of possibilities out the door."

"I do taste progress, Cletus."

"If a brain is nothin’ but a squad of neurons, caught up with one another in a twisted, complex, web of relations, then I know from this chair that I’m no brain. And if a human body is nothin’ but a squad of organs or cells, caught up with one another in a twisted, complex, web of relations, then I know from this chair that I’m no human body."

"Slow down, Cletus. We agreed from the start that we might be brains or bodies. It certainly seemed possible. So why think the results of our cheerleader-centered investigation are any better off on this score than how things seemed to us originally?"

"Maybe our original seemings were gotten from thinkin’ of brains as big lumps of whatnot, and forgetting the fact that lumps of whatnot are often nothin’ but squads of tiny whatnots. If we think of brains as squads of tiny whatnots, caught up with one another in a twisted, complex, web of relations, those original seemings seem a lot less vivid. Ask yourself, Jitney: does it *really* seem possible that are you a squad of other things?"

"It does not, Cletus."

"Hence the progress. Originally, something seemed possible. On reflection, it no longer does."

"Of course, without paying heed to our sensory experience, we can’t know what human brains and bodies are made of, or whether they even exist. What we can know is that, should they exist, there’s a good sense in which they are nothin’ but squads of things, caught up with one another in a possibly twisted, possibly complex, web of relations."

"And we know we’re not squads."

"So we know we’re not brains or bodies."
“Or restaurant-like things—squads whose membership can change rapidly and radically.”

“Still, Cletus, there’s a lot we don’t know we’re not.”

“Like pure and partless angels. They ain’t squads of nothin’.”

“That’s right. We might be partless angels.”

“Simple souls.”

“Well, some souls are quite fanciful, Cletus.”

“I mean simple in composition, not quality.”

“Like quarks. We might be quarks.”

“What’s that, Jitney?”

“A little bitty physical particle.”

“Ain’t a squad of other particles?”

“Nope. Pure and partless, simple and plain.”

“You learned that in science?”

“Yes sir.”

“No sensory experience allowed.”

“Look who’s drunk now. I retract. For all we know from these chairs, quarks are simple, and for all we know, they’re squads.”

“So we might be simple, non-physical, beings—like partless angels—and we might be simple, physical, beings—like partless physical particles.”

“Or so it seems from these chairs.”

“Correct. Tomorrow we’ll help ourselves to as much sensory experience we can gather up.”

“And the next day too.”

“And the next.”

“And if the best explanation of all that experience is that things just ain’t as they seem, from these chairs, regarding what is and isn’t possible, then we’ll begin the hard job of negotiating between what seems actual by our senses and what seems possible by our intellects.”
“But maybe what seems possible by one line of intellectual thinkin' would seem impossible by another, and vice-versa. Maybe if we thought a new line of thought, it would no longer seem impossible for a conscious being to be a squad.”

“Maybe, Cletus. But unless you've got a good reason for thinking so, I don't have a good reason for taking this maybe seriously.”

“Think about it this way, Jitney. We've only thought about the question of whether it's possible for a conscious being to be a squad by one method: asking ourselves whether we might be squads. Our feeling on this question is a firm no: no matter what sort of conscious being we turn out to be, we ain't no squads. But it's just a feeling. There's no argument.”

“Speaking for myself, it's a very strong feeling.”

“But maybe it's worth hittin' the question with a different method, from the chair, to see whether we get a different answer. Instead of asking ourselves directly whether we might be squads, let's ask ourselves whether the sort of feature had by every conscious being is the sort of feature that could be had by a squad.”

“What sort of feature is that?”

“Experiential. Like feeling sad.”

“I see where you're going, Cletus. You like French fries?”

“Mmm...”

“You like McDonald's French fries?”

“Mmm...”

“You like their taste, don't you Cletus?”

“Mmm... taste...”

“That's an example of an experiential feature, right?”

“Mmm... experiential feature...”

“Wake up, Cletus!”

“Right, Jitney. The question is whether a squad is the sort of thing that could have that sort of feature. Could a squad experience the taste of French fries?”

“How do squads get their features?”

“From their members, I suppose.”

“And how do squads get their features from their members?”
“The old-fashioned way?”

“Nope. Not by hard work. Squads don’t have to lift a finger to get their features from their members. They get them automatically.”

“The way McDonald’s fries get their golden brown color from that boiling beef-flavored lard?”

“Nope. That is automatic in a different sense. The boiling lard causes the fries to change color, without anyone intervening. The squad members’ features do not cause the squad to have its features. Rather, they constitute them. The location of a squad of cheerleaders is constituted by the location of its members.”

“And its weight is constituted by the weight of its members.”

“And its shape is constituted by the shapes and spatial relations of its members.”

“If God wants to give a squad a feature, He can only do so by giving other things—its members—certain features.”

“What about the feature of being named ‘Ed’? Couldn’t God name the squad ‘Ed’ without laying a finger on any of the squads’ members?”

“Good point, Jitney. I’m talking about inner features, the ones that give the squad its inner glow.”

“Let’s call those intrinsic features, Cletus.”

“Fine. If God wants to give a squad an intrinsic feature, He can only do so by giving other things—its members—certain features.”

“Agreed.”

“But conscious experience is an intrinsic feature. And giving other things features is no way to give someone the gift of conscious experience.”

“Unless doing so causes that person to have the experience.”

“Bingo. If you experience the taste of McDonald’s French fries, you do not qualify as having this experience by virtue of the fact that other things in the world have various features. This fact might cause you to have the experience—it might bring about the separate event of your having the experience—but it doesn’t itself qualify you as having the experience. If you experience the taste of McDonald’s French fries, you qualify as having the experience directly.”

“Agreed, Cletus. Other things’ being the way they are may cause me to have my experience, but it can’t constitute it. Other things’ having various features and standing in various relations is one thing...”

“Your having an experience is another.”
“Agreed.”

“So this confirms our original feeling that no conscious being could be a squad of anything. Squads earn their intrinsic features only indirectly: there must exist a number of things, namely, the members of the squad, none of which is individually identical to the squad, whose features jointly constitute the intrinsic features of the squad.”

“You sure do sound smart, Cletus.”

“By contrast, conscious beings have at least some of their intrinsic features, namely, their experiential features, only directly: they have conscious experience, not by virtue of other things’ having various features, but simply by virtue of directly experiencing sensations, such as the taste of French fries.”

“If God wants to give me the taste of French fries, He can do it directly.”

“No need for Him to dilly dally around with other things. To be sure, His dilly-dallying around with other things could cause a distinct event, namely, your experiencing the taste of French fries. But it could not constitute it.”

“Or so it seems from the chair.”

“Hallelujah, Jitney.”

“Let’s recap our day’s fruit.”

“We agreed to set aside the deliverances of our sensory experience, past and present.”

“But not the sensory experience itself.”

“Correct. You then took me on a fantastical journey.”

“I told you some stories, Cletus.”

“Right. And, from my chair, by hard thinking alone, given only what you said, I asked myself what seemed possible and impossible.”

“And what seemed possible?”

“Seemed possible for there to be a conscious being who could survive a rapid, complete body swap; one who could survive a rapid, partial, body swap; one who could survive a brain chop; one who could survive a teletransportation; and one who could survive a rapid, complete, personality change.”

“I wasn’t impressed.”

“Because you said this was consistent with there being a sort of conscious being who could not survive these sorts of events, and that we were no closer to knowing which sort of
conscious being I was, so we were no closer to answering my original question: what sort of thing am I and what sorts of changes could I survive."

"At this point, nearly anything seemed possible regarding the nature of conscious beings. It seemed that a conscious being could come in just about any stripe."

"A human body."

"A brain."

"A soul."

"A restaurant-like thing."

"Even a collection of features."

"Those were some strange stripes, Cletus."

"Then I had me an idea."

"I didn't think you had it in you, Cletus. I really didn't."

"We'd think real hard on what sorts of thing no conscious being could be."

"A squad of cheerleaders."

"A squad of dead cheerleaders."

"A squad of tiny dead cheerleaders."

"Caught up in a twisted, complex, web of relations with one another."

"And with the outside world."

"A squad of molecules."

"A squad of cells."

"A squad of features."

"A squad of organs."

"A squad of anything."

"A squad-like thing, like a human body."

"Or a brain."

"Or a restaurant-like thing."
“Then we surveyed the damage. Which possibilities were left, Cletus?”

“A non-physical simple soul, like a partless angel.”

“Or a physical simple particle, like maybe a quark.”

“Rednecks are simple.”

“And snobs from Boulder.”

“All conscious beings are simple.”

“I’m simple, Jitney! I’m that kind of a guy.”

“Then we confirmed this chair-bound feeling of simplicity with an argument.”

“Squads get their intrinsic features indirectly, from the features of other things.”

“Conscious beings get at least some of their intrinsic features directly.”

“They experience their sensations directly.”

“No other way to experience a sensation.”

“So, I’m simple. But am I physical?”

“Can’t know from the chair.”

“I suppose not, Jitney.”

“And what sorts of changes could you survive?”

“If I’m not physical, it’s clear that pretty much anything goes: I could survive a rapid, complete, body swap; a rapid, partial, body swap; a brain chop; a teletransportation; and a rapid, complete, personality change. At least this is so if we set aside any physical to non-physical laws of nature.”

“You’re an impressive guy, Cletus. And what if you are physical?”

“Then I suppose we’d need to pause to think about what it would be to have a body in the first place.”

“If you’re not physical, then you have a particular body just in case you’re connected with that body in the right sort of intimate way.”

“It just feels like my body.”

“Perhaps.”

“It feels under my authority.”
“Perhaps.”

“And yet, I feel like its prisoner: damage to the body is damage to my mind, whether I like it or not.”

“Perhaps, Cletus. It’s hard to say what exactly that intimate connection is.”

“And if I’m a simple physical particle?”

“Then, in some sense, you are your body; you’re a tiny, simple, physical, body of one.”

“That’s doubletalk, Jitney. Even if I’m a simple physical particle—a physical body of one—I could still have a larger body—a body of many—in the sense we just spoke about: I could have that special intimate connection with a large body of matter—say, a human body.”

“And would you be a component of that body?”

“Maybe, maybe not. Either way, I could have that intimate connection.”

“Seems you could, Cletus.”

“And since I wouldn’t be identical to that larger body, I’d be capable of having such intimate connections with other bodies, too, one after another.”

“You’re that kind of a guy, Cletus.”

“Whatever my stripe—simple physical or simple non-physical—I could survive a rapid, complete, body swap; a rapid, partial, body swap; a brain chop; a teletransportation; and a rapid, complete, personality change.”

“Or so it seems from the chair.”

“So it does, Jitney.”

“Tomorrow we’ll take our philosopher hats off and put our mosquito suits on.”

“We’ll get our hands dirty.”

“We’ll look under rocks.”

“And scalps.”

“And if we find that our sensations don’t jibe with today’s result...”

“If their best explanation is that things ain’t what they seem from the chair...”

“Then we’ll start negotiating between our sensory and our intellectual experience.”
“And if those negotiations end with the verdict that conscious beings like you and me are in fact squads of tiny, dead, strangely-bodied, cheerleaders…”

“Or squads of tiny, strangely-bodied, squads of even tinier more-strangely bodied things…”

“Or even squads of anything…”

“Then I’ll be darned, Cletus.”

“And I’ll be lookin’ for a new theory of the sorts of changes I could survive.”

“You may not need to look too far. If negotiations end with the verdict that you’re a human body, then you’ll know that you could survive whatever changes a human body could survive. And if they end with the verdict that you’re a human brain, then you’ll know that you could survive whatever changes a human brain could survive.”

“But maybe negotiations will take a turn for the bizarre. Maybe respect for our sensory experience will lead us to conclude that we’re squads, and respect for our intellectual experience will lead us to maintain that it’s possible for us to survive rapid complete body swaps, rapid partial body swaps, brain chops, and teletransportations.”

“What sort of a squad could survive those things?”

“Funny you ask, Jitney. A four-dimensional, choppy, space-time worm, for one.”

“I don’t even need to know what that is to know that negotiations shouldn’t take that turn. Think about it, Cletus. If respect for our sensory experience leads us to conclude that we’re squads, then it ought to lead us to conclude that things ain’t how they seem from the chair, regarding what is and isn’t possible. And if they lead us there, then we ought not have any respect for our positive intellectual feelings on the possibilities of body swaps, brain chops, and teletransportation.”

“Sounds like you never learned the art of negotiation, Jitney. It’s all about give and take. If respect for our sensory experience leads us to conclude that we’re squads, then we ought not have any respect for those intellectual feelings that don’t fit with our being squads, such as the feeling that it’s impossible for any conscious being to be a squad of tiny, dead, cheerleaders. But there’s no reason to throw the baby out with the bathwater. We could still respect those intellectual feelings that do fit with our being squads, such as the feeling that it’s possible for us to survive body swaps, brain chops, and teletransportation.”

“Sounds like you never learned the art of housekeeping, Cletus. If the baby is a perennial source of dirty water, there’s only way to clean the water: throw out the baby.”

“Sounds cruel.”

“The baby is the conception that you have of yourself and all other conscious beings from the armchair, prior to testing it against your sensory experience. Capiche?”

“Mmm... capiche...”
“That conception is of a simple thing, something that is not composed of other things. That conception is what generated your feeling, in the first place, that no conscious being is a squad of anything, and, in the second place, that you’re the sort of thing that could survive a rapid complete body swap, a rapid partial body swap, a brain chop, teletransportation, or a radical, complete, personality change.”

“Agreed.”

“So any reason you have to doubt that conception is a reason to doubt those feelings generated by it. If you get out of that chair and find that your sensory experience provides you with strong enough reason to reject the idea that you’re simple, then you’re obligated to stop listening to any of your feelings based on your prior acceptance of that idea, including your feelings that you could survive these changes. Capiche?”

“Yes, please.”

“If you end up throwing out the dirty bathwater—the idea that no conscious being is a squad of anything—then you’d better throw out the filthy baby that’s dirtying the water—namely, your conception of conscious beings as simple—and all the dirty water that baby is generating, including your feelings that you could survive those changes. How’s that for negotiation?”

“Respect, Jitney. If we ever get to the point of negotiating away our armchair conception of ourselves as simple, we’ll toss out all the feelings generated by that conception. Which is not to say that we’ll positively reject the deliverances of those feelings, but only that we’ll not count those feelings as reasons to accept their deliverances.”

“If it comes to that point, and the question arises which squad of things are we, we’ll address that question without giving the slightest voice to that dirty baby.”

“I don’t trust that baby.”

“So far, this is all hypothetical, Cletus. So far we’ve not found a semblance of a reason to turn our backs on the baby. We’re still in our chairs, setting aside sensory experience. It would take a heap of powerful and unexpected sensory experience to bring us to the negotiating table in the first place. And even then, there’d be a ways to go before throwing out the baby.”

“It just doesn’t seem possible that we could get to that place, Jitney. How in the world could I be a squad?”

“In some sense it seems possible; in some sense it doesn’t. Surely there’s a chance our armchair seemings are off the mark, just as there’s a chance you’ve been dreaming your entire life. In that sense, it seems possible that the baby is dirty and ought to go. In another sense, I agree, it doesn’t seem possible. That’s the sense in which it seems that no conscious being, of any stripe, could be identical to a squad of things.”

“I could go for a squad of golden French fries right now.”

“Sounds like something Kid would have said.”
“I might be Kid, Jitney.”

“You might be, Cletus.”

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