

# THEY ONLY DIE ONCE



TESSEREAN STORY SERIES

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# They Only Die Once

## A Tesserean Story

### One Life, One Choice

Zoe stood over the puppy pen staring at all the bouncing furballs. The one with the crooked ear immediately got her attention as it wagged its tiny tail violently against the cage.

As their eyes met, it took less than a second before Zoe knew she was the one.

“Can I see that one?” Zoe asked, pointing to the bouncy furball.

“Sure, that’s one of our favorites.” the shelter girl replied. “Everyone loves that crooked little ear.” she added, smooshing her lips.

As the pup was handed to Zoe, she felt an instant connection. And now with that crooked little ear tucked gently underneath Zoe’s chin, she felt as though her heart was going to burst.

“This is the one, Robert.” Zoe said to her fiancé as he stood over them.

“Are you absolutely sure?” he asked with deep concern in his voice. “This is a big deal, Zoe. We can’t make a mistake; this is our only shot at this.”

Emotion came over Zoe making it hard for her to speak. She just nodded through tear-filled eyes, took a deep breath, then offered only three words.

Yes ... forever. Yes.

### Deeper Morals

“Zoe, I know you and Robert believe you’re doing the right thing but there’s a lot at stake here.” Her father said while passing Robert the mash potatoes. “Just for starters, you can’t forget about all the other pets that will be euthanized because you’re not willing to deal with loss.”

Zoe brushed her father’s comment off like an unwelcome solicitation. It wasn’t her fault that the shelter was filled with pets no one wanted. Plus, she and Robert thought about this far greater, and more deeply, than her father could ever imagine. And if it weren’t for our leaders and their damning religious rules, this conversation could have easily been about her mother instead of a new pet. Maybe then he’d see things the way she did.

“Dad, look.” Zoe said, smothering her potatoes in gravy then passing it to Robert. “I know you don’t believe in technology, and I know you have a problem with Artificial Intelligence, but if you could do it all over again, I mean, what if you could have mom back? Don’t tell me you wouldn’t jump at that?”

The room fell silent as the words struck her father like an open window letting in frigid air. He tightened his lips then raised his arms and placed them on the table, followed by a long silence as he struggled to find the right words.

“It’s not the same, you know that.” he finally said, gritting his teeth.

Zoe got up and walked over to her dad after realizing she'd overstepped her bounds. She then gently placed her hand on his and gave it a squeeze.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. That was foolish of me to say, I know it's not the same. *But the pain* ... "her words began to trail off as the tears began welling up in her eyes. "The pain doesn't need to, I mean, it's just that ..."

She could only offer an empathic smile, as she was well aware the opportunity before her was unique, and that her father couldn't possibly understand because he never had a chance like this with his own wife. A chance to bridge death with a new beginning instead of a tearful end filled with uncertainty and sorrow.

Regardless, the path was still paved by some pain, although the tolerable kind that led to something beautiful instead of years of agonizing grief.

The rules were simple; in order to purchase an A.I. (Artificial Intelligence) pet through TODO Corp., you needed to use a recording device to capture the life of the pet you wished to have cloned. Then, you'd have that recording implanted into one of their A.I. models. This meant that even knowing the company would basically make a copy of your furry loved one, that furry loved one would still have to live, and die, in order for TODO, Corp. to catch a solid record of its entire life. This was mostly because once an A.I. pet was implanted with your pet's record, it wouldn't change its personality. Yes, it could learn new tricks, be taught new lessons, and of course, react to your commands. But the software (used to secure your pet's recorded life) did nothing more than wire its computer brain as a replica of the memories and mannerisms of your deceased pet.

So, the process was clear; the cycle must be completed, it couldn't be met halfway. You either went through with it fully, or you didn't. If you did, you were rewarded with a much richer experience of your true pet replicated in physical form, which would then stay with you for the rest of your life. If you didn't, you'd run the risk of an underdeveloped A.I. that felt more like a machine than a beloved companion.

To Zoe, the risk was worth it because it wasn't a true ending, but instead, an extra step beyond death. Or, as TODO, Corp. put it, "*A life recorded for all times sake.*"

As Zoe lifted her hand off her father's, she could feel Robert's eyes piercing the back of her head. She knew he wasn't 100% behind her decision to move forward, but he chose to go through with it out of loyalty and empathy for Zoe. Regardless of his reservations, he was naturally curious and was secretly excited to add an additional member to their family. And since the idea of children was still several years off, the implications of a pet that never died — especially one a child wouldn't have to ever grieve over — well, that was an easy enough sell to almost any future parent.

## A New Family

Just over a week later the two found themselves spending time with their new pup. The next few months were filled with incredible joy, hundreds of pictures, and several failed attempts at getting *Sadie* potty trained.

The good news was that the device TODO, Corp. used to record *Sadie*'s life, was implanted under her skull and out of sight. So, every day of her life, every moment, every bark, and every thought going through her furry little brain, was recorded and sent to the *cloud*.

Years of data would be collected and used to create an exact replica of all stages of her existence and would act as a perfect backup so that one day she would come back to them and stay *forever*.

The new Sadie would have other advantages too. She'd never need to be let out, fed, never again pee on the carpet, and of course, *never die*.

It was this last one that had the greatest advantage of all, a life without the inevitable hardship of grief. But for many — Zoe's dad included — it was all a lie, a fabrication of an irrefutable truth. The truth that all life ends in death, *one way or another*.

The argument was a complex one. This is because those who supported TODO, Corp. had a different view. Their view was that life had no opposite, no end. Instead, they felt the opposite of death was *birth*, not life. Life is eternal, ever changing and transforming. This also included — with obvious skepticism — the presence of the etheric energy of one's existence, even if a piece of that existence were recorded and placed into a machine.

Although this was solely the opinions of those who supported TODO, Corp., Zoe still wasn't sure if that was how TODO, Corp. themselves felt about their own products. Maybe one day she'd find out.

Regardless, if there was no longer the challenge of physical death, then a single birth meant an eternal life. Even if that life was nothing more than a copy of its former self.

This philosophy was held tightly by Zoe through the entire eight years of Sadie's life. And only a week after she passed, they were gifted with not only Sadie's ashes, but also the promise TODO, Corp. made the day they signed the papers allowing them to record their beloved pet's life.

### **The End of Goodbye**

It was a Saturday, warm and overcast with nonstop drizzle. The clouds broke only for a moment as Robert and Zoe pulled into the parking lot of the TODO, Corp. A.I. pet nursery.

"Are you ready to do this?" Robert asked, shutting the car off.

Zoe only nodded as she tightly gripped the papers she signed so many years before. It was as though those documents were Sadie herself, waiting for Zoe to reclaim her so they could be reunited.

Once inside they were met by a friendly young man named Jeremy. He was polite and made the process of preparing them for their new A.I. comforting and straightforward.

After the paperwork was handled, they walked into the kennel area which felt surreal: A.I. dogs were barking, cats clawing at the kennel doors, even fish could be seen swimming in tanks filled with pinkish-blue water, bubbling pirate ornaments, and fake seaweed.

"Who the hell would clone a goldfish?" Robert said under his breath accompanied by a look that almost made Zoe laugh out loud.

She nudged him with her elbow as they continued to follow Jeremy towards the end of the third row of cages. Although it had been almost two full weeks since Sadie passed, there was no mistaking that bark. Turning the corner Zoe's heart sank. There was Sadie, crooked ear and all. Her nose was pinned against the cage, and her tail wagging violently just as it had the day they were first introduced.

“This is my favorite part.” Jeremy said with a big smile as he turned the handle to Sadie’s cage letting her out.

She immediately rushed to Zoe, jumping into her arms. The tears flowed heavily as Zoe looked up towards Robert with eyes filled with the kind of gratitude he wouldn’t soon forget.

“Oh my God, she’s so real.” Zoe said, nervously laughing as she held her resurrected pup tightly in her arms.

Robert could only wipe the tears now welling up in his own eyes, as it was in that moment he would be rewarded with the validation of making the right choice so many years ago.

## A Second Beginning

The next few weeks were met with the kind of amazement that Zoe could never put into words. Having her pet back was more than a gift, more than a miracle. Plus, it was a chance to look at the world differently, one filled with promise and novelty vs one saturated with fear and uncertainty.

She and Robert had many conversations about the truth behind their choice too. A truth that told them it wasn’t the real Sadie, but instead one made of wires, plastic bones, and nothing more than a synaptic copy of the pet they once knew. But at the time it didn’t matter, because Zoe was more than willing to play along. At least, *until the dreams began*.

## The Shift

It was October 4th, just a few months after being reunited with Sadie when Zoe had the first dream. It started with a full day of rain, which brought out allergies that should have left her in September.

After getting up to use the bathroom, she thought she saw Sadie shuffle across the hallway leading towards the dark kitchen. Following her, a chill went up her spine as she realized someone, or something, was standing behind her; it was Sadie. The A.I. Sadie.

Twisting her body back towards the kitchen in a panic, Zoe found herself almost falling out of bed as her mind slipped from dream-state to waking consciousness.

“Oh my God, it was just a dream.” she said under her breath, feeling the pit in her stomach swell as she sat up in the fetal position wrapping her arms around her legs.

That’s when the tears came. She knew that what she experienced was only a dream. Nonetheless, it was a dream of the *real* Sadie.

The next several days were uneventful. She’d sleep her average three to five hours: wake up, use the bathroom, then head back to bed and sleep some more. This was followed by her morning routine of walking to the corner of their bedroom where the A.I. Sadie laid recharging on her pillow. She would wake Sadie up, give her a pat on the head, say good morning, then go about her day with Sadie in tow.

That was the normal routine, day in and day out. And it continued for almost a full three weeks until the morning of October 23rd.

It was 3:37 AM and Zoe had just gotten up to use the bathroom. As usual, she didn't turn on the lights. Making her way through the darkness, something stopped her dead in her tracks. Once again, she thought she saw Sadie crossing the hallway heading towards the kitchen. This time, before taking another step, she turned to see if the A.I. Sadie was behind her. She wasn't. Instead, she could see from across the hall into the bedroom that Sadie was in the corner laying down and charging, right where Zoe left her the night before.

Her heart sank as she turned her attention back to the dark kitchen.

"I'm dreaming." she said to herself out loud. "*I'm having a lucid dream!*"

That is when she made the choice with all her heart to stay awake and follow her deceased pet.

Quickly making her way to the kitchen, Zoe called out to Sadie. Part of her wondered if she was talking in her sleep and would wake Robert. The other part of her didn't care. She wanted to see Sadie, the *real* Sadie.

As she crossed the threshold into the kitchen, a shot of cold air caressed her cheek like a whisper. *There she was.* Sitting just in front of the kitchen table wagging her tail. At first it was hard to make out her features as the shadows from outside danced across her furry body. But there was no mistaking her energy, *it was Sadie.* With every ounce of her being Zoe felt it was her. And with a full heart, she dove towards Sadie and embraced her with both arms.

While the tears ran like an avalanche down her face, she could feel something the A.I. Sadie could never give her. *Warmth.* Not the kind created by electrical circuitry and lithium batteries, but the kind given off by a living creature that understood the reciprocity of true love.

Not only was Sadie warm, but Zoe could feel her soft muscles twitch as she squeezed her body; she could even smell her breath. This was what she missed from the A.I. copy. It wasn't just her physical features, but the way she *felt* in Zoe's arms. Her energy, the life that was once in physical form, was now being returned to her as a gift within a lucid dream.

As Zoe held Sadie tight, slowly brushing the fur on her forehead, something else in the room caught her attention. At first it came as nothing more than an odd sensation. Then, an energy rushed over her as the sound of ticking pulled a memory straight out of her childhood. Looking up towards the wall she saw a clock that shouldn't have been there. She then took a step back to get her bearings, placing her eyes upon the kitchen table.

"Wait a minute." she said out loud as she realized what was taking place. "This isn't my house, this is ..."

She then heard a voice clear as day.

"Zoe." the voice said calling to her, bringing with it a hailstorm of emotions.

"Mom?" Zoe responded, turning to face the shadowy figure standing just towards her left.

"Good, you *found us.*"

## Beyond Skepticism

The next month was filled with every article, book, reddit and blog post on lucid dreaming Zoe could get her hands on. Although it took her weeks of research to figure it out, she finally stumbled upon what made it all possible. *Her weak digestive system.* Or to be more precise, her evening ritual of Ginger tea that helped calm her stomach.

It was that simple cup of tea she drank every night to help her digest her dinner, which was the one thing that had her wake up in the middle of night to use the bathroom. Which of course, came directly after her first REM (Rapid Eye Movement/Dream State) cycle of sleep.

She learned that when she woke up to use the bathroom, it was at that point in the night — when her body was most tired, and her mind was already engaged in unconscious activity — that offered the perfect chemical and psychogenic storm to induce lucid dreaming. Then, when she would head back to bed, she would do so with a tired body and an alert mind. This was the formula that was being repeated almost every night without her even knowing it.

The last piece of the puzzle was revealed through the understanding of her nightly tea ritual, which led her to wake up then go back to bed at the right time, combined with her daily reality checks with the A.I. Sadie. This led her mind to become hyper focused while searching for reality cues, as she called them, while she fell back asleep. Now looking back, it was almost inevitable that she found herself waking up in her dreams.

The part that was difficult to grasp was if her lucidity was all made up in her head, or if she was actually seeing the real Sadie and her mother. Regardless of her beliefs, she forged ahead and learned more about the chemistry, neurology, and techniques, which could all help induce a lucid state of dreaming at will. This allowed her to examine the potential of her experiences firsthand, instead of continually second guessing their legitimacy.

As the days turned to weeks, and as her lucid dream seasons continued, she realized she was waking up the A.I. Sadie less and less each morning. At one point an entire week went by, then two, then three. It wasn't until early December that Zoe came to a conclusion that changed everything.

It was the morning of December 6th, when she called Robert at work and asked him to take a few hours off. She then set up an appointment to meet him at TODO, Corp. so they could talk to their CEO, Mr. Laviver. The seriousness in her voice alarmed him, but no matter how hard Robert pried, Zoe wouldn't give him a reason for the emergency meeting. *"Just meet me there, it's important."* she said, giving Robert no other option.

After entering the front doors of TODO, Corp. and signing in, they were escorted to the top floor by a woman in an expensive business suit named Katie.

Zoe took a deep breath as the woman walked them through the double mahogany doors of the main suite on the top floor.

As the office doors swung open, they were greeted by a good-looking man in his mid-fifties sitting behind a massive desk. With his back towards the windows overlooking the bay, he stood up, buttoned his suit, and rushed across the room to greet them with a firm handshake.

"Hi, I'm Eric Laviver, please, come in." he said, pointing towards the two leather chairs in front of his desk. "Can I get you anything? Coffee? Water?"

"No, thank you." Zoe answered for both her and Robert.

"Apparently we're good," Robert added with a smile, "thank you."

"Please take a seat." Eric said, taking his seat behind the desk. "Katie tells me you have a question for me. What can I do for you?"

Zoe sat down and took a moment to collect herself while looking around the suite. It was massive, only matched in size by the Mr. Laviver's desk. The western wall behind the desk was made of floor-to-ceiling windows offering a breathtaking view of the city skyline. Opposite the windows were dark walls with artist-rendered posters showing off TODO, Corp's various A.I. models; all of which were reflecting off of the beautiful black and gold marble floor.

As Zoe turned to place her focus back on Mr. Laviver, Robert noticed she had reached out and placed her hand on top of his. Looking down, he saw the pale skin stretching around her knuckles as she squeezed his hand. He looked up towards his wife and smiled reassuring her that she had his support.

"Mr. Laviver, I have a ..." Zoe began.

"Eric, please call me Eric." Mr. Laviver interrupted.

"Sorry, Eric." she corrected herself. "I have a very important question to ask. And I hope you don't think I'm being rude."

"Of course, not Mrs. Thomas. I'm here to answer anything you ask." Eric added with a toothy grin.

Zoe took another deep breath then crossed her arms.

"Thank you for that. My husband Robert and I purchased Sadie, I mean, one of your A.I. models a while back. First off, she's been a miracle and we greatly appreciate your company and what you do. But I have one question, and again, please forgive me if I'm being too forward. But why don't you offer this service for humans?"

The question shocked Robert as he shifted his widening eyes towards the floor trying to piece together where his wife was going. His thoughts ran wild until they returned to the night at her father's house just before they adopted Sadie. He could hear Zoe's voice like a distant echo, as she asked her father how he'd feel if he could bring his wife back. Now he knew why she crossed her arms. With her hands out of each of his, there was no way he could signal for her to retreat. Whatever she came here for, it was now all or nothing.

Eric smiled, then sat back deeply into his chair resting his hands on his thighs.

"Believe it or not, I get this question all the time." he replied, easing Robert's obvious discomfort. "You see, in order to retain a sense of realism with our products, your pet for example," he added while raising his right hand and pointing towards one of the models on the wall. "is that we never cross the line of what we call conversational transmission."

"What exactly does that mean?" Zoe asked.

"It means that pets don't talk back. They only respond in the form of gestures, affection, or commands. And since human communication goes far beyond that, it would be crossing an ethical line towards one of fallacy. Heck, not to mention the complexity of having an A.I. trying to execute a convincing enough psychological evolution of an expanded identity. In other words, our pets are based on a recorded past, not an evolved future."

*There it was.* The answer she had been looking for since that first lucid dream in October.

Zoe sat up straight in her chair then pulled her shirt away from her neck in order to help remove the false sense of tightness her anxiety was trying to choke her with.

"So, what you're saying, is that although your A.I. models are examples based on the synaptic replicas of deceased pets, that's really all they are? And nothing more?"

"Yes." Eric answered. "And as much as we believe in an emotional human connection with our products, we will never misguide, or misrepresent to you, what they truly are."

"And what is that exactly?" Robert chimed in, still trying to wrap his mind around what was taking place.

Eric and Zoe both turned to Robert and answered his question at the exact same time.

"*Machines.*"

Zoe stood up and offered Eric her hand.

"I cannot thank you enough." she said with a bright, genuine smile.

The look on Eric Laviver's face showed he was perplexed by Zoe's reaction to his answer. Most of the clients that he had this conversation with left a sense of dread, not exuberance. And it was a kind of dread based on the conclusion that even knowing their A.I. pets were an exact copy of their beloved companions, they were still nothing more than a stew of memories, personality, and reflections of what no longer existed.

Following Zoe's gesture, Eric stood up and shook her and Robert's hand. He then followed them towards the door to see them out. After a few steps he stopped and turned towards Zoe.

"Mrs. Thomas, if you don't mind, I'd like to ask you a question."

"Sure." she replied.

"I've had this conversation with hundreds of clients over the years. You're the first one that seems to be elated by my answer. I mean no disrespect, but most people seem to want to believe it's actually their pets within our machines. And I honestly get that. But you, you seem to be almost happy that it's *not*. Forgive me, but I'm trying to wrap my mind around your resolve."

"It's because those who support your company have had it right all along." she replied.

"How's that?" Eric asked.

"That the opposite of life isn't death, *the opposite of death is birth*. Life has no opposite." she answered.

"But how does that make sense with our products? Especially knowing they're just machines?"

"Because there's one thing that your company has wrong. Heck, it's even right there in your company's name."

"And what's that?" he asked, now looking perplexed.

"That they don't only die once, Mr. Laviver. In fact, *they don't die at all.*"

## Validation

Years passed and Zoe continued to practice lucid dreaming until she came to a final conclusion. *The dreams didn't matter.* As much as she loved being reunited with Sadie and her mother over and over, she knew there were many more threads to the mosaic of life. For starters, she was no longer skeptical about who she was meeting in all those dreams. In the beginning she tested this theory by a massive onset of trial and error. She first thought it was all

in her head, that she was making it all up. Then, after countless experiences she finally came to terms with the fact that there was simply too much information for her mind to be creating it all by itself. Then one day, a few years later, she was given the greatest gift of all.

Just moments after sending her kids off to school and Robert off to work, she found herself sitting on her bed staring at her reflection in the mirror across the room. It was in that very moment that she finally realized what had always distorted the truth of the two worlds she was so attuned to experiencing.

Although she couldn't see Sadie or her mother here in the physical world, she knew that her identity, the false self of who she believed she was, was the only filter that needed to be removed in order to bridge the gap between two worlds that were *obviously one*.

*The End*



### **In Conclusion**

The story you just read is true. Not in the sense of the characters or the details within Zoe's experience, but within the scenario that led her to the same breakthrough it led me.

As a young skeptic, I stumbled across lucid dreaming on February 7th, 1998. That night I had completely given up on anything spiritual, religious, or metaphysical. To me (like the A.I. pets from TODO, Corp aka *They Only Die Once*, Corp.), I believed we were nothing but machines collecting memories for a God that didn't exist. But it was *surrendering* that allowed me to remove the filters created by my own false narrative, which inevitably allowed me to experience that first lucid dream.

That night I went to bed with the closed mind of a skeptic, only to awaken with the open mind of an adventurer, then embark upon a journey that would change my life forever.

Yes, I've been reunited with past loved ones and pets. I've experienced worlds that there is absolutely no way my brain could have created, and I have learned lessons about life that were taught to me by people that are not from this physical world. And yes, at first, I believed it was all in my head. Then after decades of practicing techniques, studying the psychology, chemistry, and neuroscience of consciousness— and of course, realizing the falseness of my own narrative — I've finally come to terms with the same truth that Zoe did at the end of our story.

Which is that A) we don't die because who we believe we are doesn't actually exist in the first place. And B) What we believe is real, is continually filtered from a consciousness that goes far beyond the self, the body, and the environment in which we call the physical world.

Remove that filter (the false self), *and the two worlds will become one*.

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