

ENTANGLEMENTS



DAVID GERROLD

Life is messy everywhere...

Entanglements

David Gerrold

I am going to kill That Pesky Dan Goodman.

I do not yet know how or when, but count on it. It will happen.

I will have a perfect alibi. That's part of the plan too. I'm a writer. Ninety percent of what I do is research. The other ten percent is planning revenge. And I learned this one a long time ago—the best revenge doesn't have the author's fingerprints on it. That way the recipient can only blame karma.

Revenge isn't about getting even. Who wants to get even? Even means you didn't gain any ground, you just restored what you perceived as a previous state of balance—no, I want massive retaliation that leaves the target sprawled facedown and jackhammered two feet into the mud, wondering if anyone got the license plate of the giant Japanese lizard that just stomped him. Yes, I believe in karmageddon.

But in this case, I'll settle for a simple and elegant disincorporation.

Now (you may ask) why have I decided to kill That Pesky Dan Goodman?

It's simple.

Self-defense.

Every time the man inserts himself into my life, the consequences are painful, expensive, and traumatic.

Once upon a time, I used to imagine that the life of an author would be a pleasant one—a life filled with good books, great music, a glass of sherry after dinner, the occasional outing with friends, and the

only drama in my life coming from the Sunday broadcast of Masterpiece Theatre. Although it requires some small degree of maintenance, for the most part, I've achieved that life. As a bonus, the dog likes me. That's all the validation I need most days—that and the occasional check from a publisher.

But whenever I feel I have achieved this desired state of sustainability, Peskydang shows up. He's like the magic button attached to the toilet seat—whenever you sit down, the phone rings.

In my case, Pesky shows up at restaurants.

There are places I no longer go. As much as I love Canter's Delicatessen on Fairfax or Bob's Big Boy in Toluca Lake, those are danger zones. So is Tommy's Original Hamburgers at Beverly and Rampart. And Pink's Hot Dogs on La Brea too. Those are tourist spots anyway.

(There's a conversation that bubbles up from time to time among Los Angeles-based writers—it's a joke that Mort Sahl told half a century ago. "The Day Canter's Closed" is a science fiction story. It begins with a meteor crossing the sky, then everybody's watches are so magnetized they all stop at the same time—no, it'll have to be updated, all their laptops and tablets and smartphones go dead from a mysterious electro-magnetic pulse—and then the gay waiters and gargoyles at Canter's are all replaced by alien space lizards, but nobody notices because they're too busy arguing about their screenplays and Kickstarter projects. I could probably option that to Warner Brothers....)

But no, if I decide I've had enough of my own cooking, I have to sneak out at an odd hour. To date, Pesky has not yet found me at the

diner around the corner where I sometimes go for breakfast, nor the Thai place up the block with the great spring rolls, nor the sushi place three doors beyond where they've customized the cucumber roll just for me, with pickled baby carrot and oshinko.

If Pesky ever shows up at those places—

I just have to figure out a way to dispose of the body.

See, the perfect murder isn't one where the cops can't figure out who did it or why. It's where the cops don't even know a murder has occurred.

My life-coach—

This is Los Angeles. Everyone has a life-coach. If you don't have a life-coach, you're a tourist. Or you're not taking your life serious enough.

—my life coach says I'm not owning the circumstances. He says, "Think about every problem you've ever had in your entire life. They all have one thing in common."

"Yes, Randy?"

"You were there."

Uh...yeah. True. Okay, yes, I get it. That's the fancy way of saying I'm a jerk. Got it. Thank you for sharing.

"David," he says, "you have eighty-nine problems."

"How do you know that?"

"Because everyone has eighty-nine problems."

"But I don't want eighty-nine problems."

"Ahh, now you have ninety problems."

As much fun as all those coaching conversations can be—all those Zen-delivered-with-a-firehose discussions of personal responsibility—

none of them actually lead to an escape from the entanglements of circumstance.

But I digress.

This time, Pesky caught me at my birthday party.

No, I hadn't invited him. But he showed up anyway. The man has an uncanny ability to locate a free meal. And he dresses like the fannish version of Diane Keaton in *Annie Hall*—the dorkish interpretation of the layered look. It's impossible to determine what fashion or style he's going for, but I call it *compilation du jour*. This time it was a bright Paisley vest over a black silk shirt, a long knit scarf banded with different colors, a crimson dickie, a broad bow tie, a knitted Jayne-hat with earflaps and short hanging whatchamacallits with knobs on the ends, a long coat spreading out like a cape, flowing silk pantaloons tucked into knee-high boots, a broad black belt studded with, well...studs, and all kinds of hanging appliances and adornments—Johnny Depp would have been jealous.

I wonder sometimes how long it takes him to dress before he can walk out of the house. And why bus drivers even allow him to board. Sometimes he carries a sword or a battleaxe. This time, he didn't.

At least he doesn't wear a kilt.

I'm not kiltaphobic. I just think there are some things man was not meant to show. Some men. Pesky, in particular.

But Pesky had clearly seen the birthday invitation somewhere. Because he showed up with a giraffe.

I'll explain.

I'd spent several months thinking about the possibility of a birthday party and why I even wanted a celebration. The last time I'd hosted a party was to celebrate the finalization of my son's adoption. That had been two decades previous and we were still repairing holes in the drywall. But this year signified that I had survived some of the best and worst this planet could do to a person for an admirable number of decades, one of the big numbers with a zero at the end—and a bit of gray-haired introspection on the bathroom scale about how my life had turned out anyway brought me to the realization that I had not had a birthday party since I was eight years old—not unless you count my Bar Mitzvah, which wasn't a party as much as it was a pageant. But other than that, I hadn't had a natal celebration in more than half a century.

I knew why too.

I didn't have one for my ninth birthday because my parents had just (finally?) bought a house in the San Fernando Valium and we were moving the day after. Half the furniture had already left. So instead of a party we had a birthday dinner and a cake in a near-empty apartment and I didn't get to see any of my friends from school. Somewhere in there, I must have unconsciously decided that my birthday was no longer important enough to celebrate, so after that I mostly ignored it. Or maybe I was just embarrassed about growing older.

While my mom was still alive, the tradition was an annual family dinner, an event which grew more sparsely attended every year until finally it was just me and my sister. And by that time, dying young and/or leaving a good-looking corpse were no longer options.

The final push over the edge of the commitment chasm, however, came from my son who quietly insisted, “Dad, you gotta have a party. People like parties. If you don’t have a party for people to give you chocolate, you’re ripping them off of the opportunity to give you chocolate.”

Sean was right. I was not only entitled, but obligated to celebrate my fiftieth birthday (albeit a couple of decades late), and after checking to see that it wouldn’t be a scene out of *Stella Dallas* (look it up), and after some internal review of my own motives, I determined that what I really wanted to do was host a big party as a way of thanking the survivors for still being my friends after all these many years of gaffes, stumbles, and falling into social potholes. It turned out the guest list was longer than expected, but we filled it out with people who wouldn’t turn down a free meal—writers, mostly.

The invitation said: “A proper birthday party requires balloons, noisemakers, party hats, ice cream, a karaoke machine, popcorn, chocolate, redheads, chocolate-covered redheads, a bathtub full of lime Jell-O, jellybeans, nachos, guacamole, a disc jockey, a disco ball, a fog machine, lasers, spotlights, a party tent, a bouncy castle, cherry bombs, a police permit, explosives, giraffes, cheese dip, strippers, a Swedish hooker, condoms, watermelons, a catapult, chainsaws, masks, maraschino cherries, flavored love oils, paramedics, name tags, registration table, insurance waivers, a trapeze, handcuffs, spare batteries, water slide, first-aid kits, chains, hand grenades, Saran Wrap, clowns, a rubber chicken, an Elvis impersonator, a live webcam feed, and a cake.

“I think we can manage the cake and maybe the bouncy castle.”

I mean, who wouldn't want to attend a party like that? A cake *and* a bouncy castle! After a certain age, you stop worrying about looking good. It's about having fun. In my case, the age was six.

Planning the party was easy. A week in advance I ordered pizzas, deli-trays, kegs, and a cake, all to be delivered an hour before the guests were due to arrive. Sodas and balloons and chips took only a few minutes at the nearby grocery. I could pick up the ice the morning of the party. Ordering the bouncy castle needed only five minutes of Googling and a phone call. But it costs \$4000 to rent a giraffe for an afternoon. I did not rent the giraffe. I admit, I was tempted, though.

The day of the party all the food arrived as ordered, so did the bouncy castle. Right on time the guests started showing up and all I had to do was open the door and hug those who weren't contagious.

Several of my high school friends, my son's godmother, Holly of Sherman's Planet, several beautiful TV stars, a couple of actors, one of my favorite comedians, two or three producers, various writers of my acquaintance, and even a few people who pretended to be normal. The writers headed straight for the food, of course. (Have you ever seen a writer eat? They're worse than actors.)

In the middle of all this, just as the party was shifting from raucous to insane, a woman I didn't recognize, somebody's plus-one, came screaming in the front door shouting something about a giraffe. Several of us rushed outside, followed by several more, and eventually everybody.

Yes, there was a giraffe on the front lawn.

And That Pesky Dan Goodman stood next to it, feeding it carrots, and looking across at me with a self-satisfied grin. “You said it wouldn’t be a party without a giraffe.”

No good joke goes unpunished.

Okay, in all fairness, the giraffe was the high point of the party.

Her name was Hermione. She wasn’t quite full-size—she was only four years old, the equivalent of a teenager, and a little high-spirited, but she wasn’t freaked out by all the attention. I guess she was used to being gawked at by a crowd—or maybe she was just happy to have all the apples, bananas, carrots, stalks of celery, ears of corn, and the occasional Dorito with guacamole offered to her. She also munched her way through handfuls of oat-crackers that the trainer kept handing up to her, wrapping her gray tongue around them and sucking them appreciatively into her mouth. How much fiber does a giraffe need anyway?

I was a little worried that the rich mix of fruits and vegetables might give her an upset stomach—diarrhea?—but the trainer said not to worry, it would be good for the lawn.

So even though Peskydang hadn’t been officially invited, after he showed up with the giraffe, I couldn’t very well turn him away, could I?

That was the mistake.

It being a birthday party, most of the guests brought gifts, and most of them knew me well enough to bring chocolate. Dark chocolate only, milk chocolate is for beginners.

But the ones who *really* knew me—they brought books.

And what books! Graphic novels, rare adventures, autographed editions! Even a marvelous pop-up book! It didn't matter. I love books.

Every book is a door into adventure. It's an opportunity to live an extra life. Or to say it another way, you're lending your brain for someone else to think with. It's exercise for the mind-muscle. You get to think something you wouldn't have thought otherwise. You get stretched. That's why people who read have the advantage.

So people who give me books are...well, I'm not sure there is a word or even an appropriate metaphor. Hero? Wizard? Guru? No, none of those work. Someone who gives you the opportunity to peek at possibilities...? I'll have to cogitate on this and get back to you.

Pesky's gift, however....

It was a small wooden box. Deceptively small. Just big enough to hold a cell phone. But heavy enough to be suspicious. In fact, when I unwrapped and opened it, it *was* a cell phone. Only it wasn't. It didn't feel right.

"Um," I said. "Thank you, Pesky...? Am I missing something here? I already have a phone."

"It's not a phone," Pesky said. "It's a parallelicon. A quantum resonator. A quawkie-talkie." He glanced around the room impatiently. Some of the other guests, those who were still vertical, were glancing at him curiously. "Put it away for now. I'll show you how it works later."

"All right." I slipped it into a pocket. My son shoved another package into my hands, "Here, Dad, open this one next," and I forgot about the odd device. I am easily distracted by any box that smells like cocoa.

By the time the party finally broke up, after the last ambulance had pulled away and the police were satisfied that Ed Green was going to keep his clothes on this time—we told them he was practicing for an upcoming audition (“The Canoga Park Players are planning a revival of *Naked Boys Singing* ...”) and that seemed to mollify the officers, though they declined the offer of comped seats for opening night—anyway, after the last of the neighbors stopped making videos and went back into their houses, we passed out shovels, rubber gloves, and trash bags to everyone who didn’t have a ride home and began cleaning up.

It didn’t take as long as expected. Three of the kegs had been emptied, most of the pizza was gone, only a few wilted slices of pastrami remained on the deli trays, Dogzilla took care of those. The only sodas left in the coolers were a dented can of Diet Coke and an A&W Root Beer, so the only leftovers we had to wrap up were the remains of the birthday cake. It had been a custom cake portraying *that* scene from *that* episode of *that* TV series. Harlan Ellison had cheerfully eaten William Shatner’s head.

As the last few guests were trying to find the front door, Pesky came over to thank me for including him, making me aware again that my biggest failure as a human being is that I’m too polite to That Pesky Dan Goodman. He keeps coming back. (Daniel Keys Moran, who plays basketball more than I do, which is never at all, says I’m putting too much backspin on him.)

“I need to explain my gift to you,” Pesky said.

“Oh yeah, I forgot all about it.” I fished through my pockets, pulling out wallet, smartphone (Samsung Galaxy Note II, because it has a larger

screen than the S4), music player (A 64GB Zune. And yes, I can hear you rolling your eyes so hard back that you can see the bottom of your brain, but I like it, it works for me, so why should I care what you think?), and a wadded-up paper napkin with someone's phone number on it, I didn't remember whose, before I finally found Pesky's device. "Yeah, this is cool. What is it?"

"Well, it depends," he said. "Have you ever heard of a telegrabitron?"

"A what?"

"A para-dimensional interociter."

"Uhh....no."

"Okay, this is going to take some time." He glanced around, checking the room. Still too many people. "C'mere." He took me by the forearm and led me outside to the back yard, grabbing the last banana on the way.

"Do you know what a stringshot is?"

"It's a way to add delta vee to your trajectory by swinging around a—"

"No. That's a slingshot. Are you sure you write science fiction?"

"Not any more. There's too much science. I can't keep up."

"You and everybody else." He took the banana—

That Pesky Dan Goodman does not peel a banana like a normal person. Normal people—that's you and me, an assumption on my part, I don't know if you're normal or not, I just like to think so—you and me, we peel the banana from the stem end, and that's usually a bit of a tussle. Sometimes we even have to bite it to get it started, right? Pesky

opens it from the other end—he pinches the tip hard, it splits and peels easily down. (I tried it once, the banana split right down the middle, half stuck to each peel. There must be a trick to it.)

—and he did that same banana thing again. One day I’m going to have to learn how to do it. Either he didn’t notice me watching or he didn’t care.

“Okay,” he said. “You know about quantum entanglement?”

“Uh, yeah, sort of. Two particles are invisibly linked together. If you do something to one, the other reacts. In tandem, right?”

“Close enough for a science-fiction story. The theory is that if the two particles are far enough apart and still remain linked, you can have instantaneous transmission of information. Even across light-years.”

“Ah, the old subspace-radio trick.”

“According to theory, entanglements create a mini-wormhole that keeps them linked, one particle at each end. So all you need to do is create an entanglement and—are you following this?”

“Yeah, go on. This is the necessary exposition. It has to go somewhere.” I say that a lot. It never slows anyone down.

Pesky heard it as permission. He kept talking. “Okay. So what if we come at it from the other direction? What if every particle was already entangled? But you just didn’t know where the other one was? What if you could grab a particle and track its wormhole through space-time and find its equivalent entangled particle somewhere else? You could have instantaneous communication anywhere you wanted.”

I waved the phone-thing at him. “Are you saying this is a working subspace communicator?”

“If it worked, it would be.”

“It doesn’t work?”

“Well, the guys who built it—they don’t know if it does or not. They don’t know where the entangled particles are.”

“They can’t tell?”

“Nope. It’s a Heisenberg thing. They’re not certain. They think they have entanglements, all the evidence suggests it, but the entanglements all look congruent, so it looks like the particles are entangled to themselves. So, what you’re holding—that’s the most useless communication device in the universe. There’s only one. A telephone doesn’t work unless there’s another one on the other end.”

A sudden suspicion struck me. “How did *you* get it?”

“I asked for it.”

“And they gave it to you?”

“I said I had an idea. They said, ‘What the hell?’”

“Mm.” I suspected there was more to it than that. Peskydang’s relationship with the truth was mostly transitory. “Really?”

“Well, I kinda borrowed it. But they’re not going to miss it. Not for a while anyway.”

“Uh-huh. So now I’m guilty of receiving stolen property?” I held the thing away from me.

“No. You are a participant in a scientific experiment. Mine.” He took the device from my hand and held it up so I could see its face. “I think this is something a lot more than they realized. I think this is a reciprocal encabulator.”

“A what?”

“A quantotum.”

“In English, please? Remember what we told you, Pesky. If you’re going to stay on our planet, you have to speak our language.”

“This *is* your language, monkey boy.” He sighed. “Look. *This* is a trans-dimensional parallelithonic resonating transceiver. It contains a 64-core multi-fractal array of entangled particles. Call it a quantum empathizer for short.”

“Okay.” I pretended to understand that sentence. “And—?”

“Where do you think the opposing entanglements are?”

“I don’t know. Argentina?”

He gave me a look. “If they’re not in this universe, then they have to be in...wait for it!...another universe. A parallel universe.” He waved the unit under my nose. “This is a Dirac line to an alternate reality.”

“Except it doesn’t work.”

“We don’t know that yet. Here, do a thought experiment—assume an *infinite* number of parallel universes. This would mean that somewhere in at least one of those *infinite* alternate worlds, it’s inevitable someone else is holding a device just like this one. *Exactly* like this one. And maybe that’s what this is really connected to, but we just don’t know it yet. The guys who built it—they think their entanglements are congruent—but what if they’re wrong? What if the entanglements look congruent because the universes are identical? Or *almost* identical, but not quite. Just in this one respect.” He wiggled the thing in his hand.

I pulled out my phone and checked the time.

“What are you doing?”

“Checking to see if it’s almost breakfast time. You’re asking me to believe six impossible things.”

“Only five. But I haven’t finished yet.”

“You can stop any time.”

“All I’m asking you to do is play with it for a few days.”

“Why me? Why not you?”

“Because you know how to break things. You’re the best beta-tester I know.”

He had me there.

I built my first computer in 1978. I’ve been aggressive about software ever since. If a program can be crashed, I can do it. If there’s a weird little quirk, an odd behavior, or even an actual bug—I’m the guy who’s going to stumble over it. I found a programming error in the Fidelity Chess Challenger. (The company denied it for over a month until I sent them a play-by-play description.) I was the guy who found out that Turbo Pascal’s random-number generator wasn’t random, by writing a program to display random patterns on the screen and seeing very orderly patterns occur instead. I crashed every new version of Windows—but hell, everybody did that, so I can’t take any credit for that one.

And before there were computers, there were typewriters. The IBM service department told me that nobody worked a machine as hard as I did—if I’d let them check the wear and tear on my Selectric every three months, they’d give me free service.

It's because I have a weird streak of obsessive-compulsive behavior. I have to find out where the limits are. I usually do that by tripping over them.

And Pesky knew me well enough to know which button to push.

"What do you want me to do?"

He put the trans-dimensional parallelithonic resonating-transceiver back into my hand. The quantum empathizer. "Try to see what you can connect to. Dial numbers at random. Well, not numbers—coordinates. IP64 addresses. See what happens. See who answers. Maybe no one. But you have nothing to lose, do you?"

"If the multiverse is truly infinite, then it's inevitable someone will answer, Pesky. You know that—"

"Yep," he said. "That's why you should be the one to do it."

"I don't follow your logic—"

"Because I trust you."

Those were probably the most frightening words that Peskydang ever said to me. I shook my head in resignation, shoved the thing back into my pocket and went in search of a hazmat suit, so I could clean the bathroom. It was a mistake to serve pickled-beet, cauliflower, and baked-bean casserole. Thanks, Mo-mo. Don't ever do that again.

I was several days recovering from the party. There were the usual thank-yous and apologies to make, plus the inevitable reparations to various neighbors to help them regain their grundle, a couple of quick interactions with lawyers, and finally a last-resort phone call to my cousin who has connections to the City Council. It was a good thing this

was only a small gathering. The doctor said I would not need my meds adjusted, but to take it easy for the next few days.

I hadn't given any thought to the quantum empathizer. The mourning after—yes, I know what I typed, but that's how I experience the day after a party—get off life-support, stagger to the shower, mainline some coffee, and finally wake up. In that order. And with some luck, do all this before dusk.

Sorting through the stack of books and chocolate—and the package of Depends one soon-to-be ex-friend had given as a gag gift—I eventually remembered that Pesky had handed me a present too. I didn't go looking for it. As the sandstorm behind my eyes began to fade, I realized that the quantum empathizer had to be an elaborate prank—though one in much better taste than a package of adult diapers.

Pesky had found an old cell phone, written a funny little app to make the screen dance on command, and then amused himself at my expense by spouting some wild, incomprehensible jargon, just to see how much of it I would believe.

In fact, the more I thought about it, the more certain I was that the whole thing had to be another of Pesky's impractical jokes—like the time he sent Alec Peters scrambling all over the San Fernando Valley, from one electronic parts store to the next, looking for a left-handed Moebius wrench. Of course, you don't fool around with Alec Peters. He actually came back with one.

So as easily as I remembered the quantum empathizer, that's how quickly I dismissed it.

By the end of the week, I was back at the keyboard—

Not yet typing though. First, I spent half an hour cleaning dog hair and gunk out from under the keys. A vacuum cleaner is insufficient. You also need a can of compressed air, one of the ones that come with a thin red straw to concentrate the stream—and a business card and a paper clip, and sometimes even some specialized putty that you can press down into the spaces to grab crumbs of all kinds.

This is just one of the things writers do to postpone the actual process of writing—others include removing the cat from the keyboard, making coffee, removing the cat from the keyboard, having a sandwich, removing the cat from the keyboard, doing “research” on the internet, and removing the cat from the keyboard, by which time, you should probably clean the keyboard again, to remove the cat hair from under the keys—because the process of writing is mostly staring at a blank screen and thinking, “Nope. That’s not it either.”

I’ve streamlined the process somewhat. I don’t have a cat. I expect the universe to fix that situation shortly, but at the moment, it just means I get to spend a lot more time staring into a 32-inch empty white space.

It’s like watching a large light bulb, waiting for something to happen. I am the moth, drawn to that light. It’s my job to fill the void with little crawly marks that decode into words that decode into thoughts that transform into an understandable moment of experience—and if possible, once over those hurdles, be somehow entertaining or even enlightening. It’s not for the squeamish. (I’d say it’s not a job for sissies, except it takes a lot of courage to be a sissy and a lot of strength to deal with the ignorance and the stupidity of those trapped

in a binary interpretation of gender, but never mind. That's another story.)

Meanwhile, back at the keyboard, but not typing. Because I was stuck.

Not *stuck* as in writer's block. There's no such thing as writer's block. That's just another excuse for not writing.

No, I mean, *stuck* as in not knowing what the next sentence should be.

[RETURNS TO THE KEYBOARD SIX HOURS LATER]

After it's published, the pauses don't show.

Yes, I'm spending a lot of time describing the process of getting words onto the paper. Onto the screen. Into a file. (Out of my head and into a form that can be retrieved, printed, submitted, and eventually published.) Because that was the what and the why of everything that followed after.

I'd been staring at the story on the screen for half a day—okay, I also answered some email, scrolled through Facebook, browsed Amazon, bought a rare Anthony Boucher paperback on eBay, checked Google News, and fussed with my outdated website, trying to remember HTML and CSS code again. But mostly I'd been trying to figure out if Squish should spend the night in his cell or escape from juvie and do something dramatic. An escape would complicate the problem, but letting the system process him would bore me to death. And the reader. And Squish.

Squish's time-slicing suit gave him (among other abilities) the power to go invisible and walk through walls. But he was already

dealing with the consequences of smurfing little Bobby Peterik, and this part of the story wasn't about him using or abusing his powers, but discovering the consequences that inevitably followed. I could have him spend the night thinking over his options until Cousin Murray showed up again. That would probably be the smartest thing he could do—he was a super-genius, so it would be obvious to him—but it wasn't the most exciting thing he could do. So if I had him wait it out, then I had to give him an internal monolog that was compelling enough to justify the pause in the action.

If I had him wait, then obviously I'd be passing the buck to offscreen forces, in this case *deus ex Murray*. If I did that, then I'd have to build up some anxiety for Squish to warrant a resulting argument between him and Cousin Murray. The argument would have to be an explosive one to justify in retrospect the inactivity during the time spent in juvie. So the whole sequence would have to be a major development in the narrative, setting up an even larger confrontation later on, but one still based on the same emotional tension between the characters—

And when you analyze it to death like that, all the life goes out of the entire story. It deflates like a three-day-old balloon, shrinking and wrinkling into a prunish echo of itself.

An alternative might be to have him sharing the cell with another boy, and—

Too many possibilities.

A bully? Too obvious. Someone who tells him how to jack a car? Except Squish doesn't need that information. What could another boy tell him? Squish's real problem is connecting with others. Maybe there's

the possibility of an emotional bridge? Homoerotic? Might be too obvious, but Squish has been feeling really alone because he lost his best friend in the previous installment, and that was part of the justification for smurfing Bobby Peterik, so some kind of “we’re in this together” sharing, leading to a sense of connection might work. Squish could use his time-slicing powers to help his cellmate. That could work, but it would add another character to the narrative. Do I want that? On the other hand, Squish having a friend might work too. Hmm. Gotta figure out who the other boy is and why he’s being held in juvie....

Myself, my experience behind bars has been somewhat limited, a status I have no intention to change. (I was 23, but I looked like I was 14. The cop got me for jaywalking, I didn’t have any ID, and I mouthed off. The cop was overzealous and the judge raised his eyebrows at the ticket and only dinged me a few bucks for the jaywalking. I spent an hour locked up with a teenager who’d tried to steal a color TV until my uncle bailed me out. Things were different then.)

Anyway, I was still staring at the screen, thinking about Squish and wondering if I could afford new glasses. These were scratched and starting to generate annoying reflections and peripheral glares.

That’s when the phone rang.

Actually, no—it didn’t ring. That’s just a literary device. A metaphor. A convenient way to indicate an interruption.

What really happened was the computer beeped and a little flag popped up in the lower right-hand corner of the screen telling me that a new device had been recognized.

The quantum empathizer.

And the reason the quantum empathizer had been plugged into the computer was because I'd been charging it. I'd plugged it into the same USB cable I use for transferring books, music, and videos to my Kindle. And the reason I was charging it was because the battery had gone dead, because I'd left it turned on since the party.

I had forgotten about it until this morning when I went looking for my Zune (mandatory eye-roll here from the iPod users), which I found in the same pants I had worn to the party, but first I found the quantum empathizer in a different pocket. When I tried to turn it on, it didn't respond. So that's when I knew the battery was dead. And while I was still certain that Pesky was pranking me, I was now getting curious enough to see how the prank would play out.

He must have programmed the thing to do something to hook me. Maybe he'd installed some kind of chatterbot that could pretend to be a person, at least until the limits of the algorithm betrayed it. I'd played with a few of those, almost written one, they can be very convincing.

In fact...

Yeah, I'll share this. Because it has some peripheral value to this tale. Back in 1983, after Gene Roddenberry had been put out to pasture by Paramount Pictures, because he'd spent \$40 million making a movie that shouldn't have cost more than \$15 million, he bought his first computer, a Kaypro 10.

The Kaypro 10 was a pretty good little machine for the time. It was the size of a microwave oven, it had a 9-inch monochrome screen—bright green letters on black, 25 lines, 80 characters per line—and it ran CP/M, a precursor to DOS. It had 64K of RAM and a 10 megabyte hard

drive. Yes, I said 64 *kilobytes* and 10 *megabytes*. In those days, that was a lot. The Kaypro 10 ran an 8-bit Z80 chip at 2.5 *megahertz*—and that was state of the art.

Gene had spent around \$1600 for the machine. All things considered, it was a bargain. I had a Kaypro 10 as well, but it wasn't my first computer. It was my third, and by then I'd already had five years of experience, which made me not just a pioneer, but an expert as well. So when Gene called me and asked for help—would I teach him how to compute?—I stopped what I was doing, took a shower, grabbed a bunch of floppy disks—in those days, they really were floppy; inside the plastic jacket was a 5¼-inch Mylar disc coated with the same iron-oxide rust used on cassette tapes (do I have to explain cassette tapes now?)—and drove up one side of the canyon and down the other to his house in Beverly Hills.

It was an interesting experience, a chance to discover that Gene Roddenberry wasn't quite the visionary he pretended to be. He was smart, but he wasn't intellectually ambitious. But then, Gene was a producer, not a scientist. To him, the computer was just a different kind of typewriter, a more efficient way of getting words onto paper. Gene Roddenberry had a strange and wonderful skill. He could take a bad script and turn it into a good one—he could also take a great script and turn it into a good one.

I taught Gene how to boot up WordStar, how to bring up the help screen, how to write some text, how to save it to a file, how to copy that file to a floppy disk, things like that. As we progressed, he began to get more and more enthusiastic about this frightening metal box on his

desk. Obviously, it had been frustrating him since the moment he first turned it on. Now, with a little bit of coaching, he was starting to feel he was in control.

When it was time to show him the computer could also play games, I loaded up ELIZA for him. ELIZA was one of the very first chatterbots, so simple you could code it in BASIC. ELIZA didn't recognize meanings, only patterns. Type in, "I like donuts," and it would strip out "I like" and replace it with "Tell me more about" and feed it back to you as "Tell me more about donuts." With a couple dozen programmed responses, ELIZA could simulate a conversation. It couldn't pass the Turing Test, but it could startle anyone whose only experience with a computer had been the vicarious observation of HAL 9000 murdering four astronauts.

Toward the end of the afternoon, Gene's eight-year-old son, Rod, came in to say hello, followed shortly by Gene's wife, Majel Barrett-Roddenberry. Gene delightedly told her, "David and I are computing!" Then he sat her down in front of the machine and told her to type "Hello." She did so, and immediately, ELIZA began conversing with her. She leapt back with a scream and shouted, "Gene! Who's in there?" It took him several minutes to explain to her that it was only a computer program. She didn't want to accept that explanation. Not at first. ELIZA was just too convincing. She didn't touch the keyboard again.

That was 1983, the beginning of the cyber-Mesozoic era. Thirty years of evolution later, chatterbots can carry on much more complex conversations because the programming has become that much more sophisticated. But writing that kind of code is hard work. Pesky doesn't

do hard work. He might have been capable of it, but was he motivated enough to invest all that time just for the sake of a silly impractical joke like a quantum empathizer?

I doubted it.

So I clicked on the little flag in the bottom-right corner of the screen, and a window opened up showing the device's log-on screen. There were the obvious boxes for first name, last name, and email address. Also address and date of birth. The program then ran a rotating icon indicating it was now identifying my service provider and my IP address. After that, it accessed its own GPS to determine the latitude and longitude coordinates of my location.

Basically, it wanted to know who I was and where I was. Somebody must have assumed that would be useful for an alternate-dimension hookup—at least, that's where my mind went. Looking for love in all the wrong spaces. Adventures in slime and place. If I clicked the [SUBMIT] button, would I be opening a portal to this world for alien sex vampires? Who comes here? Dangerous versions?

Of course, I didn't have to click the button. I could unplug the device and go back to wrassling with Squish and his dilemma.

On the other hand, if I didn't click the button, what would happen to man's search for knowledge?

Probably nothing.

But what about my search for knowledge?

And then I stopped.

Really?

Was I *really* taking this serious?

This was Pesky's little joke. He must be laughing his head off somewhere. I'll bet he's got this thing sending a hidden signal to some remote location where he's watching me through my own webcam. Well, he would if he could. I keep a sock over it. But he certainly could have this thing logging keystrokes. And maybe he's got my microphone turned on.

"Pesky, if you can hear me, you're not fooling anyone." And then I added, "Just to show you I'm not fooled, I'm going to click the submit button—just to see what kind of a stunt you think you're pulling."

I clicked the [SUBMIT] button.

Nothing happened. Not at first.

The program opened a new window and a message appeared across the top. "Searching..."

After a moment, the message changed to, "Nodes are active."

In the window, several lines of text began to appear.

Divergence 1949 [05 active nodes, 11 inactive]
 Divergence 1963 [42 active nodes, 13 inactive]
 Divergence 1967 [23 active nodes, 33 inactive]
 Divergence 1968 [13 active nodes, 02 inactive]
 Divergence 1969 [06 active nodes, 47 inactive]
 Divergence 1970 [no active nodes]
 Divergence 1971 [03 active nodes, 12 inactive]
 Divergence 1974 [12 active nodes, 65 inactive]
 Divergence 1979 [12 active nodes, 11 inactive]
 Divergence 1981 [03 active nodes, 41 inactive]
 Divergence 1986 [43 active nodes, 54 inactive]
 Divergence 1987 [34 active nodes, 36 inactive]
 Divergence 1991 [09 active nodes, 19 inactive]
 Divergence 1992 [13 active nodes, 23 inactive]

...

The numbers flickered and changed as the screen updated. It looked like a live uTorrent queue. More lines appeared, seemingly at random, but probably in the order in which the connections were established. No connections showed up for any year before my birth. That was interesting. More evidence that this was one of Pesky's tricks.

The most recent year listed was four years ago. Some years had no active nodes. Others had many. There did not appear to be any particular pattern to which years had the most. 1970 had eighty-seven active nodes while 1981 only had three.

I recognized some of the years, the opportunities and the missteps, the choices made and not made, the fumbles, the bumbles, the stumbles—all the roads not tribbled.

I sat back in my chair and stared at the screen. I still didn't believe this was anything more than a weird little prank, but I noticed my own reaction, that small moment of uncertainty, that tiny balloon of doubt swelling in my chest, that inevitable feeling of loss that comes from looking into the past.

Yes, I know I shouldn't look back, I'm not headed in that direction. I should be looking out the front windshield, not at the rear-view mirror—but the reason there are rear-view mirrors in cars is so you can see what's behind you, especially when it's roaring up after you like a truck or a tsunami. Memory is the monster that stomps the present and chases you into one desperate future after another. You have to kill the monster if you want to build anything new.

I know that. Mixed metaphors and all. But I sat there anyway, remembering.

The meeting I missed. The call I didn't make. The invitation I turned down. The date I didn't go on. And the justifications for not doing any of those things. And all the things I did instead. All the screw-ups. Especially that redhead—

But there were victories too. Little moments of triumph and joy and satisfaction. Not the obvious ones, not the ones everybody knew about, but the secret ones—because those were mine, not for sharing.

That day in July of '69, when a hot and hopeless summer afternoon turned into a magical and golden evening, as sunlit bars of dust illuminated the discoveries of love. And the horrible day when it was lost as well. That day in '77, when the magic was rediscovered and reinvented—and again in '78. And all the different kinds of magic that happened in '81 and '92 and '95 and '05 and '07. Those were mine.

Maybe, someday, I'll write an autobiography, listing all the things I've learned from all the best people in my life—and all the things I've learned from all the worst as well. I could call it, *Things I've Learned From Living Too Long* or *If You Had Wanted Me To Write Nice Things About You, You Would Have Treated Me Better*. Especially that last part. Autobiographies are a great way to pay off old grudges. I could tell the truth about a few people. I could do some significant damage to a few reputations—

Well...if Pesky had intended this little stunt as a thought experiment, he'd certainly achieved his goal. I could spend the rest of the day reviewing past lives that hadn't happened.

And then, the dogs began barking frantically at the door—the doorbell has been broken for three decades, I have no need to repair it. The mail had just been delivered. A good opportunity for a break. Nothing important, just the usual collection of junk mail coupons and ads. An opportunity to refinance the mortgage. And another one of those notes about pre-need cremation.

Which sent me off on another internal rant—

Pre-need cremation? No, I don't think so. I don't want a pre-need cremation. That sounds painful. Thank you very much, but I do not want to be cremated until I absolutely *need* to be cremated. Here's how you'll know when I need to be cremated. I won't move for a long time, I'll look bloated and awful, and I'll smell bad. Oh, wait—I'm like that now. Let me get back to you on this.

—because that's the cost of being a high-verbal. You look at the actual literal meanings of words before you look at how they were intended. I've gotten myself into a lot of trouble that way.

But in this case, the interruption brought me back to the real world—just long enough to stop and ask—Wait a minute! Is this really *the real world*? I'll bet all those others feel like the real world to anyone living over there. To them, this one would be just another divergent.

Wait. You're not taking this serious, are you?

Of course not. It's just another prank by Pesky.

You might be able to get a story out of it, though. Maybe you could see where it goes.

I don't have a little voice in my head. I have a committee.

Back at my desk, I saw that the screen had updated itself. There was even a divergent for this year now. Cute.

So far, though, I hadn't seen anything that would have required more than a couple hours of work for an experienced programmer. I assumed that if I clicked on one of those lines and tried to connect to an active node, I'd get the chatterbot. Probably the same chatterbot whichever link I chose. It might be interesting to test the limits of the chatterbot's abilities. I wondered if Pesky had made it historically literate, aware of which specific divergent it was pretending to be. To make the prank work, he would have had to. But that would have required a lot more coding than this stunt deserved.

I wondered if—yeah, that would be just like him—if after spelunking through various screens and options, some hideous deformed face would suddenly and unexpectedly fill my monitor, a ghastly scream roaring from my speakers, all with the intention of scaring me, so I would go leaping backward in startled terror, shrieking and knocking my coffee all over my keyboard.

It was a funny gag—well, funny the first time. It still showed up on Facebook occasionally. But it wasn't funny anymore, just annoying. And besides, that wasn't Pesky's style. His pranks were usually more subtle and more literate. Like the time George Takei was going to speak at the local university. The school put up a big poster of George's smiling face—one night, Pesky snuck onto campus and added matching posters just to the left, showing a lion, a tiger, and a bear. In that order. The real joke was that some people didn't get it.

So I sat at the keyboard and stared at the screen and mused. Until I realized I wasn't amused at all. "And no, we are not bemused either," I added as an afterthought. High-verbaling again.

There was really only one way to end this—and that was by continuing. When you're in the muddle of anything, the only way out is through.

I leaned forward and clicked on 1949. That felt like a good place to start. The screen popped up five active nodes. I clicked on the first. It opened a window listing multiple journal entries and descriptions of files available for download.

I started reading. I frowned—

There were articles about ramp access, the Americans With Disabilities Act, hiring discrimination, the high cost of a motorized wheelchair and how hard it was to get around Comic-Con's crowded aisles even with prosthetic legs, why it was unfair they wouldn't let him on the bobsled ride at Disneyland, and after that a few rants about the things that rude and stupid people said and did. One was about able-bodied people parking in the handicapped spaces—that was understandable. Another revealed how tired he was of people telling him how much courage he had, I could empathize with that one too. It's not courage when you don't have a choice. A third talked about amputee porn and the creeps who were turned on by stumpies, and how hard it was to have a real relationship. He didn't want anyone who felt sorry for him—

Huh?

I dug further.

Apparently, the individual at this node had lost his legs when he was five. He had been sitting on a corner curb where the streetcars turned around, a little island just off the corner of Vermont and West 1st Street. It was a very sharp curve and the bottom of the streetcar came over the curb as the trolley turned the corner.

—oh, crap.

I remembered that moment. I'd been wearing shorts. I'd sat down to watch the streetcar turn. At the last moment, as I saw it coming around, saw how the sharp yellow bottom of the car was cutting over the curb, I scrambled back out of the way. That moment was still ingrained in my consciousness. It was my first experience recognizing my own stupidity. Ever since then, I've kept a cautious distance from all moving trains and streetcars. And trucks. And buses. And everything else large and mobile.

So that was the divergence in 1949.

And this person was me. An *alternate* me.

Oh—

Now I *was* bemused. More than confused. Frozen in shock.

Pesky couldn't have known that. I'd never shared that incident with anyone. I'd occasionally thought about it, wondered what would have happened if I'd stayed put. Would I have been dragged under the carriage and cut in half by the streetcar's large steel wheels, or would there have been enough room for my skinny little five-year-old legs to escape unscathed? Or maybe I'd just get scratched up a bit or maybe broken both my legs, but not too badly. I'd even imagined the ride in the

ambulance with a superhero fireman holding my hand and telling me not to cry.

But this guy, this *divergent*, his legs had been crushed and mangled and ripped off his body. He'd lost both of them. Barely survived the blood loss. His limbs were amputated mid-thigh.

Ouch.

So that was what happened to the little boy who didn't get out of the way in time.

He grew up to be an angry cripple. No, not angry. He told jokes. He was literate. He even wrote and sold some stories. But mostly he was a single-minded advocate for disabled rights. Because he didn't have much choice.

On the other hand, having to use his arms for everything, he must have developed great upper-body strength by now. I wondered if he'd posted a picture.

Yes, he had. And yes, he had great shoulder muscles and biceps, but I couldn't be jealous. He was fat. And slovenly. Ugh. I suppose I should have been ashamed of myself for thinking that of him, but if he was an alternate me, he was one I was glad I wasn't.

Considering everything—the circumstances, the culture of the time, the lack of access to honest affection separated from pity—it would have been easy for him to retreat into comfort food and sublimated resentment. I could understand it. I'd been there. More than once. It wasn't the comfort zone. It was the zone of resignation. I just hadn't stayed there. I was sorry he had. But I could understand his frustration with the world now.

I wondered if his stories were any good. I skimmed a few titles. Nothing I recognized. I'd have to come back and look later. But my curiosity was piqued—what would I find if I clicked on the other years? Who were the other divergents?

I backed out and looked at the other years.

Why were there no active nodes for 1970? Nothing came up on the screen.

I decided to try 1987.

Well, *that* was interesting—

Apparently Gene Roddenberry had died of a massive stroke (overdose?) at the end of December. This was before his walking elbow-wrinkle of a lawyer had come aboard to pack the production with expensive empty suits. So the show-running chores fell to—

Among the files available for download were seven years of episodes. Those would definitely be worth a look.

It would take several hours for all the separate files to copy. Enough time to browse some other years.

What diverged in 1963?

Well, there was the obvious one, of course. John F. Kennedy listened to the concerns of his Secret Service agents and allowed them to put the bubble top on the limo. Lee Harvey Oswald's bullets cracked the Plexiglas, but failed to penetrate. The president and his wife escaped with only minor scratches. The following year Kennedy defeated Goldwater. The Federal Civil Rights Act passed, so did the Voting Rights Act. Not without a fight, but they passed. Kennedy did not escalate the war in Vietnam, the right wing accused him of being soft on

communism. His political popularity waned after the '66 midterms, but because the economy was healthy and because the nation was fascinated by the Apollo missions to the moon, he remained personally well-regarded. Robert Kennedy won the presidency in '68 against Richard Nixon. That was a close race, because the south was leaving the Democratic Party.

When JFK and two Apollo astronauts visited the set of *Star Trek* in early '67, the series took a ratings boost and the network moved it to an 8:00 time-slot. Its ratings climbed even higher in the earlier position, pushing the show into the top ten. They did not buy that script from a well-intentioned college student. Hmm.

Some tough times followed, but...that was interesting. It turned into a whole other career path. Twenty-two novels in ten years, approximately one every six months. And another thirty in the twenty years after that. I didn't recognize any of the titles.

Oh, this was even *more* interesting—

Heinlein novels! Holy mother of Ghu! By '67, the grandmaster was apparently heading out in a whole other direction. *On The Bounce, The Man From Mars, And Not To Yield, A Competent Man, Ezekiel And The Wheel, The Business Of Monkeys, Ad Astra.*

Beatles albums? Thirteen of them before the '73 breakup, plus another seven after the '79 reunion. Not a single title matched anything in my timeline. Definitely needed to download those. *Eight Arms To Hold You, Any Way We Can, Singularities, Everest, Let Go, Applesauce, All The Times, and The Band You've Known For All These Years.*

It all made sense—different history, different stimuli, different results. A whole other catalog. Not just me, everyone.

I wondered what else I might find. I started browsing through the ancillary files that my divergent selves were sharing. Buddy Holly's *Disco Sue Got Married*. Disney's remake of *Yellow Submarine*, Kubrick's *Napoleon*, and Terry Gilliam's *Don Quixote*. Steven Spielberg's *The Stars My Destination*. Joss Whedon's *Firefly*, all eight seasons and the two-hour special, *Redemption*. Criterion Audio, *The Compleat Hendrix*. Alfred Bester's *Destiny*. Harlan Ellison's *The Man Who Screamed Bullets*. All the divergent Ken Burns twenty-four-part documentaries on the history of the twentieth century. I counted seven of them.

And more!

All the Hugo and Nebula nominees since 1949—from all the different divergent timelines. I could spend a lifetime catching up, just reading all the different masterpieces of so many of my favorite authors.

I hesitated—I wondered about the ethics. Was this considered illegal file sharing? I couldn't pay for any of this stuff, but I could trade things specific to my timeline. That would be fair, wouldn't it?

What about my own stuff? What had my different selves created? I could market that, couldn't I?

I'd have to look.

And that made me pause—

—because that's what I had been avoiding.

And I knew why.

One of the skills all those courses and coaching had created was a weird kind of insight—an additional level of consciousness, being able to notice my own motivations.

In my timeline, somewhere on the internet, there is an Encyclopedia of Science Fiction. In it, one of those shallow and snotty self-appointed critics of science fiction had casually dismissed my entire career with a single withering sentence: “...has not lived up to his early potential.”

At the time, I'd felt that critic had misunderstood what I was attempting. But what if he hadn't? That was the fear. What if all those different versions of myself had lived up to their potential? Would their enormous body of work reveal how badly I had failed in *this* timeline?

I checked '95 and '97, looking to see if anyone had completed my seven book trilogy. No. I was the only one working on that story. Was I really that divergent?

But I did find *The Patient Dragon*, *Blue Monkeys From The Eleventh Dimension*, *The Boy Who Was Girl*, *The Girl Who Was Silver*, *A Promise of Stars (collection)*, *The Corridor*, *The Princess Of The Mice*, *Shifter*, *Nightsiders*, *Admit One*, *Bad Night*, *City Of Boys*, *Dear Doctor Morgan*, *Jesus And The Seven Dwarves*, *Loophole*, *Gendernauts*, *Escape From The Planet Of The Tribbles*, *Didactics*, *A Day At Crater Park*, *The Chimney Wars*, *Cocoons*, *The Brick*, *Cooking By Ear*, *Inherit The Stars*, *The Borrowed Body*, *Something Scratching*, *The Job Of Death*, *The Hails Of Toffman*, *The Lifeguard At Cassy Beach*, *The Rainbow Eaters*, and *Uncle Dog*.

And that was just from one timeline. There were at least a thousand others yet to explore. If there were even 20 different books in each divergent timeline, that would be a library of twenty-thousand separate downloads. I wouldn't even have time to read them all—

It wouldn't be unethical for me to download everything that all my divergent selves had written, would it? I could even resell some of the best. If I could figure out how to find the best out of twenty-thousand. Maybe just the award nominees? But no, I'd written a few pieces I was proud of that had never gotten award notice. I'm sure my divergent selves had too. How to identify them—

Of course, I should probably make my catalog from this timeline available in return. Nothing I had written after 1970 existed in any of the divergent catalogs.

But I was feeling humbled by what others had accomplished and posted.

Not just humbled—jealous.

By comparison, I had...what?

Well...

I was the only one who had written *The Martian Child*—because none of them had adopted a child. At least, not the same child. Right there, that made my heart break. Where was Sean in all those different worlds? Did he even exist in those alternate timelines?

Maybe his birth parents had never met. Or maybe they didn't make a baby that night in the fall of '83. But if Sean did exist, if he had been born, then what would have happened to him without me being there for him?

Where was he? Was he all right? Or had he been swallowed up by circumstances? Used up and abandoned before he'd ever had a chance? Thinking what might have happened to him, I started to tear up again.

Or maybe, maybe—I had to hope this was so—maybe some other family had gotten lucky. After the adoption was finalized, the caseworker told me there had been two or three other families interested in him, but they had chosen me as the best match. Maybe one of those other families had taken him.

But wherever Sean was, there was no *Martian Child*. It hadn't happened. And neither had anything else. No Hugo, no Nebula. No movie. No nothing.

I remembered why I had adopted him. What had made me the person I am. The same thing that informed all of my earliest writings. I went back and looked, I had to confirm it—yes, I was the only one who'd written *HARLIE* and *Folded*.

And that's what stopped me.

I knew why those books had been written, what they had been a response to.

At the end of the sixties—

Those novels had happened because I'd been trying to wrap my head around something so incomprehensible that it felt like the universe was a gigantic practical joker, with me as the butt of the joke. (And no, I'm not going to talk about it here. It's a footnote. Someday I'll write that footnote. Just not today.)

1970 was the divergence. This was the timeline where I'd survived.

HARLIE was me trying to figure it out—to see if it had any meaning at all. And *Folded* was a plea to any passing time-traveler. Please come and fix this. Make it didn't happen.

Pebbles down a well. No splash.

Not important enough, I guess. Or maybe the time traveler decided history worked better this way. I wasn't consulted.

Ultimately—and it took until '81 or '85 or '92 or '07—I finally figured it out for myself. I had to figure it out more than once. Each time was a personal reinvention. None of the books I'd ever read, none of the teachers I'd ever admired, none of the authors I'd followed so religiously had ever been able to say the one thing in the clear I'd most needed to hear.

If you want life to have meaning, you have to make it up yourself.

And that's the real question. The one nobody else has the answer to. The nastiest and most terrifying piece of personal responsibility.

What do you want your life to mean?

There was a book I had been wanting to write. I hadn't written it yet. No, I hadn't finished it yet. I had four different abortive versions on my hard drive. None of them came close to what I wanted it to be.

I scoured through all the different divergents. The book didn't exist. No one else had written it either.

Which meant that no other divergent in this particular selection of possibilities had experienced the same event. Which meant—

I started looking at the selfies.

Ahh, that explained a lot.

Too much.

I don't know how long I sat there, staring at my monitor, overwhelmed by conflicting storms of emotion, blinking through the tears, weeping at my loss, sobbing at my failure—because another version of me had something I had been grieving for nearly my whole life. And I didn't have it, couldn't have it.

The photo of the two of them, handsome and beautiful, smiling, squinting against the glare of the Hawaiian sun, proudly holding up their left hands to show matching wedding bands—

Oh, no.

No, no, no, goddammit! Dammit! Dammit!

Now, I knew why there were no active divergents from 1970. Those were the ones who'd committed suicide. Unable to bear the grief, they'd...quit.

I got up from the computer. I walked out of my office. I walked into the kitchen. I opened the cupboard above the refrigerator, the one glued shut by time, the one with two bottles of wine and an unopened bottle of Glenfiddich one of my friends had sent me two years ago. I don't drink—

That's not completely true. Twice a year, once at Thanksgiving and once at Christmas, when the family gathers together at my sister's, I pour myself a rum and Coke. I use Malibu coconut rum and a twist of lime. It's called a Hairy Nilsson. You put the lime in the coconut, you drink it all up. (If you make it with Diet Coke, it's a half-*Nilsson*.)

Tonight, I took down the bottle of Glenfiddich. Heinlein had introduced me to single-malt liquor when I visited him in Bonny Doon. It was one of the greatest favors he ever did for me. I twisted out the

cork, and splashed two fingers into a glass. I didn't bother with the soda. Not tonight. And no, I did not throw it back all at once like you see in the movies, because in the movies it's not liquor, it's iced tea. And nobody who respects Glenfiddich insults it like that. No, I sipped at it, letting it sting my tongue a bit at a time.

I stood alone in my dark kitchen, eyes still blurry with grief. The dogs wagged hopefully at my feet, alternating their little, "I like cheese," dance, with sitting up and waving their paws at me. "Please, sir, can I have some, so I can ask for some more?" Somewhere else, I had the life I'd planned. Here, I had the life that had happened anyway.

I don't know how long I stood there, alone, drinking, waiting for some kind of resolution, some enlightenment, some imitation of peace. I noticed my hands were shaking and leaned on the counter. I could feel the booze burning its way down my throat and into my stomach, a dark wave ballooning outward from there.

I wish I had lyrical language to describe it, those silky poetic metaphors that awaken the imagery of the mind. But I don't, I never have. I didn't even want to be a writer. I wanted to act and direct and create video games and design amusement parks. And once, I'd even wanted to be a course-leader, a trainer. I only ended up a storyteller because there were stories I wanted to read and nobody else was writing them.

I look at all the good writers around me and I'm jealous of their skills, what they're able to do with language and character and voice, and it just makes me all the more conscious of my own limitations. All I've ever been able to do is grasp after the unreachable precision of

language and hope that's enough, but just wanting something badly enough isn't enough. It needs ability and commitment and passion.

All I had was stubbornness. Too stupid to quit—

And now there were all those different divergents, every bit as stubborn and stupid as me. Some of them must have gone off in other directions, some of them must have done a few of those things I once thought I wanted to do. But I was afraid to go back and look. I was already hurting enough—

Why the hell had Pesky given me this terrible device? What was he thinking? What the hell kind of a birthday present forces you to confront the failures in your life?

I opened the back door and went out to the patio, but only as far as the awning, an empty space surrounded by the pattering of rain.

The backyard should have been a refuge, but it didn't feel like it tonight. It felt like a walled-in exercise yard. The first precipitation we'd seen in months was rippling the surface of the pool, cooling the air with the icy smell of...I don't know, what's a poetic way to describe breathing negative ions? That crisp feeling of air that clears the lungs and the soul at the same time?

But out here, I could wrap the darkness around me like a cold, wet, uncomfortable blanket, the only warmth coming from the alcohol inside me.

I thought about those other divergents. Were they happy? Had I missed something?

Well, no. Not all of them were happy. That one in the wheelchair. And the ones who'd killed themselves. The one who'd spent two

decades working through various iterations of a successful TV show—he was a millionaire now with a house in Newport Beach, a yacht, and monthly royalties bigger than my lifetime income. He also had ulcers, a drug problem, two divorces, and a reputation for being an arrogant ass. Was he happy? Did he log onto the interdimensional network feeling successful? Or did he regret that his entire life had been at the service of someone else’s creation? Did he mourn the stories and novels of his own that he’d never written because he’d sacrificed himself to television?

And the one who was married—*all* the ones who were married. Yes, I envied them. Who wouldn’t? And if I could ask them, I’m sure they’d say they were happy. They probably were. I wished I was that happy too.

Oh, what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to transceive.

I sipped at my drink—what the hell, I finished it quickly. Let it burn. I thought about stepping out from under the awning, letting the cold rain wash down onto me—but no, that was a stupid idea. I’d barely survived my last bout with pneumonia. I did not particularly want another ambulance ride or tubes down my throat.

So, what did I have?

If Randy were here, my interminable coach, he’d say, “You have the path you’re on. You have what you chose. You have the consequences that came with your choice.”

Great. Thanks, Randy.

Okay, well...I have a son I’m very proud of. I’m the only one who has this son. That has to count for something. I’d made a difference in

his life. He'd made an even bigger difference in mine. He taught me to think about someone else for a change, a skill once learned and never forgotten. Our relationship is so good, I'm jealous of myself.

And...I do have some stories that no one else wrote. No one else could have written them. That has to count for something too.

Some of my best work had come into being because of the smoldering rage I'd been carrying for so many years, for so many different reasons. Most of the time that torment just simmered, sometimes it boiled, and sometimes it exploded. Mostly it caught me by surprise. But I'd learned how to force it out through the keyboard, blasting shards of feeling onto the screen like an emotional assault rifle aimed at the reader.

And sometimes—sometimes I even acknowledged it aloud. I'd say it like a joke, but it was never a joke. "I suffered for my art. Now it's your turn."

I walked back inside and put the empty glass in the sink. A satisfying glass-on-porcelain clink. Okay, I'd had my ten minutes of self-pity. Fifteen. That was enough.

Alternate timelines are just another trap, a great big game of "what if" with teeth in it. But if there's one thing I've learned in the last seven decades, it's how to bite back—and draw blood.

This is who I am. This is the universe I live in. If I have to deal with this world, then it has to deal with me. The next time I look into the abyss, I intend the abyss to flinch.

I'm the one who gets to live *this* life. I'm the one who gets to write *these* stories.

That's enough. That has to be enough.

Well played, Pesky. Well played.

But I'm still going to kill you.

I caught up with That Pesky Dan Goodman a week later. I made a point of dropping in at a meeting of the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society. They have a new clubhouse in Van Nuys. I found him in the back room—at the snack table, of course. He turned around and saw me and his eyes widened. The first and probably only time I'd ever seen fear on his face.

I handed him the box. He shook it, frowned, opened it.

Inside were all the pieces of trans-dimensional parallelithonic resonating transceiver, thoroughly hammered to bits.

"Sorry, Pesky," I said. "I couldn't get it to work."

AUTHOR'S AFTERWORD:

This was the only file I was able to download before the device overheated and the particles unentangled.