

The Town Drunk

Presents

IMPROBABLE TIMES

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Bill knew there was trouble when he found a live trout in his briefs. It was getting his arbitration notes all wet, flopping weakly around the inside of the briefcase. A small example of the rainbow species, he judged. He blinked at it. It gazed back at him with one expressionless goggle-eye, and steadfastly refused to disappear like an obedient hallucination. The odor of fresh fish and river water wafted gently out into the air-conditioned meeting room, causing his client to furrow his brows in confusion. Bill gently closed his briefcase.

He couldn't do anything for the poor fish, and he certainly couldn't hand over those waterlogged papers to anyone; his reputation for oddity wasn't helping his business, and he didn't want any more stories to spread. He did the only sane and careful thing he could do.

He asked to reschedule.

Back in his cheap little car, windows rolled down to the spring warmth—rare in Chicago—driving distractedly in the general direction of home, Bill mulled over what could have happened. Occasionally, at a stoplight, he would raise the lid of the briefcase sitting in the passenger seat and take a peek at the trout. It always seemed to be looking back at him as if to say “Don't ask me, I'm just as confused as you. Plus, I'm dead.”

Spontaneous generation? Could random subatomic particles have just decided to come together into the form of a fish? No, even if something so cosmically unlikely were to happen, the water would have been too much to ask. Teleportation, then? That seemed to fit the evidence; seemed like the poor guy had been just swimming along, minding his or her own business, and then *bam*, shoved into a hostile alien environment with a lawyer. Bill automatically rejected the idea that the fish might have teleported itself; even if it were capable of doing so, nobody would willingly go to a place where they couldn't breathe. Similarly, the idea of divine intervention didn't make a big impression; whatever god or gods may exist rarely operated in such a direct and dramatic fashion

these days. So, who would have done this? And why? And how? He settled in behind a moving truck to think, letting the big vehicle govern his speed.

Bill swiftly came to the conclusion that he just didn't have the kind of data he needed to figure this out. He needed someone with a deeper understanding of the esoteric, he needed someone who might know something about teleportation and spontaneous appearance and...

The back doors of the truck flew open spontaneously, fractured pieces of the ruined padlock banging across his hood and fetching up against his windshield wipers. He stood on his brake pedal, skidding to a stop just as the huge, ugly, very solid-looking sleeper couch, a monster in pink brocade, toppled out of the truck, slamming onto the pavement scant inches from his front bumper. He blinked at the couch as the truck stopped, and burly men hustled back to apologize to him. He ignored them, turning to mutter to the trout, "You know, I think I know just the guy who might be able to help." He backed up and made a U-turn, leaving the relieved movers behind.

The air of the research facility was cold, sanitized, and smelled vaguely of ozone. The décor reflected the same sensibility. Mostly. Bill arrived in the office suite Greg shared, pushing open the nondescript door, and was confronted with a huge, heavy, pink brocade couch and an equally huge, heavy, and pink receptionist. The former looked like the more pleasant conversationalist, and the latter seemed to have more comfortable padding. Nevertheless, Bill announced himself to the woman and took a seat on the couch, which was disturbingly like the one that had almost made his subcompact a sub-subcompact. He was told Dr. Greg was on his way.

In typical fashion, it took Greg another fifteen minutes to arrive. The man seemed to operate within his own personal time-space continuum. Bill had just identified which "Far Side" cartoon lady the receptionist most resembled when Greg bustled through the hall door, hands full of metal and plastic and circuit boards and trailing wires. He plopped the mess on the receptionist's desk and strode toward Bill, who was still struggling free from the horrible sagging clasp of the pink couch. Greg drew Bill into his gangly, surprisingly strong arms and just about squeezed the life out of him.

"Binky!" Greg exclaimed. "It's been years!"

"...ack..."

"Oh, sorry. Happy to see you, is all."

"Please, Greg, don't call me Binky."

"What, your oldest buddies can't call you by your nickname?" Greg playfully jabbed Bill in the shoulder. Bill sighed; he never liked that nickname, and Greg was the only

friend who still bothered to use it, but nobody could alter Greg's behavior, sometimes not even Greg.

"Skip it. Good to see you, too."

Greg draped his arm over Bill's shoulders and steered him down the short hallway toward his personal office. "So, what brings you all the way out here? Need some legal advice?"

"Very funny. No, there's something unusual going on, and I wondered if you might have any ideas."

"I always have ideas." Greg was a genuine genius, with wide-ranging skills and knowledge, almost none of it useful in day-to-day life. He could barely heat soup, and his wife had banned him from his own kitchen after the one time he took apart the new microwave to see if the wavelength emitters were adjustable. Were it not for his wife's efforts in clothing the man, his entire wardrobe would resemble either the fluorescent eyesore that was his tie or the pink couch in the reception area. He was not one to ask about an everyday problem. But deep theory, abstract thinking, technical operations—that was where he lived most of the time, that was his true passion. If anyone could help Bill solve this mystery, it was Greg.

"First off, how do you feel about fish?"

They both stared at the trout, sitting in the middle of Greg's desk. Most of the water had evaporated, and it was getting a touch stinky. Still, it stared accusingly back at them.

"Okay..." Greg said slowly. "Okay. Eliminate the impossible. Whatever remains, however... improbable," he hesitated slightly on that word, "must be the truth."

"Sherlock Holmes's credo. And good advice in my profession, as well." Bill shifted his gaze to Greg's face. "But if you eliminate the impossible, the whole problem goes out the window, and that's obviously not going to help."

"It's not that, it's... well, I suddenly thought it might relate to the project I'm working on."

A kind of tingle started at the base of Bill's neck and put slivers of ice between his vertebrae. He kept his voice calm, though he wanted to yell. "Greg. What is it that you're working on?"

Greg leaned back, steepling his fingers. "You were always a widely read guy, for a law major. What do you know about branching universes?"

“Hmm. I read a Robert Anton Wilson book about them once, lots of sex but some physics, too, right? Something like, for every possible outcome of a given decision, a new universe splits off from the original, or something. Einstein and a couple of other guys didn’t like that very much, as I recall...”

“That would be Einstein, Podolsky, and Rosen. I think you’ve got the basics, though you’re glossing over a great deal...”

“Quantum physics isn’t my strong point.”

“True, true...” Greg suddenly leaned forward. “Look, there are innumerable mysteries in this world, particularly in physics. We don’t even actually have a theory that completely explains all the intricacies of how electricity works, and we’ve been playing with that phenomenon for more than a hundred years. Point is, there’s a lot of usefulness in just researching the basics, finding out why very simple things happen, and then seeing what you can do with them.”

“Greg, you’re starting to scare me.”

“Look, I’m just saying that what we’re doing here is essentially basic research, not necessarily intended to develop a specific technology or anything. It’s about finding out what makes the universe tick.”

“Greg, if you don’t start explaining to me what the *hell* you’re talking about, I’m going to take my fish and...” Bill didn’t have anything to follow up with, so he stood up and took the trout and put it in his pocket.

Greg stood, hand out. “Binky, wait!” He paused, then tilted his head. “Want to see it?”

It was a large, blocky machine, not unlike an old-time industrial boiler, in a huge sterile room; Bill had to put on a smock and booties and go through an anti-static hallway to even go through the door. While most of it held blank metal plating, one whole side was covered with displays and keyboards and monitors. Bill circled it, stepping over cables and pipes. It was an impressive piece of work. “What does it do?”

“Gives us glimpses into branching universes.”

Bill stopped. “Okay. How?”

“Have you done advanced post-doctoral work with subatomic phenomena? No? Then I imagine my explanation wouldn’t make much sense. Suffice it to say that, for a brief time, we can examine several different ‘option paths’ from a given phenomena. I’m framing it as a proof of the Everett-Graham-DeWitt many worlds theory, which can be interpreted to say that anything that can happen, does happen, given enough branching

universes and the proper probabilities.”

“Probabilities?”

“Sure! Look, everything you do could create a branching universe. Whether you scratch the itch on your nose with your right hand or left hand, or even your index finger or thumb, creates a whole new set of universes, or timelines, if you will, in which all possible options are explored. We organize them in order of probability. We figure most options don’t have much impact on the probabilities of other actions, and so most branches stay pretty much along a single timeline, perhaps bundled together like wires in a cable. That’s the metaphor we’re using, at least...”

“Stick to the point, Greg.”

The scientist grimaced, cleared his throat, and continued. “However, some choices have significant impact, and spin timelines off in completely different directions. Can you imagine? Sufficiently developed, we could use this technology to find the perfect outcome of any given choice...”

“Um... hold it.” Bill had to break in, before Greg went off on one of his sweeping quasi-philosophical monologues. “What can you tell me about side-effects?”

“Er, none. The effect is limited to within this machine.”

“I think Mr. or Ms. Trout would have something to say about that. I’m thinking your machine has done something to screw up the universe, started messing with probabilities.”

“That’s crazy.”

“So is having a trout spontaneously appear. Or at least, it’s very improbable. Why couldn’t you just put a cat in a box and see if you could turn it into a probability wave, something normal like that?”

“Because that’s Schrödinger. Related theory, but completely different guy. Schrödinger’s major premise was...”

“Crikey!” Bill jolted as if he’d been shocked. “I need to feed my cat! I got so caught up, I never made it home. Come on, tell me why I’m wrong in the car; you’re not off the hook, yet.”

“Hope your cat likes fish...” Greg looked significantly at Bill’s jacket pocket.

“Oh, no. This is evidence. Come on.”

Outside, where Bill's subcompact had been parked sat a big SUV. The parking lot was nearly deserted, and there were no other cars nearby. Bill noted the SUV wore his license plates, and his key still fit the lock. The seats were incongruously covered in hideous pink brocade; Bill couldn't help but think it seemed familiar, somehow. He power-unlocked the doors, and Greg eased into the passenger seat, wincing at his surroundings. Even in the dimming evening light, the upholstery was punishing.

"Still think I'm crazy? I hate these sport utes; now my car's turned into one, and I'm probably stuck with it unless we can stop whatever it is that's happening."

"The only thing that makes me think you're crazy is this color scheme. Seriously, Binky, what were you thinking?"

"Don't call me Binky," Bill growled, as he pulled out the parking lot. "It's bad enough this fat car makes my head look small..."

None of the customary yowls greeted them as they entered Bill's apartment. Further, Bill immediately noticed someone had been redecorating.

"Dear God," he said, gaping at the monstrosity. "How did that even fit through the door?"

"Oh, I get it," said Greg. "You had your car interior made to match your couch." He paused. "Actually, I don't get it. That's just plain odd, man. Even I know that."

"I didn't do any of this! This pink couch is following me, ever since the trout."

"Whatever you say, Binky, it's your theory."

"Which you weren't able to convince me out of. And don't call me Binky, please."

"Can you just feed your cat? Deanna's going to kill me as it is."

"Give her a call; phone's in the kitchen. Tell her I said hi."

Bill glanced in all DaVinci's usual hiding places in the living room and bedroom, but the fat tabby was being unusually devious. The food dish by the bathroom was nearly untouched. He added some wet food to the dry kibble in the bowl as a kind of apology, and stepped into the hall to track down Greg. The physicist was standing in the doorway, speaking Japanese into the kitchen. As he approached, Bill glimpsed an elderly Asian man in a bathrobe, standing in a room that looked nothing like the one that was supposed to be there. And there was a glimmer of sunlight in the far window. As it had gone completely dark on the drive over here, Bill knew it was wrong, wrong, wrong.

“Binky, this guy wants us out of his kitchen. I thought you lived here.”

“Yeah, and I thought it was night, as well. Make our apologies, and let’s go. This is very, very wrong.”

Bowing low, they backed out of the kitchen, and turned to find DaVinci. At least, the collar on the growling Rottweiler had that name emblazoned on it. Saying “nice doggie” only worked for so long; Bill had to sacrifice his wobbly-headed “Mr. T” figurine before they could escape into the hall.

“I thought you had a cat, Binky.”

“Don’t... ah, forget it. Let’s go.”

It started to rain as they drove back to the research facility. “Okay, let’s break it down,” Bill muttered. “I start with a fresh trout in my briefcase, then I start seeing the couch. Then this blasted giant sport ute. Then the apartment and Japan. Obviously, it’s escalating, and things are just getting weirder. Why me?”

“Why not you?” Greg wondered. “I mean, perhaps it’s just because of your relationship to me. I’ve been the only one running tests today.”

“That does seem to fit. I wonder if anyone else is having problems.”

“Well, of my friends, you live the closest. Deanna and I live farther out, now. I’ve got Bruce and Julie’s number back at the lab; we could call them, see if anything unusual is happening there.”

“If we get back to the lab...” Bill trailed off. Snow was gusting across the road, and was swiftly piling into drifts. Chicago weather was unpredictable, but this was ridiculous. He began to think they would have use of the SUV’s four-wheel drive soon; finally, a good use for the damn things. The snowfall was getting thicker by the second, a sudden blizzard in late April. “I really don’t like the looks of this. I can barely see the road.”

“Shapes ahead,” Greg said, squinting into the swirling white. “Is that a horse?”

Indeed, a smallish horse galloped out of the snow, its fur-clad rider brandishing a sword. The metal of the blade shone wickedly bright in the headlights. Greg screamed, and Bill swerved away. He heard a metallic impact, then noticed the side mirror was suddenly missing. More riders on ponies could be seen in the snow. The SUV seemed to have left the road and buildings far behind; there was no curb, no structure, nothing to stop Bill from swinging the vehicle around and flooring it. Greg twisted to stare out the back window, Bill kept glancing in the rear-view. A few scattered dinging noises across the back announced hastily fired arrows bouncing off the roof.

“Mongol raiders, it looks like,” said Greg with wonder in his voice. He turned to face forward again. “Winter weather, Mongols... can’t be happening.”

“Tell that to Ghengis Khan,” Bill muttered, peering through the snow to find a destination—any destination. The city seemed to have vanished, and he had no idea where he was going, but as long as he was fleeing the Horde, he was happy enough.

“Look out for that... thing!” Greg yelled helpfully. Bill twisted the wheel, trying to see what Greg was reacting to. The SUV skidded to one side and, as expected, started to tip. As the world angled sharply, Bill finally saw it: a huge, hairy pillar of a leg. He saw a flash of a long, curved tusk, and had time to think “mastodon!” before the SUV fell on its side.

A face-full of cold air and wet snow roused Bill as Greg pulled him from the vehicle. “Come on, Binky, get up,” Greg shouted over the wind, “Kubla is almost on top of us.”

“You’re thinking Coleridge, not Mongolia,” Bill said blurrily. “Pleasure-domes and whatnot. And don’t call me Binky.”

“Geez, even with a concussion, you’re a cranky bastard,” Greg said, as they stumbled through the blizzard. Snow-muffled hoofbeats approached behind them, and adrenaline helped Bill regain his senses. He couldn’t see more than a few feet away, and there didn’t seem to be any sort of cover. Greg, however, pointed ahead and yelled “Over there!”

“I can’t see it!” Bill yelled back, even as they waded in the direction Greg indicated.

“Me neither! Wind sounds like it’s going across something, though. Might be shelter.” Aerodynamics was another of Greg’s interests. A large mass, a pile of snow-swept rocks, became visible. Bill was too concerned about getting killed to feel the cold, but his teeth were chattering by the time they reached the pile.

“At least we can put our backs against something when they kill us,” Bill said, glancing about for a stone small enough to heft. He was a lawyer, not a medieval warrior, but he wasn’t going to go down without a pathetic show of resistance. “Was that really a mastodon back there?”

“Yeah. I almost stepped in a dropping earlier. I think there’s a cave over here,” Greg said, moving along the side of the pile. Bill charged after him, wading through the accumulating snow. Yes, it did look like a cave, or at least a sheltered indentation in the rock. They heard the snorting of a horse behind them. Dull powdery thuds announced the coming of the warrior. Bill stole a glance, and nearly panicked, the man was so close. He found himself unable to breathe as the sword blade, glinting in the distant light from the tilted SUV, swung inexorably toward him. Then Greg grabbed him and half-jumped,

half-toppled toward the cave entrance. The Mongol's sword whistled past Bill's face as the pair fell into the cave, and he closed his eyes in relief.

Of course, it became a problem when they kept falling. The quasi-weightlessness of being in mid-air never went away. Bill opened his eyes and saw daylight first, then a wide, flat, misty surface far in front of him second. He realized it was the Earth, as seen from a great height. The falling sensation was thereby explained.

It made perfect sense. He felt like he was falling, because he was. Skydiving without—yes, indeed, he wasn't wearing a parachute. It made at least as much sense as encountering the Mongol horde. He tried to imagine the look on the warrior's face when he and Greg had disappeared; it must have been pretty amusing. He found himself giggling, and then realized he couldn't stop. He spied his trout floating—no, falling—in the air not far from his head, falling at the same rate, and that made it funnier, somehow.

Greg, of course, snapped him out of it by grabbing hold of his arm, and swinging around so they were facing each other. "I'm beginning to think you have a point about the Probability Device."

Bill's vision faded out for a moment, and when it returned, he was throttling Greg, the scientist's face bright red while he pried Bill's fingers off his windpipe. Reluctantly, Bill let go, and glanced around. The ground was coming up awfully fast; they didn't have much time left. Neither man panicked—they had been through so much in such a short time, their impending deaths merely filled them with resignation.

"I wish we had more time to get to the bottom of this," Greg said, barely audible above the rushing of air past them. Bill forgave him the regrettable metaphor.

"Well, maybe we'll hit something soft, give us a few more seconds to think about the problem," said Bill, though part of him wished the opposite.

As the ground got dizzyingly close, Bill shut his eyes against the inevitable.

They landed hard on the lumpy cushions of a horrible pink brocade couch. Contrary to their expectations, they were not immediately smeared and/or ground into the upholstery. They actually bounced a moment and settled, as if they had fallen from the top of a coffee table rather than the top of the cloud layer. They sat and savored their salvation for a moment. Then, with a wet, meaty *thwock*, the trout landed squarely on the most sensitive region of Bill's lap. He crumpled forward in silent pain, falling off the couch.

"Some kind of cavern," Greg said, looking around while Bill whimpered softly. "Don't know where the light's coming from." He looked up. "I also don't see the hole we fell

through. Did we just pass through the ceiling?"

Bill was lying on a metal plate, and as he slowly recovered, he noticed it was vibrating ever so slightly. He pushed himself up, slipping the trout into his jacket pocket. "It's humming. It's a machine!"

"It's the Probability Device," Greg said solemnly. And it was, of course. They stared at it for a while. It made no sense for it to be here, but then again, Bill thought, what had made sense since this whole thing started? They climbed down and stared some more.

"Okay, now what?" Bill asked.

"Should I try to make any adjustments?"

"Don't touch it! We don't know what would happen!"

"Maybe if I shut it off, everything will go back to normal."

"On the other hand, maybe everything will be locked in as it is, unable to change back again."

"Shouldn't we test that theory?"

Bill threw up his hands. "Test the theory, test the theory... I swear, if I had a dollar for every time you've said that..." He trailed off, staring at his right hand.

After waiting a moment for the rant to continue, Greg sensed something was wrong. Bill was gazing at a stack of crisp, new dollar bills sitting in his palm. Greg snapped his fingers and laughed out loud, startling Bill so much he almost dropped his money.

"That's it!"

"What's it?"

"We're the observers! The quantum indeterminacy is affected by our knowing it's going on; that's one theory we weren't taking into account!" Greg practically danced a jig. Then he swooped over and gripped both of Bill's arms, smiling. "The observer, Binky, the observer! Nick Herbert, Roger Penrose! Von Neumann may have had it right after all!"

"Schrödinger, I thought. And don't..."

"Well, yes, the cat too, but it applies to Von Neumann's theories. An observer affects the outcome."

"But we may be the only two people who know what's going on," Bill said slowly, "so we're the only ones really qualified to observe..."

“Which means we have a certain amount of control.” Greg looked up toward the ceiling. “I imagine I’ll find a box of jelly donuts around the corner of the machine.” He half-jogged, half-skipped around the corner and shouted for joy, returning with half a jelly donut hanging out of his mouth. “Point proven,” he mumbled, spraying crumbs.

Bill felt a surge, but as his thoughts continued, it drained away. “Hang on. I didn’t dream up Mongols, nor skydiving. Nor the trout, for that matter.” He touched his pocket reflexively; yes, the trout was there. “So we may have influence over what happens, but we aren’t originating it. So we can’t fix it unless we can figure that out.”

Greg stopped smiling, though he kept chewing. “Honestly, I don’t know if we can do that. I don’t know if it’s possible.”

“Me neither.”

“Excuse me,” said a tiny muffled voice. Bill and Greg looked around wildly. When it spoke up again, it sounded like it was coming from Bill’s pocket. “Excuse me, please.”

Bill pulled the dead trout from his pocket, and peered at it. Yep, still looked dead. “Um, hello?”

“Yes, hello,” the trout said. It didn’t move, remaining as dead as before, but the soft, androgynous voice issued forth from its gaping mouth, nonetheless. “I’m sorry to intrude, but I think I might have an answer.”

“But you’re a dead fish!” Greg objected.

“At this point, are you really surprised?” Bill said.

“Exactly. Reality is so chaotic by now, I’m the least of your worries,” the fish said. “You’re both concerned that you can’t figure out how to control it, but the effect itself gives you an out, if you’re willing to ask for help.”

“So,” Bill said slowly, “we can ask to speak to a friendly intelligence that can provide us with answers...”

“...by using our position as observers to make it possible,” Greg finished. “Of course!”

“You’re a very smart fish, you know,” Bill said to the trout.

“I can’t take credit,” the trout said, “it’s this whole mess that gives me the capability. Plus, I’m dead, so I have a certain perspective. But thanks.”

“I’d imagine, if we were to find a door over there on the opposite side of the cavern,” Greg said, “that it would lead to a friendly being sympathetic to our cause who would be able to help us shut this effect down and return everything to normal.”

“I agree,” said Bill. “Lead on.”

They walked around the Probability Device, and found a portal. It wasn't a door as they recognized it, but rather a metal iris in a black frame. They looked at each other, then Greg shrugged and stepped toward it. It slid open from the center as he approached, releasing a blast of chlorine-scented air into the chamber. Greg lurched back, coughing, and the two men fled to the far side of the cavern. The iris closed smoothly.

Bill shook his head. “I suppose we should be more specific. That door should lead to a friendly being sympathetic to our cause, able to help us put everything back, who we can talk to and whose environment won't hurt us.”

“Seconded. Do you think it's safe to go near it?”

“You're the scientist. But considering how it smells like a pool in here, I'll bet the chlorine has dissipated enough. Tell you what, I'll go.”

“Should I hold on to the trout? You know, just in case?”

Bill arched an eyebrow. “It's dead, Greg. You think air is going to hurt it?”

“Good point.”

Bill walked across the chamber, stepped up to the door, and held his breath. One large step, and the iris opened. A cautious sniff revealed nothing more than cool, sanitized air, not unlike the atmosphere inside Greg's research building. The passage curved left after the first dozen or so feet, but it looked safe enough. Bill waved to Greg, and the two of them stepped through the portal.

“Long tunnel,” Bill finally said, breaking the silence. They'd been walking for half an hour through a semicircular tunnel apparently carved through glassy obsidian, with little greenish light bulbs spaced every few meters along the center of the curved ceiling. There were no branches, and no change in angle after that first turn.

“I feel like something's dragging on me, but I can't pinpoint the exact sensation.” Greg turned to the fish in Bill's hand. “Hey, um, trout, do you know where this tunnel is going?”

“Hey, I can talk, sure, but that doesn't mean I'm clairvoyant,” the fish said, somewhat testily. “Why do people always think the dead have supernatural powers?”

“Um...” Bill started to answer, but thought better of it. For just then, a fourth voice boomed through the air, deep and powerful and electronic, like James Earl Jones crossed with a Speak-and-Spell.

“Approach, humans. I have found your language, and I am now able to communicate.”

They paused, waiting for something to reveal itself, but nothing else happened. They looked at each other, shrugged, and kept walking. Another half-hour and they noticed a variation in the lights ahead. Eventually, the passage opened up to a large chamber. The opposite wall held a single luminescent blue tube, and in the center sat a large pink brocade couch.

“Sit, humans, if you are tired. You have come a long way.” The voice seemed to come from the blue light, but it filled the entire space.

“Thanks,” Bill said, crossing to the couch and taking a seat. He didn’t want to seem impolite. “My trout suggested you could help us.”

“Yes. Your experiments have caused physical reality to revert to a primordial formlessness, easily malleable by the energy of intelligent thought.”

“Could you tell us what we did to make that happen?” Greg sat on the arm of the couch, leaning forward, enraptured.

“It was a fluke, specific neutrino and tachyon interference with your probability experiments at precisely the moment necessary to set up the reverberations in the local subatomic particles. The effect spread out naturally from that epicenter.”

“Oh, naturally.” Bill kind of followed the voice’s explanation, but it was way too calm and matter-of-fact to be talking about the breakdown of reality. “You said the effect was malleable to thought. Why did it respond to our words, and not just our thoughts?”

“Language is intelligent thought given physical form.”

Bill waited, but no more was forthcoming. “Ah. I see. Well, then, can you help us put everything back to normal?”

“I cannot cause your reality to resume its previous form. Once released, primordial formlessness cannot be completely bound again.”

Greg groaned. Bill thought of DaVinci, his apartment, his whole life. All gone, by this time. He hoped the DaVinci dog had at least chewed on a Mongol...

“However, I can return you to your time period before the event occurs. You would replace your earlier selves, and could thereby alter the timing of the test. Starting a microsecond earlier or later would be enough to throw off the fatal interaction.”

Greg blinked. “Would we run into problems again?”

“Unlikely. Your discovery, while interesting, is not cost-effective, and has no

foreseeable practical development with the current methodology. Your funding will be cut within the year.” Greg flinched. “Besides, you are more likely to start another baby universe with your experiments than you are to experience another confluence such as the one that started this.”

Bill noted the voice didn't provide any specific probabilities on either occurrence, which was worrisome. Then he registered something the voice *had* said. “You said ‘our time period.’ Are we not currently in our time period?”

“In order to speak to an intelligence capable of helping you, it was necessary for you to come forward in time approximately 1.3 million years.”

“Million...” Greg just about fell off the couch.

“Before you ask, I cannot tell you anything about this world, or the fate of humanity. I will say that you both have achievements yet to make, particularly you, Doctor.”

“But...” Greg started, but the voice abruptly cut him off.

“I am starting the process now. You may experience observer-based side effects for a short period, but it will pass.” The blue light was getting hazy; in fact, everything was graying out, from Bill's perspective. In a few moments, subjectively, he was awoken by DaVinci the cat in the usual way, with the feline sitting on the human's head. It was the morning of the previous day, and there was more than enough time to make things right.

The next evening, instead of fleeing Mongol warriors, Greg stopped by Bill's apartment.

“Hey, I've got a couch like this in my office waiting area,” Greg said, as Bill brought him a beer.

“Yeah, it seems to be a leftover. It's too big for me to move it out; believe me, I've tried. So I guess I'll have to get used to it.” Bill turned on the TV, muting the sound.

“I don't remember that fish tank being there.”

“No, that's new. It's the least I could do to say thanks.” Bill grinned at the small trout swimming in the large tank. With no predators, no fishermen, and no competition for food, he hoped the trout would enjoy a long, content life. As far as trout go, at least.

“But how did...”

“Wait, hold on a second.” The lottery drawing was coming on, and Bill pulled out a ticket. “I don't know if simply stating that I was buying the winning ticket was enough, so I've got to focus.” As the announcer was giving the warm-up, Bill started chanting his

lottery numbers softly, under his breath. Greg's eyes widened as, one by one, Bill's numbers appeared on the little balls that popped out of the machine. Bill put his ticket back in his pocket, smiling.

"You just won sixty million dollars!" Greg gaped.

"Unless I have to share with someone. Which I am, by the way; I'm cutting you in for half. There's a big chunk of taxes, and they pay it out over the course of years, but still..."

"But how did... Binky, you just..."

"And don't call me Binky."

"But Bill..." Greg paused. "Bill..." His brow furrowed. He raised his chin and said, carefully and distinctly, "Bill." The scientist blinked quickly. "I can't say it. Every time I try..."

Bill grinned even wider, and held up a hand to quiet Greg's babble. "You remember when the voice said something about observer-based side effects lingering for a short time?" He glanced significantly at the fish tank, then patted his pocket.

"You mean..." Realization dawned on Greg's face. It was a wonderful thing to see.

"You want to call your wife? Maybe she wants to come out with us tonight. Better hurry; we don't know how long this will last."

E. Mark Mitchell is a loquacious maximalist. To his mind, there's never a sentiment expressed in 6 words that can't be equally expressed in 60. Therefore, short story writing is difficult, but if boiling a story down to its essentials makes it more powerful, then that's a worthwhile effort. Mr. Mitchell has many unrelated nicknames in use amongst his friends, who are scattered across several countries on several continents. He currently lives in Chicago with his lovely wife and his adorable and brilliant giant mutant daughter.

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