

Brain Drain

I first noticed my diminished capacities when I couldn't figure out all of Niagara Mohawk Company's marketing problems by lunch. I was adroit in covering up my gaff with a wink, a wry smile, and some vague comments about how it would all make more sense later in the day when I could tie in what I said was an unusually difficult problem with the overall solution. My clients nodded acceptance, but I saw some queer looks coming from my staff. Fortunately, I was able to complete the assignment that day, although I didn't have the final solution ready for presentation to the executive committee until 8:00 p.m., instead of my advertised, 5:00 p.m. I told myself I was just working too hard; I just needed a small vacation and everything would be back to normal.

When the same thing happened the following week with the Central Hudson Corporation, I began to worry. Let me explain why this is important. I am one of the original practitioners of a new branch of management consulting called 'Instant Solutions' (in fact, I had the foresight to copyright this term and now "Instant Solutions" is one of the hottest buzz words in management today: much to my economic benefit). For those of you unfamiliar with business in the mid 21st Century, Instant Solutions is a management discipline whereby the practitioner is presented with a problem by a corporation, which he then analyses and proposes specific solutions. This is different from the old style, traditional management consulting in that the whole process takes only one man (or woman) ten hours. Gone are the days when an army of consultants charged

millions of dollars and took months or even years to complete a project (and even then screwed things up half the time). This technique works for marketing, finance, manufacturing, human resources, and every other business discipline. It can be applied to short-term operational problems as well as to longer-term strategic issues. Once the problem is defined, neural data requests are sent out to every affected employee (all are able to respond in twenty seconds), and by lunchtime, I've analyzed the situation and identified all problems. By quitting time (or 5:00 p.m., whichever comes first), I present to the Board or senior management committee the solutions and implementation schedules. And unlike some other charlatans, I'm always right. Instant Solutions requires an exceptionally nimble and disciplined mind, and there are few of us capable of performing it.

Needless to say, I'm in high demand. I had to refund twenty percent of my fees to Niagara Mohawk and Central Hudson as a goodwill gesture for going over my 5:00 guarantee, but what did I care? I've already got more money than I know what to do with, and I knew they'd be back as clients. It was slipping twice in one week that had me bothered. What could have caused it and would it happen again? I had been keeping up with my mental exercises and progressing ahead of schedule on my capacity for complex tasking. I was in good physical shape: weight, lean body mass all good, and I religiously followed my workout routines. I followed my prescribed diet. Could I have a medical problem? I felt good, but you could never be sure what malfunction was lurking in the human body at any given moment. I decided it was time to see my doctor; I was due for a checkup anyway.

Doctor Jim Burns has been a good friend of mine since boyhood when we discovered a mutual love for books and school. Jim went on to be a prominent research medical doctor, and I followed my talents into business. We decided to forego our weekly paddleball game for lunch at ‘Beinlich’s’ – a small north shore bar and grill that was a favorite local hangout for the young business crowd. Beinlich’s looked like something you’d see up in the deep woods next to a lake (although there were no fishing lakes within fifty miles of this place). The sparse interior was all weathered wood and there were stuffed, mounted northern pikes, muskies, and the occasional bass prominently displayed on all four walls. A solo neon sign for Hamm’s beer (pheasant rising out of a marsh) completed the scene. We found a table in the back and a middle-aged waiter with a bored, no-nonsense expression came to take our drink order. I wanted a pint of bitters, but fishing bars don’t go in for fancy stuff, so we both ordered bottles of Rolling Rock. As the waiter shuffled off, Jim pulled a small hand sensor from his pocket and, after a brief calibration, slowly scanned my body, bottom to top. He finished by slowly circling my head and then sat down.

“Done,” he said as he placed the instrument on the table. The exam had taken all of twenty seconds. “We’ll have the results in a minute. Let’s go ahead and order.” He turned and squinted at the chalkboard menu over the bar.

The waiter immediately appeared with our drinks, and we both ordered roast beef sandwiches, heavy on the cheese sauce. The waiter scooted away as the sensor beeped. I could see a slight frown on Jim’s face as he scanned the results. He shook his head.

“These gadgets are getting better all the time. Did you know that I also did a complete

colonoscopy just now, along with everything else? Do you want to see a three-dimensional view of your colon?" He started to pivot the screen.

"Please, Jim." I winced as I turned the screen back in his direction. "I'm going to be eating soon. Just give me the executive summary."

He shrugged. "You're fine. Perfect health. Nothing wrong." He took a long pull on his bottle of beer.

"What about the brain scan portion?"

"Well developed. I don't see any problems there."

I slammed my hand on the table in frustration. "Damnit, Jim. Something has to be wrong. I don't slip twice in one week. I'm losing a mental edge here. I need some help."

He thoughtfully contemplated his sensor before returning it to his shirt pocket.

"Have you made any enemies lately? Anybody threatening you?"

Huh? "No, are you nuts? What's that got to do with my mental health anyway?"

He didn't answer my question but plowed ahead. "Have there been any significant changes to your life within the past six months or so?"

I shook my head. "No, business has been good. My parents are in good health. My new apartment is outstanding."

"New apartment?" Jim sat up, eyeing me.

"Yeah, I had to move when Patty and I split up."

Jim reacted as if he had been hit with a cattle prod. "You and Patty are separated?"

“Yeah,” I sighed, flashing back to our last fight just before the holidays. Patty and I had met three years ago and gotten married in a fever. She was a gorgeous, fiery redhead with an attitude: just the sort of woman I had to tame. The first year of our marriage had been exciting, but then the realities of living with another person began to weigh upon us, and the bickering had started. Fortunately, there were no kids to complicate matters. “She was giving me a lot of crap about not being sensitive to her needs and all that. She kept bugging me to go to a marriage counselor, but I don’t have time for that nonsense. We split about three months ago.”

“So how did she take the breakup?”

“Not good. You know Patty. A lot of yelling and screaming. Threats. She can be quite emotional sometimes.”

Jim nodded his head, deep in thought. “She is quit intense, intimidating even. What kind of threats?”

I detected a sudden interest in the last question. “The usual gibberish. She’s going to take me to the cleaners, ruin me, you know. I’ll have to give her a big settlement, but I can afford it, and I’ve got a good lawyer to handle those things.”

Jim’s next question hit me like a lightning bolt. “Do you think she might try to kill you?”

“What? Are you crazy? She’s emotional and a bit over the edge at times, but she’s not violent. I mean she might fantasize about killing me, but she would never go through with it.” I paused a moment to consider whether I really knew my wife, then dismissed the thought. “The worst she ever did during our spats was to break a few

dishes. Besides, what's this all have to do with my health? The issue I'm worried about is slipping mental performance affecting business, not my personal life."

Jim ignored the question again and leaned forward, earnestly staring at me. "Will, you remember Doctor Corvallis and the Argonne projects, right?"

"Of course I do. I'm a Pioneer Platinum supporter of Argonne. And you were the one who roped me into being a guinea pig for one of their human intelligence research projects." The waiter appeared with our lunch and as he laid out the plates, I quickly spun through the history of the Argonne projects for a clue as to what this had to do with my health and business: old professional habits die hard.

Argonne National Laboratories was a large research facility located west of Chicago that was established by the federal government after World War II to develop nuclear energy as a civilian power resource. The place was run by the University of Chicago under a no-bid contract. About twenty years ago, the government got disgusted over management and security failures at several energy and weapons labs and decided to put the management contracts for several of these facilities, including Argonne, out for bid. And even worse, some politicians started openly circulating the idea of shutting Argonne down permanently. Fusion energy was already well established and what did theoretical physics have to do with the everyday problems of the common man and woman? These events shook up the moribund scientific and business community in Chicago – a considerable amount of economic prestige was at stake here -- and a full court press was made to keep Argonne alive and for the U.of C. to continue administering the contract. Lobbyists were hired and truckloads of money flowed towards Washington and the many interested congressmen and senators. In the end, the Department of Energy

grandly announced that ‘Science comes first’ and the contract was renewed. The University of Chicago, indeed the whole city, breathed a collective sigh of relief.

But the University had to raise its game. The DOE made it clear that ‘sound financial management’ was also a consideration in their evaluative criteria. This was code that was well understood by those of us in the business community to mean that local corporations, foundations, and wealthy individuals would have to help defray the expense of operating the labs. In the end, we all stepped forward – checkbook in hand – and demonstrated to Washington’s satisfaction the University’s ‘sound financial management’. I was one of the first to contribute, hence my Pioneer Platinum member status. I can’t say I have any appreciation for science, but like most businessmen, I support technology because I know it’s the only thing that keeps America economically on top.

The University also had to promise some of the less enlightened politicians that more efforts would be made to support other, more popular, scientific endeavors. The U. of C. also has one of the premier hospital systems in the country, so Argonne funding also went to support medical research. For example, because of the mental requirements of my profession, I agreed to have my head probed by medical doctors and physicists using a bewildering array of non-invasive scanning instruments as part of a larger study. I was told that the goal was to better understand human intelligence, which could lead to improved treatments for learning disabilities as well as old-age degenerative diseases of the brain.

“Okay, Jim.” I leaned forward. “You’ve stumped the band. Does my mental slippage have anything to do with that intelligence study I took part in over at Argonne?”

He frowned again. “Probably not. But just to make sure, I’m going to make some calls. I may want you to see Doctor Corvallis. Stay by your phone.” With that he got up and tossed his napkin on the table. “Gotta run. See ya’ later.”

I sat a moment staring at the large, stuffed musky on the wall, gaping vacantly at me. Doctor Corvallis? He’s not a medical doctor, he’s a physicist.

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Two days later, I was hired by Exelon, the holding company for all of the utility and energy businesses in northern Illinois, to revamp their strategic regulatory strategy. This was a plum assignment for a plum client and I was horrified when I didn’t complete the problem analysis until 4:00 p.m. and the recommendations/implementation roll out schedule until 2:00 p.m. the next day. By contract, Exelon didn’t have to pay for the project if I took more than twenty-four hours to complete it, but they graciously paid me half of my fees. It was the look in their eyes as they got up to leave the final meeting that struck me with terror: those eyes wondered if I was starting to lose it and whether another instant consultant should be called in next time.

The next morning, after a sleepless night, I was on the phone to Jim.

“Doctor Corvallis is a hard man to track down,” Jim said. “In fact, he is pretty much inaccessible. But I reminded him of your status as a supporter and your help with the intelligence projects, so he’ll see you Friday at one o’clock, at his office.”

“Can’t he see me sooner?”

“No. I had to send him some information on you, including the personal business about your wife, so don’t get touchy with him if he brings it up. He said he needed some time to check on some things.”

“What things?”

“He didn’t say. Just be there.”

* * *

Dr. Julian Corvallis’ office looked as if a tornado had struck it. Paper and disk tubes were piled and spread haphazardly across a large wood desk. The desk had seen better days; it had several burn marks and rings from carelessly placed coffee cups. There were two chairs and a worn yellow couch along one wall. I took one of the chairs.

My perception of scientists was that they were generally a frumpy, distracted lot, but Julian was none of that. He was tall and thin, with peppery hair just beginning to thin and eyes that were aware and penetrating. He wore chino slacks and a short sleeved open collar shirt, neat but casual. Corvallis was a couple of years older than me and had risen to be a senior manager in the scientific bureaucracy. But he was a hands-on manager, jumping into the thick of research rather than endlessly attending meetings.

We exchanged pleasantries and talked a bit about how Argonne was adjusting to the new government scrutiny, as well as the occasional meddling from her corporate partners. Finally, we got down to business.

Julian sat casually on the front of his desk and seemed to search for words to start off. “Will, we at Argonne appreciate all you and others like you have done for this institution over the past few years. We will always be in your debt. Also, Jim Burns is a good friend of mine and since we’ve been working with the hospital side, I’ve come to appreciate his intellect and capabilities. So when he asked me to look into your situation, I was glad to oblige.”

“Dr. Corvallis,” I began. “With all due respect, I’m not sure why I’m here talking to you. You’re a physicist and my problem concerns a medical condition.”

He slowly nodded his head as he stared past me, seemingly lost in thought. “Have you ever heard of quantum computers?”

I thought a moment. I’d heard of quantum mechanics and quantum physics, but details escaped me. “Quantum is the science of the very small, isn’t it? Are you referring to very small computers?”

Dr. Corvallis smiled as he shook his head. He rose off the desk and went back around to sit down. He leaned his elbows on his desktop and peered at me. “Well you’re correct to the extent that today’s computers employ quantum mechanical processes. But the repertoire of computations available to all computers is essentially the same. What I mean is that any home computer out there can be programmed to solve any problem the most powerful computer can, as long as you give it more memory, long enough time to solve the problem, and additional hardware to display the results.”

I shrugged. “What’s that got to do with me, Doc?”

“Okay, I won’t bore you with a lot of theory. Classic computers are inherently limited as to what they can do. Quantum computing has no such limitations. To accomplish this requires us to harness nature in a completely different way. To put it in layman terms, quantum computers can solve any endlessly complex task by distributing components of that task to an infinite number of like-computers operating in parallel universes and then sharing the results. That’s why the military no longer uses numeric crypto. Any key, no matter how complex, can be broken using quantum computing.”

He leaned back in his chair and waited for this information to register with me. When I didn't say anything, he went on. "So to your particular problem. When we were forced to share our resources funding medical research, I chaired a committee to determine if there could possibly be any scientific synergies between medical research and the physics projects we had underway." He rose from his chair and began pacing, gesturing animatedly. "Low and behold, we came across a bombshell." He turned and looked directly at me. "And it came as part of the project you assisted on."

"The intelligence project? I thought that was for finding treatments for degenerative brain diseases and learning disabilities."

"It was, and still is. But we still kept coming back to the same basic question: what determines human intelligence? Why are some people smarter than others? Why do some people have certain talents that others don't? For that matter, why are humans smarter than monkeys or whales? It couldn't be satisfactorily explained by physical, chemical, or biological factors. And theology, well all I can say is scientists look for more concrete evidence."

Now he had my interest. "So what did you discover?"

"We've made some startling discoveries in quantum computing and the existence of parallel universes. This led to our discovery that the human brain has been conditioned over the centuries to adapt to nature such that it acts like a quantum computer. Our brains are in contact with and sharing analysis tasks with our counterparts in parallel universes and sharing the results on a real time basis. Without this, humans would be no smarter than dogs."

I've heard of some strange and crazy things, but this took the cake. "Is this just theory, Doc, or do you have some direct evidence?"

He didn't blink. "We've been communicating with some of our counterparts in other universes and have recently developed a means of physically traveling between parallel worlds. This research is highly classified, and I can't give you any more details. I'm only telling you this as a favor to Dr. Burns and because of your valuable support when we needed it."

He crossed in front of me and sat back on the top of his desk, staring at me hard. "Human intelligence as a species and on an individual basis is determined by the strength of the quantum connections between our brains and those of our counterparts in other universes. We did a full profile of all of the subjects in the study you participated in and found that the most intelligent and talented, all had counterparts in many parallel worlds who were similar, meaning they followed similar life paths. In other words, the more copies of Person A there are in other worlds, the more computing power, or intelligence, all versions of Person A will have. Also, the closer the copy of Person A is, the stronger the quantum connection, hence the more intelligence all versions have. So in your case, there are many versions of you who have basically led the same life as you, including marrying counterparts of your wife, and that accounts for your highly developed mental acuity."

"This is just too incredible. Actually, it's impossible."

Corvallis chewed his lip with impatience. "Will, not too long ago, the leading scientists of the day proclaimed that manned flight was impossible. Now, I've spent over twenty years as a theoretical physicist, and I'll admit that I still don't completely

understand quantum mechanics, but in my old age I've come to believe one thing: that there is nothing too fantastic or impossible that it can't happen or be true."

I held up my hands in surrender. "Okay, I believe you. So what does all of this mean?"

"Jim had the right idea when he asked you whether your wife had threatened any violence against you."

"No. Patty is emotional, but she would never harm me."

"I'm sure you're right. But unfortunately, there are other versions of Patty who are not so civilized."

"What? You mean other Pattys from other dimensions are going to come here and kill me?"

Corvallis shook his head in frustration. "No, no. Remember I said you owe your mental acuity to the fact that there are many parallel versions of you that are similar. Now we've done some investigating and it seems that many of your alter egos have married a version of Patty and that they are now separated. But some of these versions of Patty are more violent than your version. Some of your alter egos have been murdered by their wives: by their Pattys."

My mind raced with the implications. "So this is affecting my mind? This is what's causing my slippage?"

"Every time a version of someone dies, for whatever reason, a link in the quantum chain is broken and mental capacity decreases. In your case, so far, versions of you that have been murdered by their Pattys have occurred in considerably dissimilar worlds, so the harm isn't as great. But there is a cascading effect. Your Patty may not hurt you, but

if she is emotional, if she even fantasizes about doing you harm, the effect will translate to the brains of her parallel selves and the results can be disastrous to many of your parallel selves. So I expect that over time, more versions of you will be removed from the quantum chain – how many depends in part on how acrimonious your own divorce proceeds -- with a corresponding decrease in your intelligence and abilities.”

My heart sank. “What do we do?”

He peered at me nonplussed. “We have to stop other versions of you from being killed.”

“How do we do that?”

“I mentioned that we recently developed a means of physically transporting individuals to parallel worlds. You would have to go and stop Patty from eliminating you, or the parallel you I should say.”

I put my hands over my eyes and tried to sort this out. “How do I go to an infinite number of parallel worlds to do this?”

Corvallis got up and started pacing again. “Just one world. We’ve discovered in a universe very similar to our own, a Patty that has already made plans to murder that parallel you. If you can prevent that, then the cascading effect in Patty’s quantum connection should stop the killing in most other parallel worlds. Our quantum connection to this world is very strong. We can safely insert you there for about an hour. You have an appointment to have lunch with her at The Billy Goat Tavern on Madison.”

“So I’m supposed to convince her not to do away with the other me in just an hour?”

“No, even if you could do that, the resentment of how your relationship turned out would still be there, and the cascading effect would still result in other versions of you being eliminated. No, you have to break this particular quantum connection.” He stopped his pacing and looked at me narrowly. “You have to kill her.”

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My first impression was that I had been had by Dr. Corvallis. I was standing on Wacker Drive in downtown Chicago. To the south of me rose the Sears Tower and marking out from there were other notable landmarks: Marina Towers, The John Hancock Building, The Opera House, and The Chicago-Northwest Station. The streets were clogged with traffic, pedestrians hurrying along the sidewalk, not stopping to pay attention to the panhandlers that were ubiquitous this time of day. One of them caught my eye and ambled over. “I’m a gulf war veteran and I have a job as a security guard. Someone stole my wallet and I just need some change to ride the ‘L’ back home. Can you help me out?”

Yep, even the come-ons from the beggars were the same. Corvallis must have just been scamming me with that parallel worlds nonsense. This was the Chicago I knew. I reached into my pocket and flipped the bum a quarter. He caught my offering and stopped: his eyes wide as he examined the coin.

Oh, oh. Some street people can turn psycho if they feel they’ve been offended. Maybe I should have given him a buck. I got ready to run. But the man smiled and spread his arms. “Thank you sir. Thank you for your wonderful generosity. God bless you, sir and have a nice day.” He turned and hurried off, clutching the quarter to his chest.

That was weird, but I didn't have time to ponder it. I had decided to play out Corvallis' charade and blast him later for his sick sense of humor. He said that the lunch date with the parallel Patty was at the Billy Goat Tavern on Madison. Now, the Billy Goat has always been something of a Chicago landmark, but it was located on lower North Michigan Avenue, not Madison, and it was a cheap, bare-bones, hamburger joint: part of its charm, but a place that Patty wouldn't be caught dead in.

I looked at my watch and realized I was running late. I stepped off the curb and raised my arm for a cab. Immediately, one of the boxy, yellow Checkers swerved across three lanes of traffic and pulled up along side. "Billy Goat Tavern," I said as I climbed in the back, taking a moment to notice the roofline of the cab.

"Yes, sir," responded a swarthy man in an eastern European accent. He yanked down the handle on the fare box and darted back out into traffic.

"Say," I said leaning forward. "I noticed your taxi sign on the roof. Is T-A-X-X-I a European spelling or something?"

"Huh?" He glanced back with confusion on his face.

"Never mind." I sat back and shifted my focus to the street scenery flashing by. But then I remembered something from my Navy days; from traveling in out-of-the-way places overseas: 'TAXI' was one of those international words, like 'STOP'. It was spelled the same way in all countries.

My thoughts were interrupted by the cab swerving to the right and stopping by the curb. "That'll be nine, pal."

I blinked in confusion. We were on Lasalle Street, not Madison. I turned and looked out the side door. Yes, there was the Inland Steel Building. And kitty corner to

that was the LaSalle Bank Building, in all its art-deco glory. I turned back to the cabbie. “I hate to tell you this, but we’re on Lasalle. Madison runs east-west.” I made crossing motions with my hands. “Lasalle is a north-south street.”

The cabbie rolled his eyes in the patient manner of someone describing arithmetic to a slow child. “Billy Goat Tavern, right there,” he motioned with his head.

Sure enough, the sign on the ground level said “Billy Goat”, but I’d missed it because of the ornate design. This wasn’t the crude hand painted sign I knew from the place down on North Michigan, but was a sculpted wood sign, done in raised lettering. The goat was still featured, but a British hunting scene surrounded it: men in red jackets on horses. There were even reliefs of trees and water. I started to get out when the cabbie barked, “That’s nine, sir.”

I looked at him in disbelief. “Nine dollars for a one mile ride?”

“Very funny, pal. It’s nine cents.”

“Nine cents?”

He mistook my look of surprise. “The city Commission raised the fares two weeks ago.”

As with the panhandler earlier, I took a quarter out of my pocket and tossed it to him. “Keep the change.”

His face lit up and he smiled appreciably. “Thanks, Pal. Have a nice day.” He slammed the door and raced off.

As I approached the entrance to the Billy Goat, I could make out details of the interior. This wasn’t at all like the greasy spoon I was familiar with. This restaurant had deep, red burnished wood tables and chairs with white tablecloths covering the center,

laid out crosswise. Waiters in black tuxedos flitted among the diners. Along the back wall was a massive ornate blue tile bar, with a mirrored back bar featuring ultra-premier vodkas and single malt scotches: many I'd never seen before. I guess the Billy Goat decided to open a second location, one considerably more upscale, but I hadn't heard anything like that. In fact, I thought I remembered a Starbucks in this location.

"May I help you, sir?" A tall, wiry man with thinning slicked back hair smiled unctuously at me from behind a stand up desk. I stared for a second at his tuxedo. The lapels were crossed in a convoluted fashion I had never seen before, and his bow tie was ridiculously small. His uniform looked more appropriate in a circus.

I resisted laughing and said, "Yes, reservation for McClain."

The Matre-D made a show of checking his book and nodded. "Oh yes, reservation for two. Your lovely wife and her friend just arrived. I'll show you to the table."

Her friend? As I was led across the noisy room, I was forced to concede that perhaps Corvallis had been straight with me, and I was indeed in a parallel version of the Chicago I knew. The subtle differences were piling up too high. And as I approached the table, I was seized with a sense of panic. Up until now, I had convinced myself that this was all part of a big joke, a grand charade. Jim Burns had put Corvallis up to conning me into this whole scheme, and afterwards we would all have a big laugh at this over drinks back at Beinlich's. But now I was faced with actually executing the plan. And my thoughts flashed back to Corvallis' office and my reaction to this crazy plan.

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“Kill her? Kill Patty? Are you out of your mind?” I stood up so fast, I knocked my chair over. I took the time to put it back in place while I overcame my shock. “Are you serious?”

In response, Corvallis walked around to the back of his desk, opened a drawer and pulled out a small, black stick. He placed it carefully on the desktop. “You’re not killing anyone in this world, you’re killing someone in a parallel world. You’ll only be there for one hour.” He studied the confusion in my face. “I can’t make this decision for you, but I can’t think of any other suggestion. If this particular Patty murders your alter ego, then the ripple effect will run in all directions and more Patty’s will act on their emotions. The more versions of you that are immolated -- the more breaks in your quantum chain -- the more intellectual capacity you’ll lose. Our minds are all completely interrelated to our counterparts: every thought, every action affects all of the others.” He sat down and leaned back in his chair, the creaking from the worn hinges shrieked around the room. “Look at it this way. You’ll actually be saving many lives: the lives of your counterparts. And by taking out this strong link in Patty’s quantum chain, you’ll reduce her emotional and intellectual level, which should make her more compliant in any kind of divorce negotiations. You have a lot of personal assets at stake here too.”

“Couldn’t I just go and talk her out of it, or maybe buy her off, or let her know I’m aware of the plot and she’ll get caught? Wouldn’t that work?”

Corvallis shrugged. “Maybe. You tell me. You know Patty better than I do.”

I gulped involuntarily. When Patty had her mind made up, it was almost impossible to talk her out of anything. We’d had many fights over her stubbornness.

And if this other Patty was even more emotional, even more stubborn... “What if I get caught?”

Corvallis nodded at the stick on the desk. “That is a sophisticated pellet gun. It has four charges in it. You operate it like a ballpoint pen. It fires a silenced charge that can easily penetrate several layers of clothing and human skin. The charge is a microscopic nano-tech poison that leaves an entry wound the size of a tick bite. She won’t feel a thing. This is not a poison in the traditional sense of the word: it’s not a chemical substance, but rather an army of tiny computers that are programmed to travel through the bloodstream to key parts of the body. They will remain dormant for forty-eight hours and then create obstructions in critical blood vessels to the brain and heart. She’ll pass due to stroke and heart attack. It’ll be quick, there won’t be much pain.”

“Won’t they be able to determine what killed her in an autopsy?”

“The nano-poison is programmed to disperse throughout her bloodstream once their work is done. It would be almost impossible to detect them in that state, presuming any pathologist would be looking for them. It will appear as death by natural causes.”

Corvallis leaned forward and held my eyes. “You’ll be back here long before the poison takes affect, and your alter-ego is out of town for the whole week, so he is clear from any possible suspicion.”

I was still in a daze, looking for any other solution. I couldn’t think of any. “Well, I’m not actually killing any real person, I mean, no one in our world is getting harmed.”

Corvallis' eyes went hard. "Not someone from this world, no. But we're not talking about imaginary beings; these are not ghosts or ephemeral spirits. These are real flesh-and-blood people. They just happen to be in a different universe than ours."

A long moment of silence passed. I finally picked up the pellet stick and carefully examined it. "So, how should I do this?"

He took the pen back from me. "We'll load this right before we send you over. I suggest that you use the table for cover and fire the pellet into her leg. It will give the nano-poison the best position for orienting themselves." He casually put the pen into his shirt pocket.

I continued strumming my fingers on the table, still searching for an alternate plan. "So how do you guys send people over to different dimensions?"

"Parallel worlds, actually. Higher dimensions are something else, although we've had some exciting breakthroughs in..." He stopped and shook his head. "Anyways, to answer your question, to get you to where you're going, we have to shrink you down to the point where the laws of quantum physics take over from Newton. To do that we..." He stopped again and looked at me strangely. "Well, you don't want to know."

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My mind snapped back to the present.

She stared up at me and the emotions of our last three years together came flooding back. She was still strikingly beautiful: green eyes flared against a milky complexion and fire-red hair. Her body was long and thin, surrounded by a mysterious air and a hot flash of lust passed through me. She was just like my Patty, except for one

thing. Her eyes blazed with a contempt and hatred that froze me into place. In that instant, I had no doubt that she would be capable of murder.

“Hello, Will.” She smiled cruelly as she nodded to the empty chair. “You don’t mind if Jerry joins us do you?” Her tone made it clear that she didn’t care if I minded or not.

So Jerry Roberts was her divorce lawyer in this world too. We exchanged formal greetings, while a waiter swooped in with two large salad bowls and a single menu. He grandly flashed the menu in front of me.

“You were late so we decided to order.” There was no apology in her voice.

I glanced at the menu, ordered the first thing I saw, and handed it back the waiter. I wasn’t going to be staying long, and I certainly had no appetite.

Patty poked at her chicken salad, then looked at me doubtfully. “I thought you were out of town for the week. And did you get a haircut? You look different.”

“I finished up early. I got a haircut at O’Hare while I was waiting for a cab.”

There was a subtle start of suspicion on Jerry’s face, but it quickly passed. I silently reminded myself that although this world was almost exactly like my own, there were some differences. Maybe there were no barbers at this version of O’Hare, maybe they didn’t call them cabs in this world, and maybe the main airport in this Chicago wasn’t even named O’Hare. I’d have to be careful; the less I talked, the better. I slowly palmed the pellet stick and fingered the trigger. I planned to feign dropping my napkin and as I reached down to retrieve it, I would accidentally kick her calf at the instant I fired the pellet into her leg. Dr. Corvallis said she wouldn’t feel the impact, but I decided a distraction would be good insurance.

But I hesitated. My stomach was tied up in nerves and I began to sweat. I continued massaging the stick in my hand and tried to mentally force myself into action. I could hear Jerry's voice droning on, but his words just flew past me without any meaning. The air became thick and I willed myself to slow my breathing, not to hyperventilate. I focused on one of the bottles along the back bar in front of me and tried regaining my resolve. I have always been a decisive man: never afraid to take needed action in my own best interests. If I didn't act now, I'd be condemning myself and countless other Will McClains to death or, even worse, a life of mediocrity. I just had to concentrate and focus. One...two...

“Will, are you Okay? You look ill.”

Patty's voice broke my train of thought. I blinked at her in surprise. Gone was the look of loathing, replaced with one of genuine concern. And in that face I saw compassion and love, perhaps just for a fleeting moment, perhaps to be smothered again with resentment and hate, but there were the complex emotions of a real human being. I was suddenly struck with a great resolve, and I felt at peace with myself. There was one other way and although it might ultimately lead to my destruction, I knew it was the only path I could take. I slowly withdrew the poison stick back into my sleeve and leaned toward her. “Patty, I know you detest me and I don't blame you. If you want to continue with the divorce, I won't fight it, and I'll give you anything you want. But there will be some changes with me, starting with...”

* * *

“So that's it. I know that words by themselves are meaningless. But I intend to change, whether we reconcile or not.” I was back in my Chicago, where Lasalle Street

ran north-south, Madison ran east-west, and Taxi was spelled with one X. We were now at the Ambria Restaurant on Madison, more Patty's style.

Patty's eyes, my Patty's eyes, stared back at me looking for sincerity. I met her gaze directly and after a wordless moment, I saw her face soften. I knew I had a long way to go with her, but there was a chance.

* * *

Dr. Corvallis was greatly irritated at having gone through all the trouble of finding my problem and sending me off to a parallel world, only for me to get cold feet and fail to finish the job. I calmed him a bit by pledging a substantial gift to the Argonne Projects and using my business influence and contacts to create a new science and technology advocacy board within the Chicago Business Bureau. "So, you've had an epiphany," he said. "You're a changed man now?"

No, Doctor," I smiled shaking my head. "I'm still the same egotistical, self-centered, success driven bastard I've always been. I don't believe that anybody can change who he basically is. But I found out that I'm not a murderer. So I have to take a different and, for me, a more difficult path. You told me that our minds are quantum linked with an infinite number of our counterparts in parallel worlds and that anything that affects one, affects all of the others. I just realized that to save myself, I had to change Patty's feelings and attitude towards me. From now on, I have to spend less time at work and more time with her. I have to stop thinking about having a fifty-fifty relationship – about getting as much from her as I give – and just get used to the idea that I will give one hundred percent to her and not expect anything in return. I will have to care about everything she cares about. I will have to support her always and never

criticize. If she complains to me, if she makes mean or nasty comments, I must bite my tongue and not respond in kind. I'll have to go out of my way to always show her love, affection, and respect. I'll have to buy her whatever she...well, you get the idea. By changing Patty's feelings towards me, I hope the ripple affect throughout all of the other Pattys in all of the other universes will soften to the point that all the other Will McClains are spared."

Corvallis nodded his head in agreement. "And your changes will also ripple throughout the other Will McClains, which should improve the situation. You're right. It just might work."

"This is going to be the hardest thing I've ever done in my entire life. I've got a lot of work ahead of me. But I have to do this for my own health."

"And who knows," Corvallis added. "You might end up being a happier man as a result."

I stopped and considered that strange thought. "You think so? Now, that would be a bonus."

I don't have too much to say about this story other than I've always found the idea of parallel worlds and quantum computing fascinating and wanted to write a tale that incorporated these theoretical, scientific elements. If you want to learn more, there are many books on these topics. Email me if you are interested.

But the sociological theme of this story is: could you kill someone in cold blood if they brought some potential small harm to you? I'm not talking about threatening your

family or life, but maybe just income and status? And what if you knew that you could get away with it; would that change your calculation?