

Unspent Time

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It's a little known fact that NASA chooses her scientists based not only on their credentials and technical aptitude, but also on their propensity for dumb luck.

When you need someone to operate a billion dollar piece of equipment, you don't want that guy who, for no reason at all, keeps getting his coat caught on door handles.

Sunday Brunch

Sunday brunch; the table overflowing with food and drink, the fine china and silverware laid out, the clock ticking away painfully slow minutes before father finally speaks. “Well son,” he says, “isn’t it about time you got yourself a job?”

John looks up from his plate. “Dad,” he says, “I *have* a job.”

Father nods thoughtfully, chewing his medium rare steak. “I guess it’s about time you moved out then. Found a place of your own. Planted some roots.”

John is baffled. “But dad, I moved out five years ago. In fact, this is the first time I’ve been back.” He looks over at mother, who shrugs and says, “You know dear, your brother has his own business. He set up an accountancy firm.”

John rolls his eyes. “That’s *me*, mom. *I* set up an accountancy firm. John Williams and Associates.”

“That’s good to hear,” father says. “Always said you should run your own business. You have a keen business sense. You always had.”

“I just wish he’d find himself a girlfriend,” mother complains.

“What do you mean?” John smiles apologetically at Annabel. “I have a girlfriend, mother, she’s sitting next to you. She gave you flowers at the door, remember?” He points at the vase. “You put them in water.”

Mother waves it away with a warm smile. “Sorry dear, I meant a *proper* girlfriend.” She squeezes Annabel’s hand. “You know what I mean, don’t you dear?”

Annabel opens her mouth, but can’t think of anything to say.

“Didn’t you used to have dark hair,” father says suddenly, “and not quite so many arms?” He looks John over carefully. “Yes, yes,” he says, “you definitely look different. Did you get shorter?”

“That’s enough!” John gets up. He gestures at Annabel to do the same. “If you cannot behave like civilized human beings, then we’re going! I can’t believe you’d treat Annabel and myself this way. It’s appalling!”

Father throws down his napkin and stands as well. “Serves you right, young man,” he says. “Serves you right for not going home for five years and then ending up in the wrong house!”

About Sunday Brunch

People often ask me where I get my ideas from. Actually, they don’t, but I imagine that if I ever met some people, and they’d read my work and liked it, then that’s something they might ask.

It seems a fair assumption.

But whether I’m asked this question or not, the answer is: I mostly don’t know.

Some ideas are just in my head and feel like they’ve been there forever. In fact, using them almost feels like stealing from a younger me. A *me* who didn’t need to go digging into his memory for ideas.

Other ideas pop up when I’m doing something unrelated. About a hundred useless thoughts run through my mind every minute and mostly this is a nuisance. But, every once in a while, one of these thoughts turns out to be a little gem: a seed for a story or a nice plot twist. In the

long run, that makes it worth it I suppose, even if it often means I can't sleep because of all the noise in my head.

A third type of idea comes in a dream. I used to keep a pen and pad by the bed to capture these ideas, write them down before I could convince myself that this time, *this time*, I really would remember. I wouldn't fall back asleep and forget them forever. After that, invariably, I'd fall asleep and forget them forever.

So I started writing these dream ideas down – all the brilliant things I came up with while semi-unconscious – only to realize in the cold light of day that each and every one of them was utter crap. Not just normal crap. Utter crap!

Except for this one time, when I woke up from a dream that was so vivid that I could remember the entire dialog. I still had my pen and pad by my bed and I quickly took it all down. Thinking back, I realize that dream was so clear, I probably wouldn't have forgotten it anyway.

The Sunday Brunch story was written around that dialog. Apart from a little editing down the line, the dialog remains as it was when I first heard it in my dream.

On some level it doesn't really feel as if this is *my* story, I don't feel like I was the one who made it up. But it is one of my favorite stories anyway, and until someone can explain how it ended up in my head, I'm proud to keep my name on it.

Carbon Copies

The carbon copies came out of nowhere and turned everything we thought we knew about reality upside down. Their existence invalidated some of the most basic laws we'd ascribed to nature, and if even one of those laws turned out to be false, how could we continue to believe in the others?

For the carbon copies themselves life wasn't any easier. They carried no information on their origins and couldn't answer any of our questions. And it soon became apparent that not everybody was going to welcome them with open arms.

My own experiences with the carbon copies began on the day of their arrival, on that fateful August morning.

Muted sunlight filtered through a blanket of fog as Maud snored quietly at my side. I gave her a hug and went to the bathroom. My reflection only bothered me a little that day as I didn't find any new gray hairs or evidence of my hairline receding further. I splashed some water on my face and made my way to the kitchen, my head still groggy from the party the night before. Maud was already there, dividing a large omelet over two paper plates.

For a moment I wondered how she'd managed that. How she'd slipped past me unnoticed and fried two eggs to a crisp in the time it took me to check my face, but my train of thought was derailed by the TV. It welcomed me with tales of doom and destruction. Once again CO₂ emissions were dangerously high, threatening to suffocate our commuters. More and more scientists joined the bandwagon saying that yes, we were rapidly approaching the point of no return. And a new report on fossil fuel reserves stated that even our most pessimistic estimations had still been childishly optimistic.

I turned the TV off and sat down to vanquish my eggs, all the while trying to convince myself it couldn't be that bad. The reports had probably been overstated for dramatic effect. Somehow, I was sure, the bad news didn't apply to me. I certainly didn't want to consider that if the pollution didn't kill us, it was sure to kill our – as of yet – unborn children.

Maud joined me at the table. She smiled cheerfully. "Slept like a baby," she said. "Can't remember when I last slept so well."

I mumbled something to the effect that I'd seen better mornings.

"Somebody drank too much beer last night," Maud teased. She started on her eggs while humming an eerily unfamiliar tune.

I was about to ask her where she'd heard that song when my wife came down the stairs and joined us at the table. Her eyes were puffy, all but closed, and she muttered something about not having slept a wink.

Maud – the first Maud, the one who'd fried the eggs – stared at me, her mouth ajar, her breath held. It was the same look I must have been giving her. Our shocked stares moved to the copy of Maud now sitting at the end of our table, waiting, presumably, for her share of the omelet.

"What's going on?" Maud1 asked.

"I have no idea," I said.

"Who the hell is *she*?" Maud2 demanded, her puffy eyes wide open now, her plate still empty.

A tense silence followed.

Somewhere in the distance a siren wailed.

"Well, *I* certainly had nothing to do with this," I said. "Stop giving me those looks!"

They were looking at me as if I had somehow duplicated Maud when she wasn't looking. Ludicrous!

"I am just as stunned as you are." I looked at Maud2, wondering where she'd come from.

"You think *I* did this?" Maud2 rolled her eyes. "I just came down to the kitchen, that's all!"

Maud1 shook her head. “I can’t believe what I’m seeing. This can’t be happening. This just can’t be happening!”

When we’d calmed down – as calm as we were going to get, given the circumstances – we tried to work out a timeline.

“I got up at five to eight,” Maud1 said. “I gave you a nudge, but you were fast asleep.”

I must have been, I had no recollection of that.

“I washed my face, came down to the kitchen, and started making breakfast. And I’m sure,” she returned Maud2’s incredulous look, “*I am sure* that when I left the bedroom, my side of the bed was empty!”

Maud2 shook her head. “That’s impossible,” she said. She looked at me, “You got up at eight, you gave me a hug, remember? I heard you go to the bathroom. I turned over one more time and got up a few minutes later.”

It wasn’t an isolated incident.

Over the course of the morning reports poured in from all over the country. People had been duplicated everywhere. Scientists, cooks, and salesmen alike suddenly ran into twins they never knew they had.

By early afternoon the first reports arrived from other countries and continents, and by evening the count was up to about three quarters of a billion Carbon Copies, worldwide.

Later this figure would be amended to one billion. One billion Carbon Copies had appeared scattered over the globe at exactly 8 a.m. CET.

Maud was the only person on Maple Street to be duplicated.

An elderly couple over on Oak now had two sons (before they’d had only one), and there were rumors that a college professor, a few blocks from Maple, shared a one-bedroom apartment with himself. Harvey, my high-school buddy, who lived on Pine, was the only other guy I knew who found himself living with two wives. He came over

for a BBQ the following Sunday and brought the lovely missuses.

He was giving me winks and nods.

He was giving me energetic hand signals.

He was giving me lines like: *'quite a business we have here, don't we?'*

I asked what was wrong with him.

"Don't you find," he said, "that there are so many ways two wives can be useful to you?" He took a swig of his beer.

I shrugged. Puffy faces came to mind. Stereophonic nagging sessions. I wasn't so sure. "What do you mean?" I asked. "They can get twice as much house work done? Talk to each other about their feelings without involving me, that sort of thing?"

Harvey almost spewed his beer. "No man!" He swallowed painfully. "That's not what I meant and you know it!" He gestured in what I assumed was the direction of the bedroom. "I was thinking more along the lines of certain... leisure activities."

"Ah," I said. "I see."

Harvey smiled. "Now you've got it. Don't tell me you haven't thought of riding the beast with the three backs?"

To be honest, I hadn't. I'd been too busy walking on eggshells. The house seemed crowded, small. Everybody was constantly on edge. Plus, there were now twice as many Mauds to get into an argument with. I was playing it safe. Very safe. "Sure," I lied, winking and nodding for Harvey's sake. "You know me, riding the beast whenever I can." I took a swig of my beer.

"Good boy."

Laura and Maud and Maud and Laura giggled at us from the veranda. They looked as if they were happy and generally up to no good.

"I've been eating a lot of protein," Harvey said.

Later that week I dropped some hints around bedtime but neither Maud1 nor Maud2 seemed very keen to understand

what I was getting at. Moreover, they tended to get headaches alternately.

They'd solved the ambiguity surrounding the sleeping arrangements by taking turns on the couch. For a while they tried to get me into the rotation, but I told them I was sleeping on my side of the bed; whatever they decided to do with the rest of it, was up to them.

The government released a statement saying that the Carbon Copies were nothing short of perfect biological duplicates. Actual flesh and blood, bone and gristle. Identical in every way to their originals, right down to the strands of DNA swimming around in their carbon copy cells. In fact, they were indistinguishable from the originals – which was another way of saying that there was no way to determine which of a duplicated pair was the original and which the Carbon Copy.

It was also another way of saying that there was no real basis for the discrimination that was beginning to take place.

Except that there really was, observed several groups. The environment is stressed out already, they said, it can't handle the extra people. The Carbon Copies have no right to be here, they shorten everyone's life expectancy.

Put them on ice, said the science fiction buffs.

Destroy them, said spokesmen of various religions. They cannot possibly have souls.

And while you're at it, said the neo-totalitarians, why not solve all our problems? Why not bring the world's population all the way down to acceptable levels? One clean sweep, one single blotch on history, and we can all live happily ever after. Feel guilty about it afterwards if you need to, but first, let's survive.

But nothing was done. And nothing would continue to be done until a politically correct solution was found, stated the world's leaders.

"I thought *I* was making dinner," said Maud².

She was wearing our kiss-the-cook apron, holding an empty salad bowl, looking annoyed. At least, I think it was Maud2, by now the girls had cycled through most of Maud's clothing and the only reference point I had was that Maud2 always seemed slightly more annoyed than Maud1.

"You cooked two days in a row," Maud1 observed, giving me a little wink. "And our hubby cooked the day before that, so I figured it was my turn." She stood by the stove, heating the water, wearing our chefs-are-hotter apron. She smiled encouragingly.

"That was leftovers," Maud2 said. "I didn't cook two days in a row, I just heated up leftovers. I thought it'd save time."

Maud1 shrugged. "I've started now, why don't you cook tomorrow?"

Maud2 wasn't happy, but she let it go. She hung up her apron and rummaged through the cupboard. "I'll be in the living room," she said, after she'd located the long spindly vacuum cleaner attachment. "Maybe I can be useful there." She disappeared, taking the long spindly vacuum cleaner attachment with her.

I've always wondered what that attachment was for, but I didn't get a chance to find out because Maud1 ordered me to open some cans and peel the potatoes.

For all their problems, the Mauds didn't seem to notice how alike they were. The resemblance wasn't merely physical, it ran much deeper. They tended to say and do things the same way, often at exactly the same time (which, when I thought about it, was probably part of the problem).

I'd hoped they'd learn to get along, to work and live together as Harvey's Lauras had done, but it wasn't in the cards. It took Maud2 less than a month to set the ultimatum.

"Decide!" she ordered me.

I was sitting at the veranda table, drinking a Coke and going over the utility bills. Heat and water had gone up,

but nowhere near as enthusiastically as the phone bill, which seemed to be heading for a low orbit.

“Decide what?” I looked at Maud1 and Maud2 in turn.

Maud2 put her hands on her hips. “Decide who goes and who stays,” she said. “This can’t go on any longer, there are too many people getting in my way and wearing my favorite outfits.” She shot a look at Maud1. “One of us has to move out and we can’t come to an agreement.”

I scratched my head. She was right, of course. There were too many people claiming the bathroom and getting ownership of the remote had almost become more trouble than it was worth. But I wasn’t ready to give up just yet. No sir. Surely, with a little professional help, the Mauds could be made to see eye to eye. And then we could live in peace without anybody moving out and having their feelings hurt – and, maybe, just maybe, I could finally get me some of Harvey’s winks and perhaps even a nod or two at Christmas.

“Why don’t we try this,” I said, taking a pamphlet from under a stack of bills. I’d been keeping it for just such an occasion. “It’s a support group. They help Carbon Copies deal with all manner of problems. I think it would be a wonderful idea to have a look, don’t you agree?”

Maud1 didn’t seem very enthusiastic, Maud2 even less so.

“Maybe that’s something for her,” they said in unison, pointing at each other, “but not for me. I’m the original, after all.”

Which was at least half right.

I sighed.

“Decide who gets to stay!” This time it was Maud1, hands on hips, looking sufficiently annoyed. “Bite the bullet and choose!”

I had no choice. It was time for the Mauds to go their separate ways. I pointed at Maud1.

“What?” exclaimed Maud2. “I can’t believe you picked her! Leave it to you to pick the Carbon Copy!” She fumed at Maud1 for a moment, then ran upstairs. I heard her pull the suitcase from the attic and slam our bedroom door.

“Finally,” sighed Maud1, dropping into a chair and rubbing her eyes. “I’ve been waiting for her to bugger off since she appeared at breakfast a month ago. Those duplicates may sound like a good idea, but boy, aren’t they a hassle?” She smiled at me. “Just think,” she said, “only a few more minutes and she’ll be out of our hair for good. It’ll just be the two of us again.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Worth giving up a few outfits for.”

I was still somewhat stunned. What I had done had felt awful, like getting rid of half my wife. But as Maud1 gazed into my eyes, smiling the way she did, I decided it had to be the right thing to do. I still had some questions though.

“Where will she live? How will she support herself?”

Maud waved it away. “We went apartment hunting earlier today,” she said, “found her a nice place a few blocks from here. It’s a new building. A few other duplicates live there already. We met one of them when we were checking it out, a handsome college professor. And we can loan her some money till she gets a job. She’ll be fine.”

“Great,” I said, unable to muster the appropriate tone. “So, you’ve really been planning this...”

“You know me,” Maud said, “always thinking ahead. And it’s good we’re doing this now; apartment prices are going to soar if you ask me, as soon as the other duplicated pairs discover they’re not all that easy to live with.”

... continued in “Unspent Time”