

Let's do something with this

by Stephen Stark

Robert spent a lot of time thinking about and worrying over a lot of things that rarely seemed very high on Ann's list of priorities. The impermanence of events. The color and weight of words. The odd quality of spoken language as an abstract representation of reality. And the even odder quality of the written word as an abstract representation of the spoken word. Therefore twice removed from 'reality' except an integral part of it. And concomitant power of both to evoke time and place and emotion. The capacity of language, language shaped into narrative, to remove you from a given reality and transport you to another.

It had felt, right before he got the paperwork, that he was coming very close either to finishing *The Sprawling Novel* or giving up on it. He wasn't even sure now what draft he was in, having thrown out at least three and started again from scratch. But this one—this one was the one. The one that would work or the one that he would shelve. And the idea of shelving it terrified him

Duke had told him for as long as he could remember, Your time will come. And he, Robert, remembered when the day that the paperback rights to *The _____* were supposed to be auctioned. No one bid. Not even a dime. The phone never rang. (That was the twilight--or past the twilight--of hardcovers being auctioned. Although it could have, his hardcover publisher never brought out *The _____* in paper.)

He and Ann had been married by then for how long? Six months?

The next day—the day after the non-sale—he had gone fishing with Duke, and as they sat on the dock and silently fished together, Duke had said it again. Your day will come, Robert. No life is built overnight.

Robert could see that this was true. Robert could see that at the lake. Robert could see his own father's pride and joy (or his second one, after his son), the cabin, which he'd been begun in the 1970s, when Robert was little, but even then it was still something of a work in progress. Part of it was the doing. So much of it, in fact, was the doing. And if it was ever done, if it were ever really done, then so were you.

Your day will come, Duke said. I have confidence in you, son.

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I don't remember ever having that conversation with Dad, Bob said. I remember him saying that business about 'your day will come,' but I don't remember that talk.

They'd met half an hour ago. Bob drove a BMW, a car (yes, the entire brand) that Robert secretly despised. Expensive cars represented to Robert a kind of profligacy. This was not jealousy. This was the belief that it was immoral to spend more on a car than some villages in the world could reasonably expect to earn in a year, or even a decade.

They had stretched and now they were jogging along at a slow pace, the evening air heavy, but still sweet.

Maybe you didn't. Robert said.

It's a good possibility, Bob said. He was a good guy. Robert watched his face. By the time he died, I was so wrapped up in work.

You weren't with him, Robert said. It was as much a question as a statement.

I saw him, if that's what you mean.

I was with him all the time. Sometimes I think I was with him more than mom.

I wanted to. I'd just spent two years in law school and was building my practice and there was a case at that time—this woman who was being spent into the ground by her ex. The guy seemed to live to torture her. Maybe subconsciously I made a value judgment. That she had a future that I could help with, and he—

Bob didn't go on.

What did he think about it? Being a lawyer.

You know Dad. He was proud as peaches.

That, proud as peaches, was an old Arlene-ism. Robert hadn't heard it in years.

Yeah, Robert said.

I guess I thought he'd last forever, and when mom called me—. Bob leapt over a root on the path. —I felt like I'd failed him.

Just so you know, Robert said, I actually was there with him when he died and I still felt like I'd failed him.

Bob turned. You were there?

No, Robert said. Not the actual moment. He was alone. Can we walk a second? I'm so out of shape.

Sure, Bob said. Now there was silence between them. Now and again a runner would come by, the sound of feet on the path, then breath.

Robert's first thought was that Bob was a dick for not being there, but at the same time he mulled the idea that he also might not have been there, at his father's bedside. And the truth was, if his work had been going well—if he'd been living in another state or on a book tour or something—he might not have been. It struck him that he could be the kind of person who would have put his work ahead of his father. It was possible.

You care about your work, Robert said after a while. They were jogging again, slowly.

Yeah, Bob said. I guess. But—, he started but left it there. Robert watched him look up, as if scanning for rain.

But what? Robert said.

By the time most people get to me, they're at the end of their rope. And so a lot of the time, you get into the ugliest parts of people's lives—and you have to—and nearly anything can be made to seem as though it crawled out from under a rock. Believe me. I try to be objective. These are other people's lives. I want to help. I try to give them hope. You know, life goes on. Maybe that gives me hope.

Bob did not seem terribly convinced by this. But in this last phrase, Robert was surprised at how much his double sounded like his/their mother/father. If he had needed further confirmation that

this other person was himself, this was it, except Robert was already convinced.

He had been thinking about this way too much, this relationship with 'himself.' It still seemed to him, when he was not actually a in Bob's presence, that this whole thing was entirely delusional. That it had been brought on by a combination of really nasty emotional events, not the least of which was being served divorce papers. And it worried him deeply that he might be insane and that his singular and narrow focus on his writing, his grief over his father, his grief over his marriage—that all of it was conspiring to drive him nuts.

And the other thing was this: if it wasn't delusional, then it was going to—because of things like Bob running into Ann—really screw every chance there might be to get her to change her mind. As gratifying as it was, in a really juvenile sort of way, to have Ann see 'him' with Bob's 'fuckbuddy' there was just no way that it could possibly be constructive.

But also there didn't seem to be much of a way that he could just make Bob go away. And the fact was he liked him. It was the closest he'd ever come to having a brother. Robert was sweating furiously now, but it felt good to be back to running, even if he was huffing and puffing. Just as he was wondering what Bob was thinking, Bob said: This is kind of fun, hanging out like this. But also it's kind of, I don't know, instructional.

Robert said: What do you mean?, even though he knew exactly what he meant.

You probably know exactly what I mean, Bob said. But if I need to spell it out, then it's kind of interesting to see yourself, to sort of, I don't know, objectively see if you are the way you think you are.

Are you?

Robert, of course, knew that Bob had been looking at him, watching him, the same way that he had been watching and looking at Bob, but at the same time he hadn't really thought of it that way, and now he felt uncomfortably scrutinized and distinctly inferior.

Yeah, I guess, Bob said. You know, better in some ways, worse in others.

This was exactly—but exactly—how Robert felt. Except hearing Bob—himself—say it pissed him off so much, he wanted to slug him. No way was he actually surprised that he was competitive with himself, but there was also something way more interesting and concrete about this. There was actual object of his competition, instead of hand wringing, there was someone he could actually want to punch. And thinking about all of this—as well as how tired and rubbery his legs were getting—was so interesting that he no longer wanted to punch Bob.

Bob gave him a weird glance and he—Robert—knew that Bob was thinking exactly the same thing. Bob said: I think if we're going to, you know, like hang out, and if there's the chance that people we know will see us, then we have to come up with a plausible narrative.

Yeah, Robert said. They slowed again, to cogitate over this. Robert watched a pair of women run past one was tall and slender, the other wore lime green shorts and a yellow T-shirt, and she was likely somewhere around 30, but the thing was she was pretty much exactly Ann's height, with a figure very similar to Ann's. Watching her trot along shot him full of longing and he wanted to look away. It was painful but he couldn't look away and he watched until she disappeared into the woods. When he looked at Bob, Bob smiled ruefully. Yeah, Bob said

Where were we?, Robert said, his chest still pinched.

Ground rules, Bob said.

Ground rules, Robert said. Leo's already seen you and he kind of knows, but if anyone would understand it, Leo would.

He a psychic?

Robert laughed. No, a physicist.

Ann here: Leo is not a physicist. I guess you're portraying him this way for purposes of the story, to try to give the unexplainable an explanation. Leo is a very good software engineer, and pretty good at math, but he's not a physicist. I almost think you should just

portray him as he is, as much of an in-the-dark knucklehead as you were.

Thanks for the vote of confidence, darling.

Almost the same thing, Bob said. Robert laughed.

Bob said: Wait a minute. He thinks there could be some sort of rational explanation for this?

Yeah, something about the multiverse. Leo says that anything that can happen will happen. And that there is some probability—however infinitesimal—that a person could actually meet himself. His idea is that we, from two more or less identical realities. Somehow they've adhered to one another and that's how we can see each other.

Bob looked at him skeptically.

I know, Robert said. It's totally out there, but so is this.

Okay, but what about others?, he said.

Robert said: Well, as far as Ann is concerned, or the Anns, then I think it had better remain a secret. They were running again and Robert was getting winded again.

Totally agreed, Bob said. It irritated Robert that Bob seemed unfazed.

What about Arlene?, Robert said. He was breathing heavily. Hey, I need to slow up, he said.

Bob slowed to a walk. They were both streaming sweat. Even Robert's socks were squishing in his shoes, but it felt good to sweat.

What about Arlene?, Robert said, again.

Bob eyed Robert closely, and it was the first time that Robert had really seen his eyes. They were the same odd shade of brown-green, or green-brown, at certain angles appearing green and, at others, brown. He had seen his own eyes every day in the mirror, shaving, brushing his teeth, trimming nose and ear hairs, but he had never seen his eyes—for lack of a better way of putting it—in action.

Bob hesitated a long time before saying anything about Arlene.[22]

[22] It would occur to Robert, much later, after things have got way too complicated, that Bob entirely avoided talking about Arlene.

Well, he said at last, I think that there should be a quarantine, a firewall, between people that we know and are related to. Your side of the family, so to speak, and mine shouldn't know about it. And it's too bad, I think, because...

Robbie would so love this, Robert said, giggling. Bob giggled too.

Yeah, Bob said. He lifted his sweaty shirt and squeezed sweat from his face.

There was a bit of a breeze now and Robert was grateful for it. He pulled at his shirt to let air in.

You ready to go again?, Bob said.

I guess so. They had almost made it around the lake and were near the concession stand. It was maybe a mile, a mile and a half back to the parking lot.

Give me a minute, Robert said.

You're pathetic, Bob said.

Robert didn't disagree, but changed the subject. I have to move out before next Tuesday, Robert said.

I'd offer to help, but...

No, Greg and Leo are going to. I'm going to crash with Leo for a few days, or until I can get a place.

They passed the drink machines, passed the cinder block hut where they sold bait.

The shadows were growing longer on this wooded part of the path, and they stopped. You could clearly hear the conversations of other runners and walkers. The men's conversations tended to be about sports and business, it seemed. The women's tended toward relationships.

Robert picked up a rock and threw it as hard as he could out into the water. He said: So, what happened with you and your Ann? She doesn't still teach at the Accord School?

Bob laughed. God, I'd completely forgotten about that place.

What? Robert found this almost impossible to believe. The Accord School seemed such a constant, indelible part of Ann and Robbie and his lives, that it was impossible to imagine her without it.

Ann—she wanted to be a stay-at-home mom, Bob said. I started making enough that it wasn't a big deal.

So she quit teaching?

She quit teaching. Stayed at home with Robbie when he was a baby. I was finished with law school then and the practice was building.

So what happened? Robert was aghast. He could no more have imagined Ann not teaching than her filing for divorce.

It was good for a long time, Bob said. Then, when Robbie went to school, I don't know, she sort of got unmoored. We had moved to Ashburn, the big house she always wanted, and there were a lot of other stay-at-home moms around, and at first I thought it would be a good thing, you know, how Arlene was. But they all sort of reverted to junior high school. I'd just hear about it. All these names of women. I knew some of the husbands. Played golf with them.

Wait a fucking minute, Robert said, laughing. You play golf?

A group of three women marched by, speed-walking with determined teeth gritted, and one of them glared at Robert. Then she did a double-take at Bob.

Sure. You don't?

The bizarre Scottish torture? No. Robert laughed and looked at Bob. You. Play. Golf.

It's a social game, man. I didn't say I was any good.

You don't have to apologize.

I'm not apologizing.

It sounds like you're apologizing.

Don't be a dick about it, Bob said.

Bob walked on and Robert followed. Robert was chuckling.

You're being a dick.

Robert thought, Yeah, I guess I am. But he was also watching Bob. The thing was this: You never see yourself from the back. You can sort of imagine what you look like from the back, but you never

really know. Robert wasn't exactly surprised, but he was silently pleased at the way he looked. A lot like his father, actually, but not quite so square. Duke had had a square frame.

So what happened?, Robert said.

There were afternoon get-togethers, you know, lunches and stuff. Lots of chardonnay. That kind of thing. And they were like encapsulated sleepovers—you know, gaggles of 13-year-old girls sitting around and dishing dirt on one other, vying for position.

I don't get it, Robert said.

It's like this: you've got this brand-new neighborhood, and the people living there are mostly families, young families with little kids, older families with teenagers, and a lot of the moms are stay-at-home moms. Some are stray-at-home, but that's another story.

Wait a minute, Robert said. Stray-at-home?

You know, liaisons with other people's spouses?

Oh, Robert said, feeling stupid.

And so, like, a lot of these women, they're, like, people who've had pretty high powered careers. Hard charging, you know? Lawyers and finance people and so forth. Not like Mom was. And so now, instead of setting up board meetings where world-changing ideas will be discussed, multimillion dollar budgets negotiated or fates decided, they're arranging play dates and museum trips and things like that. And, suddenly, their kids are out of diapers and off at school, and they have a gaping hole in their day.

Bob stopped in the path, lifted his shirt, and wiped sweat off his face. Robert watched, endlessly curious, completely fascinated to see how he worked. Bob had the same swirl of hair around his belly button, same birthmark just below his ribs on the left side. He had the same little scar just above his right eyebrow from fifth grade when he'd been playing catcher and his face caught the backswing of a Louisville Slugger.

They all turned on each other. Some of it was the drinking, I think. There were in-crowds and there were out-crowds, and status became an obsession. In the absence of any real drama in their lives, they had to create some drama. And so they turned our nice little

suburb into this complete soap opera. She'd take Robbie to school and help him with his homework, and then the rest of the time was completely given over to gossip and wine.

It was simultaneously easy and impossible to imagine Ann like this.

Are you saying your Ann's a drunk?

No. Not exactly. Robert stared off into the trees. He did not notice that Bob was doing the same thing. Robert had a habit of trying to identify the kinds of trees in the woods. Poplars were mostly what was here. The occasional red or white oak, but mostly poplars. Duke had bequeathed this affinity for wood to him. There was a hickory.

Let's race, Bob said. Robert wanted to quit, but he couldn't resist the challenge from himself, couldn't resist the try to beat himself, even though he knew that Bob was in way better shape.

Suddenly Bob took off, and Robert tried to chase him.

Bob called over his shoulder, So what are we going to do with this?, goading Robert, showing how easily he could stay ahead of him.

Wait!, Robert barked, chasing, jumping over logs and watching the flash of Bob's feet.

With what?, Robert said, puffing, trying to keep up but also thinking that if he did, he also might explode his hear.

This. Us, Bob said. We've got the opportunity to do something completely wild here, man. Something completely off the hook. They were almost back to the parking lot by now, and the shadows were long but the air had hardly seemed to cool at all.

Like what are you thinking?, Robert said, barely choking out the words, his chest heaving.

Robert had, actually, some ideas about what Bob might be thinking. And in another time, he might have been up for some hijinks, but right now, with his separation and the ten thousand pound shithammer of divorce hanging over his head, he was convinced that this was about as bad a time as any to do anything 'interesting.'

Bob slowed, letting Robert catch up. Seems to me the possibilities are yet to be plumbed, he said as he stopped. They'd run maybe thirty yards, and Bob seemed unfazed. What do you want most in life?

I want Ann back. I want to do right by her, whatever that means. I want to get the novel published and make enough money to keep writing.

Ah, the ambition is still the same.[23]

[23] Charlie Burns here: The curious thing to me from the start with Mr. Grayson is that how, despite being a professional spinner of yarns, creator of narratives, he never worked out a narrative in which any of this would in fact be possible. In fact, both of the versions of himself that Mr. Grayson has created in this narrative seem to have—so to speak—singularly failed to produce a coherent narrative about their own lives.

Why wouldn't it be?, Robert said, perhaps a bit defensively.

You want me to read it? I haven't touched it since it was rejected.

No shit?

I shit you not, my brother.

Sure. Yeah. Robert would have put his hands in his pockets if he'd had any. As it was, both hands searched a moment before giving up.

What do you want most in life? Robert said.

I don't know, exactly, Bob said, not quite looking at Robert. Maybe—, he started but stopped.

Maybe what?

To be a little more, I don't know. Like you?

This was low-level weirdness, compared to the rest of the weirdness, but it totally surprised Robert and he stared, but Bob wasn't looking at him.

Are you kidding me? (He laughed.) You mean like balding and fat?

No. I mean still in touch. You're still in touch, however distantly, with how I, we, you, whatever, used to be.

And you're not.

No. They started a slow jog, and Robert tried to let this sink in. Bob came across to him as so much more together, so much more in control of his own narrative than Robert. Bob was a version of himself that, at the moment, he liked a whole heck of a lot better than himself. He wanted to be more like Bob, but hadn't said it. He wanted to be in shape again, be successful, independent, confident. And Bob wanted to be like him. It made him shake his head in disbelief.

You know what we ought to do?, Bob said.

What?

Change places. Like in Prince and the Pauper.

I always thought that would be so cool. Even as Robert said this, he had serious—as in dire, grave—misgivings. With all of the ill portent at The Firm, it would be the apogee of foolishness.

Just a quick swap, for a start. We swap cars and swap jobs for a day. See what happens.

I don't know anything about law, Robert said, really meaning that Bob didn't know a thing about Robert's own job, and he didn't want to do anything to jeopardize it. They walked into a cloud of gnats and thousands of them, it seemed, instantly adhered to his sweaty face. Robert wiped at them, then wiped his hands on his shirt.

I don't know anything about contracting or consulting or whatever it is you do, so we don't do anything that could have any, like, ill effects. We swap on a day that nothing all that important is going to happen. Routine stuff only.

Robert was liking this. Except he was not. Except he was. In a way, it was what he had done all his life, in a sense, in fiction writing, except that was harmless, private role-playing. He was a lousy actor.

But about Mia? I mentioned her, Bob said.

What about Mia?

She's a paralegal at a firm next door to my office. Bob was grinning.

What are you saying?

I'm saying it could be fun for you. Since you'd be me.

You mean a little apres luncheon shag? I don't think so. But even as he was denying it, some animal part of his brain was contemplating the wonders of a total and totally innocent freebie.

Ann here: Robert, this is so disgusting. I hope you're doing this for its titillation potential. I mean I hope you weren't really thinking about it. It is so demeaning, not just for her (as in tantamount to rape), but for you, too, even to be contemplating something like that.

I thought you'd say that, but Mia can be very, um, persuasive.

I have to move out and all. Robert said, And then get back to work.

Bob put his hand on Robert's shoulder. We'll plan, he said. We've got our preliminary ground rules. We can do this.

Robert shrugged, simultaneously utterly seduced by the idea of getting to be another version of himself and completely terrified of it and the consequences it might have. (And, of course, he was right to be wary, although he could not have envisioned how truly and deeply he would fuck the whole thing up.)

