

# Unprecedented weirdness

*by* Stephen Stark

Robert looked around—at Bob, at the highway, at the building across the street where his office stood empty. The light on Route 7 had just changed, and the traffic was starting up again. A dump truck headed west and as it accelerated, it chugged out thick blue diesel smoke, which drifted, almost solid in the humidity, toward where they stood. He thought, This cannot be happening to me.

Bob reached out and put his hand on Robert's shoulder. Are you okay?, he said, because clearly Robert was undergoing a moment of visible and highly awkward distress. Robert was pulling at his hair and mumble-whining, I really don't need this.

It was then that Robert bolted, just dropped his hands, turned, and started to run. It was some kind of reptilian reaction, amygdala taking over higher cognitive functioning, and in a moment, he was racing down the sidewalk—winded already—just to get away from the doppelgänger.

Rather effortlessly, Bob pulled up next to him and kept up stride-for-stride. Dude, he said, and Robert tried to speed up, but he was horribly out of shape, and Bob kept up easily.

Dude yourself, Robert said, gasping for air. Leave me alone. (Which came out more like, Leave—puff, puff, puff—me—puff, puff, puff—alone—puff, puff, puff. Which was pathetic, and made him want to erase himself from this moment.)

The thing I want to ask you, Bob said, striding almost casually alongside Robert (who could remember running that effortlessly, chatting away like a pull-string doll), Is this: Are you, Robert Duke Grayson, Jr., having a failure of imagination?

What? Robert stopped and Bob did, too. Robert had started to sweat, and he bent over and put his hands on his knees to try to catch his breath. He could still taste vomit in his throat, at the back of his sinuses, and it occurred to him that his gut was empty and he was almost completely exhausted.

You're not thinking of the possibilities, Bob said. Are you having a failure of imagination?

Robert said nothing but stood bent over and watched himself stretching idly—God, could he actually be this annoying?—the whole stretching thing being more like a nervous tic than real stretching, but also being kind of a fascinating look at himself, a view few if any of us are ever afforded. Even seeing yourself on a video tape wasn't quite like this. Such weird moments of recognition. For example, you never see the top of your head, and he knew that his hair was thinning, but not that much.

Listen, Robert said (puffing), hands still on his knees, sweat coming, I don't have any clue who you are, or why you're here, or whether, actually—puff, puff, puff—you're not actually a figment of my imagination, but this is the last thing I need. My wife just—puff, puff, puff—filed for divorce...

Ann?

He wasn't sure that it should have shocked him that Bob knew his wife's name, but it did. Yes, Ann. I really hope you're real, Robert said, because if you're not, then I'm standing here talking—

This is getting even better, Bob said, shaking his head in something like wonder. His right hand was on his chin, his left arm across his midsection propping its elbow.

(Puffing.) You have one too? An Ann?

Yeah. Why the incredulity?

Jesus, I don't know. This is just too weird.

(It went through Robert's head that in a movie he would be standing here talking to himself—that is, Bob—and the audience would be able to see Bob, but no one else would. Not that there was anyone here actually to see or not see Bob. This was one of the many strange things about a place like Tysons: while there were lots of people around, there was no one actually around outside of a vehicle or building. The nearest person was across the highway, jogging.)

So she filed against you?, Bob said.

I got served with papers today. She didn't file against you?

No, Bob said, both arms folded now, weight shifting from leg to leg.

Robert hated the momentary, almost smug look that his doppelgänger got—he wasn't actually sure if he hated it more because he recognized it as his own gesture. The smug look changed now and was replaced with one that was a little misty and perhaps filled with some as-yet-undefined poignance. See, Bob said, I filed against her.

What? Robert was aware that this was almost a shriek, but the traffic was so heavy likely only Bob heard him, and besides, once something's out, it's not like you can pull it back in again. Lord knew he'd tried with things he'd said to Ann.

Funny, Bob said, musing.

I don't think so.

You are having a failure of imagination.

Robert was close to infuriated. Why do you keep saying that? I mean, this has nothing to do with imagination, unless you know that I'm imagining you.

No, Bob said, That's not what I'm saying.

What, then? (The weird thing was that standing here with himself, or what appeared to be himself, he had got so self-conscious that it was almost paralyzing. Suddenly, it seemed, he had become hyper-alert to nearly everything he said and did. And so he was aware that in saying, 'What, then?', he sounded kind of whiny and childish.)

There's something happening here. It's weird, but we should do something with it, don't you think?

Listen, Bob, Robert said, spitting the name out—this was one thing he didn't get, the Bob thing. He'd never considered calling himself anything other than Robert—and even as he said this and had this thought, he became distracted by too much self-awareness. Listen, Bob, he said again, gentler this time, I just got served with papers, divorce papers, and this is not a good time. Maybe I am having a failure of imagination. Maybe I've been having a failure of imagination for years, now.

Happens, Bob said, almost wistfully. I gave up on my imagination a long time ago. It's nothing to get all misty about. You have to grow up, right?

What does having an imagination and growing up have to do, I mean, what does one have to do with the other?

I don't know. You tell me.

Bob gave the notion of being irritated with yourself a whole new dimension. There were perhaps a million things that Robert wanted to ask, like what happened with your Ann, but he was so irritated with himself, with Bob, that all he could say was, Don't be an asshole.

Listen, Bob said, all I meant was, we can't all have Robbie's three hundred miles an hour imagination.

You have a Robbie, too? No. Of course you do. I am losing it. My imagination, my mind. Next thing you know I'll be in a straitjacket slobbering my way to a mental institution.

Bob sighed, evidently trying a new tack (Robert knew this because this was exactly the look he got when he was trying a new tack). Dude, Bob said, You need to chill. This is much a surprise to me as it is to you. I didn't exactly expect to run into you—me—whatever, either.

Robert hadn't thought about it this way. He had just sort of instantly figured on some kind of exterior agency[1]—Bob was part of something that was happening to him, the way the divorce papers had happened to him. He said: I didn't think of it like that.

Fuck. What did you think?

I didn't, Robert said, which was far easier to say than what he was actually thinking, but which amounted to the same thing.

Well, actually, neither did I.

So does that mean that we're as solipsistic as Ann says?

Your Ann says that?

Yep. Yours doesn't?

It's complicated. Most of the time—Bob hesitated, and Robert could tell this was a painful subject. Most of the time..., he started, and then looked around. Most of the time she's too wasted.

Wasted? Ann?

Yours isn't?

Ann? Robert was incredulous. God, no. She has a glass of wine now and then, but with her schedule during the school year—I mean, no. I haven't seen her wasted in years. Might be a nice change.

Yours works?

Again, the incredulity: Yours doesn't?

They had started walking now, Robert wasn't quite sure how, but they were headed roughly in the direction of The Firm. Neither of them said anything for a while. It was a lot to take in, and Robert hadn't discounted the possibility that this was all a bout of madness, some sort of stress-induced hallucination. Still, but strangely, Robert felt almost the way he had when he was around his father, which was that you could be with him pretty easily without saying anything.

Bob said: I'm saying there may be possibilities. I do think it would be nice to know why this happened. Is happening, whatever. But it's fascinating.

I guess, Robert said. That's one word for it.

I know what you're thinking. You're not going mad.

It was, actually, exactly what Robert was thinking, but he said anyway, How would you know?

What you're thinking or if you are or are not going mad?

Either or.

Because I've got the same thing going on, dude, and I'm not going mad.

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They had been walking now and talking, and were completely lost in conversation when Robert looked up and noticed they were right outside The Firm. It was one thing to talk to yourself—that ongoing narrative conversation that sometimes emerged in actual words, but this was different, although it did have weird similarities. It was interesting, and it was infuriating in certain ways. It was interesting because it made you try to think better, to sort of want to outdo yourself, but it was infuriating because you could tell that you were trying to outdo yourself, and you wondered if you looked like a dick because the other you, the Bob, was being a dick.

It was roughly lunch time, and when Robert looked up, there was Leo, gaping, looking back and forth between the two of them.

Leo Czukay, with his beard, looked a little like Dave Grohl, except he was gangly and nerdy and had curly hair. His hair had a little gray in it—but not the beard—and he wore it in a ponytail.

Shit, Robert said to Bob. That's Leo.

Is that a bad thing?

He's my best friend. What are we going to say?

I don't know. Maybe I'd better go.

Yeah.

Leo was gaping and grinning and approaching. Leo was a physicist and a software engineer, the kind of guy that The Firm made money off hand over fist. And he might have been the one person that Robert knew that just possibly could have explained why there were suddenly two Robert Duke Grayson, Jr.s. But Robert didn't want any explanations at the moment. At the moment, he was feeling pretty much the way he had when he'd bolted from Bob—like he just wanted to erase himself from the situation.

Robert, Leo said, and came up, What is—?

Robert cut him off. Bob gave a strange little wave. Leo, Robert said, Can you just give me a minute?

Leo backed off and Robert and Bob turned away. Robert said: We've got to, we can't, this is just too weird. If we are going to do something, I mean, with this, then, you know.

Bob was nodding, evidently taking all of Robert's incomplete thoughts and turning them into complete ones.

I'm gonna take off, Bob said.

Okay, Robert said.

Tonight—no, not tonight, I've got a date—let's meet somewhere.

Burke Lake, the path. By the boat landing.

Then Bob turned and took off running.



Robert turned around and Leo was right there.

What the fuck?, Leo started. I mean, dude, who was that?

Leo, Robert said, Let's go upstairs. There is unprecedented weirdness.

Um, no shit, dude.

No, it's even weirder.

Robert was sweating when he came back into the building, and his head was spinning. He had no choice but to get used to the idea of Bob, whether he was a delusion or the result of some weird fold or tear in the fabric of reality. But now he was going to have to explain it to Leo, and he hadn't even told him about being served with divorce papers—the reality of which, right this second, walking through the glass and marble and steel foyer of The Firm's flagship building with Leo, he suddenly doubted, the way he doubted what had just happened with Bob.

Leo's office was a warren of computers—he had worked for The Firm for almost his entire professional life, and there was history in all of the equipment—and you could most often find him coiled behind his desk, wearing his prized AKG K701 state-of-the-art, studio-quality headphones and rocking out, completely oblivious to anything other than the music and the code on his screen. He was the king of code, code was the poetry of the future, of Leo's present. In truth, Robert had almost no idea what code Leo was using at any given time, for any given project. They were languages that were a mystery to Robert, languages with which Leo created narratives of a kind that made machines come alive. 'Want me to hack your

toaster?' was a half-joking question Leo liked to ask, just for fun. What he really wanted—though he had never mentioned it—was for Leo to hack his novel.

He was younger than Robert by a couple of years, but made about ten times what Robert did because he could make a machine dance on the head of a pin. And do it elegantly. Robert's department supported Leo's department, translating the electronic magic and miracles that bloomed out of the minds of the engineers. What Robert's team did was produce readable manuals for the masses of mere mortals so that non-engineering types could actually use the software that Leo and others designed and developed.

In the same way that a good chef could close his eyes and pretty much tell you anything that was in a recipe, Leo could disassemble any machine, any piece of electronics, any sort of physical or theoretical construct and put it back together again—and often better. Or he could look at the specs of a machine and figure out how to take it to its limits. He was an electrical engineer, and in most areas of inquiry, he thought about things in an entirely different way than Robert did. He was Spock to Robert's Kirk. He was a geek's geek. Although he was Robert's best friend, he also happened to be good friends with Ann, and the long-time boyfriend of Ann's best friend, Bonnie. (Whom he occasionally pissed off by actually hacking her toaster or her coffee maker or alarm clock.)

Leo was a lead systems engineer and program manager, a pair of titular concepts that only a person who works in that sort of industry would understand or care about. Suffice it to say that he was good at what he did, and a leader of a certain kind of pale, caffeine-addled, role-playing-game-type men and women who were way more comfortable negotiating virtual reality than the other one. There were few women, and, perhaps because they were women, they tended to exist with way less of a cloud of isolation around them.

Leo sat down at his desk and Robert closed the door and sat in the chair opposite. Robert looked at him, and then just put his head in his hands.

What's going on, dude? Who was that?

Listen, Robert said, Ann is filing for divorce.

Leo shot back in his chair, his eyes wide, his mouth open. What?

Then you didn't know. I didn't think so, but I thought she might have said something to Bonnie.

No. Shit. Shit. Fuck, Leo said, looking at Robert.

Yeah. I got served with papers earlier. That's why I was outside.

Dude..., I'm so. No, like, no, I did not know. Shit.

Robert sank down in the chair.

What are you going to do?

Being outside—and then Bob—had been a weird little vacation from reality, but now here was reality again in all its grayness. Robert thought he might start to cry, and he did not want to cry in the office. The disbelief and waves of grief and anger and weirdness began to turn sodden and heavy and just hung on him, a dead, and deadening, weight.

Robert put his face in his hands because he couldn't actually keep himself from crying. He said through his hands: I don't know what I'm going to do, exactly.

He wiped his face and tried to get hold of himself. He said, his whole

face trembling: I'm going to go home and get a lawyer, and then I guess I'm going to—. He wiped at his eyes, tried to squeegee off his face. Leo handed him a wad of napkins from the company lunch room.

Do you think she's serious?

Yes. I mean, yes. I guess. It looks like she's serious.

I never would have thought. You two. I'm so fucking sorry, man. The way that Leo looked at him was almost like a plea to tell him that this was some kind of joke. But it wasn't. Leo looked down at his hands, at his t-shirt.

There were different rules of decorum for coders at The Firm. While the arty types in so-called creative services decorated their offices in aluminum foil and irony, the real creative types as far as Robert was concerned were guys like Leo, who were the real stars at a company like The Firm. They built and maintained the custom software that was the bread and butter of The Firm. They brought in very serious money, the giant contracts that kept the company not just afloat but sailing ahead. Few if any of them ever got to the high levels of the company because, frankly, a profound lack of social skills often seemed to go hand-in-hand with their peculiar kind of creativity.

There's a restraining order, keeping me from Robbie until I sign the paperwork.

That's cruel, dude. But it's probably just lawyer thing, a bargaining chip.

Maybe, Robert said, dizziness on him like spiders. I don't know. And—and I have to move out, at least according to the paperwork.

Do you think you'll stay at Hickory?

Hickory was Hickory Lake, about an hour-and-a-half's drive southwest from this part of Northern Virginia. Robert had inherited the cabin there that his father had built in the 1970s.

Naw. I don't know. Maybe. That'd be a fucker of a commute, and make it harder to see Robbie. I don't know. I don't know anything. I'm just so fucked. I want to curl up in a ball.

Leo picked up a pencil and stuck it in his hair. He said: If you want to like put your stuff in storage and stay with me while you find a place, that'd be cool.

Prickles of anger started to hit Robert as he thought about moving out, as he started to envision it. And the anger helped dry his eyes. It was hard to ignore the feeling that he was being treated like a child; that he could be treated like a child and there was nothing he could do about it.

Do you think Bonnie knows?

No. I don't know. Maybe. I'll call her.

I'm going, man.

Wait. Who was the guy?

Robert had started to get up and then he sat down again. You saw him? Robert knew that Leo had seen him, but he wanted to stall, because he had no idea how he could explain the inexplicable or what he could say. But that Leo had seen him seemed to indicate that it was not a delusion.

Like, yeah. He looked just like you. I mean identical. (This made Robert slightly more comfortable that he was not insane.)

He is. Sort of.

What do you mean?

I can't explain....

Try me. Leo was all over this in a way that didn't surprise Robert at all. In a sense, he was grateful for it.

So I got the paperwork. I threw up. I went outside. I was just walking and suddenly I ran into him, or he ran into me. But the thing is, I have no idea where he came from. I didn't see anything until we were just standing right there.

So who is he?

He said his name was Robert Duke Grayson, Jr. He calls himself Bob.

Dude, that's your name.

I know, Leo.

Leo sat for a moment and thought about it. Finally he said, So are you saying he's you?

Somehow, that seems to be the case.

That is so cool, Leo said. Intimations of the multiverse.

Robert looked at Leo without comprehension. Whatever. It doesn't seem very cool. It seems pretty fucking weird. But is it actually possible?

You mean that there could be two of you? Leo ran his hand through

his beard professorially. Theoretically, yeah. I mean, theoretically, anything can happen, and anything that can happen will. I don't know if you could put odds on it, though. Do you think he's you?

Yes. No. I mean I have no idea, really. I'm too fucked up to think clearly. The thing I don't get is why.

Maybe there is no why. Maybe there was an adhesion in the multiverse. Which would be more of a how than a why.

You keep saying that, multiverse. What does that mean?

Too long to explain. A theory that if you think about it too much will either depress the fuck out of you or make you wonder in awe at the pure strangeness of creation. I could go to the whiteboard—

No.

But I'm getting intimations that you don't want me to do that.

Robert was suddenly restless. Restless and angry and really depressed. Listen, he said. I've got to go.

He got up.

Call me if you need anything, Leo said.

Robert nodded, then stopped. Don't tell anyone—about Bob, I mean.

Really?, Leo said, but then, seeing the look on Robert's face, said, Okay. Sure.

Robert left for his own office. There, he got the paperwork and shut down his computer. He was on his way to Mack's office when Greg cruised up, looming. So what's the deal, kiddo?, Greg said.

Robert stopped. Reflexively, he patted his knapsack to make sure it was all zipped up. The sensation that he was going to cry, or throw up, or just crumple came on him again. He bit his lip and said, Man, my wife has filed for divorce.

Greg stood back. Well, knock my socks off and chase 'em to the washer, he said.

Yeah, Robert said wearily. I've got to go find myself a lawyer.

Greg put his very large hands on Robert's shoulders. If I can help, old sport, I don't know how, but if I can, let me know.

Thanks. Listen, he said. Can you hold down the fort? I'm going to probably, like, be out for a few days, so—

Roger that, Greg said. Standing tall and ready for action.

Thanks, Robert said and headed for Mack's office.

His boss was sitting at the little conference table in his office, a plastic foam cup of soup on his desk, the newspaper folded open. You look like shit, Mack said when he looked up.

Thanks, Robert said and tossed the manila envelope on the table.

This for me?

No. I'm the lucky guy.

Mack wiped his hands and picked it up, pulled out the paperwork.

Mack was retired military. He was about ten or fifteen years older than Robert and wore his white hair in a gravity-defying flat top. As



far as Robert could tell, he had no life outside The Firm. He was often here before dawn and often gone long after dark. He liked to come off as the gruff drill sergeant, but it was mostly an act. While he didn't suffer fools lightly, he was a kind and even sweet man. And he was divorced.

Oh, shit, he said, and sighed.

Yeah, Robert said.

Do you have a lawyer?, he said.

Not yet.

Go get one. Do what you need to do. Just do what you need to do. Call me if you need anything. Robert would have sworn that Mack's eyes were red.

Thanks, Mack.

Leaving The Firm in mid-afternoon and heading in the relatively sparse traffic, Robert felt as though he had been expelled from the body of some larger reality that he was no longer part of, and it was not a good feeling.

[1] Charlie Burns here: Much of Robert's narrative is concerned with exterior agency. The interior agency is almost entirely lacking in his reported experience of important events. He seems to have very little awareness of his own agency in his arrival at this particular moment in his life's narrative. He's simply a leaf in the stream. See Giles & Whiting, "Internalizing Exteriority," *Annals of Narrative Thought*, Fall, 1998.

