

STENDEC

“I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.”

- Ecclesiastes 9:11

It is raining outside. It is nighttime. I hear the droplets hitting the windows. I do not want to look outside. I could lose myself, probably would lose myself, in the pattern of rain droplets on the parking lot and window. Here and there and there...spelling out a new theory of interpretation of Macbeth or a more efficient electric motor armature configuration. Instead, I sit at the table in this large wardroom, surrounded on three sides by grated windows. Even sitting here, head bowed, the sound of the drops is tapping out the structure of a new anesthetic. But I ignore it by humming to myself to mask the patter of droplets. Sometimes I would like to leave, not this room tonight, but the hospital. But that would not be a good idea. They would not let me leave anyway and that is to the best.

There are certain distinct moments in my life. Pregnant pauses, perhaps, or pivot points of possibility. Instants and instances of deep sight and deeper insight, flashed slices of ephemera in which the interconnectedness of things is revealed to me. After that is the consuming madness as I scribble and scramble to record it all.

I have tried to breach that mania but every attempt has failed. Once viewed the new truth must be recorded, in whole, before I can rest again. I become obsessive. Inside I move in a mist but to others I operate with a frightening focus that will not be denied. The last incident – a week

ago - was the rocket nozzle – a new shape that only took three hours and some minutes to itemize. No food; no sleep; no urination; just tabulation and enumeration until the design is complete and recorded.

So long ago...I was twenty and walking a path beside Lake Ontario on a winter night. The lake was frozen over and the ice was snow covered in white that faded with distance away to black. And it started snowing, slowly at first, but quickly increasing. Big fluffy flakes fell with languorous grace, thousands, perhaps millions fading into the darkness over the lake. It was entrancing and hypnotizing. A man could stare at these flakes as he stepped off a cliff to his death. And yet, and yet, at the edge of understanding, just beyond intellect, the falling flakes spoke of a thousand truths, written in a foreign language, an Incan knot language, unreadable yet elegant. I shook my head and walked on.

I was thirty-five and sitting on a bench waiting for a bus. It was early morning and a school bus turned onto the main road I waited beside – the same as it had done yesterday. The same man walked by as the day before, carrying a cup of coffee, as before. Next would be a woman carrying an umbrella. That had not happened yesterday but it would today. Three cars go by. The next car is yellow. A small bird – a sparrow? – lands for seven seconds on the bus stop sign. I see my bus turn out of the university complex and back onto the main road. I stand and gather my packages.

I read once that of course the cure for cancer was encoded in the structure of the piece of cake you ate this morning. But you didn't have the alphabet to read it. Imagine if you could. That is what happened to me. I imagined that I could and then I could. Now I see patterns everywhere and most reveal deep truths.

I cannot stop myself. I have tried. Once I see a pattern I am compelled to record it. This is a gift and a curse, a gift of knowledge to the human race and a curse on me. I live terrified of the theory that will be so detailed and extensive that I will die while writing it down. And that is why I am here. The staff in this ward will not allow that, should it come to pass. They will restrain and force feed me, if need be.

But that need has not arisen and perhaps it never will. The summaries and notes and pages of text contain shorthand and codes and these seem to indicate that no recording would ever take so long as to be fatal. But that risk is an existential danger and one I need not bear, and so here I am.

My evening medications are brought to me by Sarah. She is a pleasant nurse of early middle age with a kind demeanor and pleasant aspect. The medications are in a small cup and are mostly to help me sleep. I dare not look into the cup. I swallow it in one gulp. Sarah also brings me a small glass of orange juice and a snack. She changes the snack. Sometimes it is a piece of cake, or a small tart, or even a fruit cup. She helps me to keep a small mystery in this existence of perfect yet useless knowledge.

The snack always has a featureless surface. Texture and pattern are dangerous for me. I see light and dark and difference and I start decoding. I need a smooth surface. White icing works well. No chips or raisins in cookies. Monotonous and isotropic are the watchwords of my life.

The rain keeps on. I consider requesting the quiet room but I think I will be okay. A few minutes later I turn out the ward lights and retire to my private bedroom. The raindrops are muted here. The walls are plain and bland and cream colored. The sheets and blankets are

monochrome. There are no varying colors and no patterns. For me patterns are dangerous.

I am a voluntary inmate. A foundation has been established that receives my notes and presents the insights and inventions for development. Frederick Banting led the project that discerned and purified insulin. He won the Nobel Prize. The purification of insulin turned juvenile diabetes from a terminal illness into a manageable condition. Imagine that – a death sentence commuted, life rich and full again - and long.

Banting wanted his treatment for diabetes to be available to all so he and his partners sold their patents to the University of Toronto for one dollar. I want the same. My notes are given in trust to various developers, business people and foundations. The charter states that they may make a profit but not profiteer. If I am able to improve the world it will not be for the bottom line profit / loss of a corporation but instead for the good of all.

I blow my nose and drop the toilet paper into the toilet bowl. I should have looked away. An insight lies in the swirls and curves of the wet toilet paper in the bowl but this one does not require pen and paper. The ultimate answer is 42. But what is the ultimate question? If we assume it has to do with existence, what is this all about, what is the meaning to life, why are we here, then 42 are makes sense.

The asterisk character, *, is used in various computer languages and applications as a wildcard placeholder. The asterisk wildcard is still used today in UNIX and Perl. Way back in MS-DOS, if one typed *.* , this would list all files on the selected media. However, c*.* would only list files that began with the letter c. Similarly, *a*.* would only list files that had an embedded 'a' character in their name, and so on. Therefore the wildcard character * meant, whatever is selected, or chosen or found – whatever is wanted. The asterisk is a user defined

operator – as wished – whatever works. The asterisk is therefore the universal answer to any and all questions – whatever you want. And the number 42 is the ASCII code for the asterisk.

Carol visits me the next day. I struggle to stay focused and not be distracted. She has worn a single color blouse. The shades on the windows have been drawn. The lights have been turned down and everything is dim. There is minimal visual stimulus. All is very quiet. This is the way the world ends, not with a bang but a whimper.

She still waits for me to leave the ward. She waits for me to come home. She still doesn't understand that I never will. I have told her but not forcefully. As much as our shared life is over, I am weak and would be bitterly alone if she did not visit. So in my own way I string her along to keep her coming.

She stays several hours. We chat and visit and it is so good to see her. Sarah brings a featureless snack and a wan smile. We do not say it but I think we both know it is over. These visits are ghosts rising from the grave of our past life together. I stare at her, an idiot smile plastered on my face, it is so good to see her. I should let her go, drive her from me if need be, but it is so good to see her.

A few days ago I was visited by a military man so impressive that he had a staff that sat at a nearby table while we met. I do not know uniforms. I do not know which branch of the forces he was from. But he was obviously quite senior and privy to the fact of my existence by dint of his authorized classified status. And he used that knowledge and status to bring himself through the gates and metal detectors and to this locked ward to see me.

He sat glaring at me. His demeanor was hostile and he became aggressive. He had

brought coffee and doughnuts instead of a cooperative attitude. The coffee was good. The doughnuts looked sugary. He did not ask for a cure for ovarian cancer; he demanded one. It doesn't work that way. I told him that. This is not a vending machine. I do not get a choice of answers. I cannot pull a lever or press a button to select a solution. I see a pattern and I lose myself in the understanding of it until it is fully explicated. I do not get to choose.

“I don't either!” he said.

“I can't help you. I'm sorry.”

“I'm sorry, too.”

He reached into his jacket, festooned with colors and medals, and pulled out an effective looking handgun. I don't really know anything about guns but this one was sleek, dark grays and blacks, and compact yet imposing. It looked like a battleship or armored vehicle, an efficient machine for dealing death, a snug method of force. I burst out laughing.

He looked surprised. He was puzzled and a bit frustrated. His tool of intimidation had failed. I don't think he was fundamentally a bully. I think he was desperate. I didn't know what was going to happen but I didn't really care. We don't get to choose, General, or is it Admiral? Time and chance to all. All you get is now, this moment, right now, while your daughter lies dying.

Will you throw that away, be arrested, carted off to jail for killing a man who has done you no harm? You are my time and chance. I cannot stop you pulling the trigger. I cannot give you what you want. Be my hurricane, tornado my house to wooden splinters, a destructive force that leavens all.

His men at the other table are rising, realizing there's a problem, moving closer. He points the gun at me. I don't care. You, General or Admiral, have the comfort of grief. Mine is a life

suspended, placed on hold, consigned to limbo because I cannot walk down a street without seeing patterns and patterns everywhere and everywhere and always.

But then I see that the muzzle of the gun is not open. There is only a tiny hole. His men have rallied to his side. He tucks it back inside his jacket, this realistic water gun. And his hand emerges with sugar packets. He tears them open, scattering the white grains onto the dark brown tabletop. I try to look away but it is too late.

“This won’t work!” I say through gritted teeth.

More sugar, scattered again, stars in his pocket like grains of sand, burning hotly, velvet white, on the vast dark tabletop of night, I see nothing, I refuse to see, I will not try. I will not be manipulated, galaxies scattering across the cosmos of the endless universal inevitable. And then, despite myself, there it is, a lock and key, an enormous polypeptide, a protein chain thousands of amino acids long. This will empty the wards, sending the mentally unwell home, clearing out the hospitals. This is a curative prion, one that will take a folded and spindled and mutilated brain and make it flat and new and creaseless again. I reach for paper and begin to write.

Chains and chains of amino acids. I write out the single letter codes. No J, U, V or X and Z. Every other word can be made, CODEC and KODAK. No RUBISCO but definitely NABISCO. I laugh as I scribble. The naming of that plant enzyme by a senior researcher in 1979 was done in very cognizance of Nabisco. No JUICY but very ICY. Without thinking I group the letters into words in those cases where they read as words. Not often, only occasionally, but words do jump out.

STENDEC, the last Morse message sent from the passenger plane Avro Lancastrian Star Dust before it crashed in 1947 in the Andes. For fifty years the fate of the airplane was unknown, until 1998, when two hikers near Mount Tupungato came upon the wreckage. Ever since the Star

Dust disappeared people have puzzled over that last message. Perhaps one day I will look into an angry ocean or turbulent windy day and know the answer. Until then, STENDEC, in three letter amino acid codes, Ser Thr Glu Asn Asp Glu Cys.

The fugue begins. I do not lose consciousness but I become dissociated. I am detached and disinterested. I see all that transpires but I am disengaged. I do not care. After a great deal of time I see Patton and his minions rise and leave. I am scribbling away. My hand aches but I do not care. In a way, I do not exist right now. The scribbling goes on and on. I could not stop if I tried.

And finally, hours later, it is over. It is dark outside. The creases of my fingers bleed from where I held the pen. I feel the usual exhaustion. I can barely keep my eyes open. But it is not fully over – not yet. This is when I come back to myself. I look at what I have written, thirty-one sheets of letters, several hundred per page, describing three prionic proteins.

The first protein is quite short, a mere page and a half of amino acids. The other two are approximately equal in length and both quite long. The first one will prevent and even cure early stage Alzheimer's. It can be taken by anyone without harm. Injecting one dose of this protein at age thirty will prevent Alzheimer's from ever developing. It will be a universal preventive measure.

Once the dementia crosses a critical threshold, however, this proteinaceous prion will have no effect. The window of prevention will be permanently closed. Thus, anyone already significantly suffering is not helped.

The second one will cure Schizophrenia. Of the current cases, ninety-seven percent will be cleared by three doses of this protein, spaced ten days apart. This may be taken anytime in

one's life and twenty days later, hours after the third dose, the symptoms will start to clear and be totally gone eight days later.

However, it will not cure everyone. Three in one hundred will be unaffected. Again, like the prion that will cure Alzheimer's, not everyone can be helped. But the odds are greatly in favor, so much so that there is no risk in trying it. Is this a good thing? I will improve the quality of life for many. Many more will be out of work, as their jobs in nursing homes and hospitals and other care facilities disappear. Is this a good thing?

I do not know what the third one will do for the average person. Perhaps nothing. Perhaps it is a poison. But for me, if I take it, a single dose, I will lose this ability, this blessing and cursing, and be able to live a normal life. I can go home. I can announce myself magically cured and go home, to normal life and to Carol.

And the world can go hang. I have done enough for a hundred lifetimes, I have been Banting and Haber and Bohr again and again. The very small royalty paid into my account would support fifty families at the height of luxury. That is more than enough for Carol and I to live a quiet and comfortable life.

I expect that in a week or two the first samples of these proteins will have been synthesized. I will explain what they are and what they will do, telling lies about the third, and in half a month I will have the option to be normal. But I will not take it. I will remain here, for the good of all, as long as Carol keeps visiting.

Bio:

Bill Suboski is an aspiring fiction writer with a background in computer programming. He is still trying to decide what he wants to be when he grows up. Born in Indiana, Bill is a transplanted Hoosier living as a Buckeye by way of Canada and the Netherlands. Contact Bill at WSuboski@yahoo.com.