

The Thinnest Void

Keeping a watchful eye on his wife, Val Brumford tried to ignore the uneasiness niggling at his conscious as he leaned against the kitchen island. Despite the soft morning light casting her face in an ethereal orange hue, he couldn't shake the feeling something was wrong.

Not wrong, he thought, trying to untangle the growing knot in his gut. *Perhaps just a bit off.*

He had to admit though, under normal circumstances, seeing Mae aglow amid the diffused light should've been akin to watching a Thomas Kinkaid painting in motion.

This was not a normal circumstance. Instead of being captivated by her incandescent beauty, Val watched as she stood hunched over the kitchen sink shoveling forkfuls of leftover penne Bolognese into her face hole.

Less Kinkaid and more Norman Rockwell meets Jackson Pollock, he decided. *Yeah, something is definitely...*

He couldn't bring himself to go back to 'wrong'.

Yet, the Mae he'd known before she'd died six months ago never ate breakfast on a workday. Period. And she sure as hell wouldn't have grabbed cold pasta any day of the week and shoveled it in like a starved wolf gorging on a fresh kill.

"Mae, are you alright?"

"Muhph-huh," she mumbled, her cheeks full of partially chewed pasta. "Why?"

"Why?" he repeated. "Since when do you a. - Eat breakfast before heading off to work and b. - Eat cold leftover penne by the mouthful? And don't even get me started with talking with your mouthful."

She'd chewed and swallowed enough so she could talk clearly.

"I'm not sure I follow. I was jonesing for left-over garlic naan and chicken tikka masala. No worries, though. The penne's doing the trick."

She pierced another pasta-sauced globule and held the semi-spherical mass at him. "You wanna bite?"

Val stared in disbelief. "No, I'm fine."

The Mae he'd married being hungry for chicken tikka masala was as likely a scenario as Frank Sinatra being reincarnated and asked to sing for the heavy metal band, Slipnot.

Shrugging her shoulders, Mae shoved the entire thing into her mouth. As she chewed, she washed the fork, dried it, put it back into the drawer, grabbed her lunch box, and headed for the door. Val remained rooted to the floor.

"Ya know," Mae said as she stopped at the coat rack next to the garage door and slipped into her jacket, "now that you bring it up, you're the one who's acting strange. Don't get me wrong, this weekend was wonderful, but I dunno, you've been," she searched for the right word, taking several seconds before she found it. "A bit off."

Reaching the door that led into the garage, she turned and said, "You gonna stand there like a tree, or are you gonna come over here and smooch me before I leaf?"

Oh. My. God. A dad joke from Mae? What the hell is going on?

Too stunned to move, Val remained where he was.

Unruffled, Mae walked to him, planted a cold tomato kiss on him, turned, and headed off to work. He watched as she walked away, then listened to the sounds of the garage roof rolling back, the soft whine of her jump craft spooling up, and the whoosh of air as she took off for work.

Unmoving, he replayed everything he'd just experienced while thinking about what the sales associate at Lifetronics had told him to look for after the life graft.

Something about aberrations in personality manifesting in the first 48 hours, he recalled. Personality quirks, the associate had referred to them.

Still rooted to the floor, Val tried to think of anything else.

And wasn't there something about when you alter an element of two nearly identical layers of the multiverse, despite how advanced their AI was, there was the risk it wouldn't always be able to adjust for minor variations from one iteration to the next.

Still, Val decided, it's better to have this version of Mae, even if she had less couth, than not have any version of her at all.

Since she'd died six months ago, life had been unbearable. Unrecognizable.

The well-worn and familiar cloak of depression began to unfurl. Not wanting to go there, Val fought the urge to ponder on that dark and empty time, deciding she looked kinda cute as a ravenous chipmunk. Instead of spiraling into despair, he chuckled and chalked her new trait as patina. A patina that would only add to their new, if somewhat recycled, life together.

He headed for the garage, wondering what other new quirks awaited discovery. The morning gorging, he could learn to live with. The terrible puns, he hoped, were a one-time occurrence.

As he got into his Veneer model jump craft and felt the engine coming online, he smiled. He remembered how he used to miss her as soon as she left for work, and how excited he would be upon her return in the evening. It felt good to feel that again. It felt good to have her back.

Despite his initial misgivings and words of warning from his friends, he was happy he'd pulled the trigger and shopped the multiverse and gone to Lifetronics to have a life graft done.

He lifted off and headed to his office, whistling his favorite rock tune, As Is, before turning on the radio, surprised to hear country music twanging from the speakers.

Um, nope!

Using the controls inset on the jump craft's yoke, he thumbed through the other presets. Next was an opera station, then a political talk show.

Hell no.

He cycled through the remaining station presets. None of them were the programmed classic rock stations he expected to hear. Perplexed, he thought back to the last time he was in here.

Three days ago. Friday.

He'd gone to Lifetronics to have the life graft done. All had been fine then.

Maybe there'd been an electrical short and the station presets had been erased.

Manually scanning through the stations, he found his classic rock station hitting the jackpot as Jump by Van Halen, the same group that wrote the song he was humming a few minutes ago came through the overhead speakers.

Despite the odd events of the morning, allowing the feel-good, party vibe of the song was easy. Captured by the music, knowing Mae was back, the viscous grief that had coursed through his heavy heart continued to thin. Resplendent with a lightness that comes when all is right, Val sang.

Although his commute was short, as he neared his office, Val noticed the landing deck was relatively empty.

Is today a holiday and in the excitement and craziness of getting Mae back, I forgot?

Setting down only two spaces from the walkway that led to the building, Val checked his phone to see if Mae had called or sent him a message informing him her office was closed as well.

No call or message.

Welp, we'll see.

Upon entering the building, a receptionist he'd never seen sat behind a desk that hadn't been there last Thursday.

"Good morning, sir. May I help you?"

Val looked her over, hoping to find a name tag. Finding none, he said, "Who are you?"

"I'm Bridget. How may I help you this morning?"

"Bridget. Are you new? I work here. Name's Val Bradling."

It was Bridget's turn to look him over, although when she did, her hazel eyes narrowed, her gaze less helpful than it has moments ago.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Bradling. I've worked here over three years and I'm certain we've never met."

Perplexed, Val looked around. Had he landed at the wrong building? Turning in a slow circle, the foyer's footprint was correct, but the furnishings, the art, the color scheme differed from the one he'd known. He turned back toward Bridget, looked above her head at the backlit sign on the wall behind her. Conner & Conner Esq.

"I'm sorry," Val said. "I must be mistaken, my apologies."

He turned and walked back out the door toward the landing park before he suffered any additional embarrassment. He needed to get to his jump craft and collect himself and figure out what the hell was going on.

The walk from the building to his jump craft took forever. Once inside, he closed his eyes, took several deep breaths to calm down. This was no time to panic.

“You’re okay,” he said. “Just keep calm and figure this out.”

Thinking back to Mae gorging on the penne Bolognese, that for sure was real and not some whack-a-do hallucination. Opening his eyes, he looked at the world outside his jump craft. That too was real. He leaned over, stared into the rearview mirror probing his own crystalline blue eyes looking for...

“And what the hell does crazy look like, Val?” he said. “What did you expect to see? Cartoonish pinwheels? Geez-Louise, pull it together.”

Acknowledging that talking to himself was not a good argument for sanity, his eyes looked clear, alert. He was cogent. This was real.

It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out something must’ve gone wrong at Lifetronics.

“If only you were a quantum physicist and knew what the hell happened.”

At least he had a good idea where the fracture happened.

He closed his eyes, intent on recalling the events of last Friday morning. He reimagined the anxiety and anticipation swirling in his gut as he flew to Lifetronics, knowing he would have the entire weekend so he and Mae would have plenty of time to acclimate.

They’d stayed home the entire time. Today was the first day he’d been out. That would explain why he hadn’t noticed anything was amiss. The euphoria of having Mae back had clouded the small idiosyncrasies in her personality, at least until this morning, when the initial euphoria was wearing off.

He opened his eyes and looked around the landing park and the structures beyond. He was definitely at his office, but now recognized minor differences in the landscaping. Instead of crepe myrtles on each side of the walkway to the building as there had been last week, now there were sky pencil hollies. And the tops of the light bollards interspersed between them were spherical, not square.

He pulled up the computer console inside his jump craft and did a GPS search for Quad Sure. No result.

Although he'd sensed that was going to be the result, shock still tore at him. He retyped Quad Sure into the search bar, this time doing so with deliberate and calculated slowness. No result.

How could the place he'd worked for 12 years no longer exist? His pulse throbbed in his temples and he gritted his teeth, keeping the surge of anger from clouding his mind as he switched to a search engine, and retyped Quad Sure. No result.

Not one disposed to anger, on the rare occasion he was, the voice of his mother chirping adages in his head always popped in. Sometimes the adages helped, and sometimes they added fuel to the fire.

Today he heard her say, "When life hands you lemons, make lemonade."

"Yeah, well, what do you make when life hands you a turd, Ma?" Val said aloud.

The voice was silenced.

On the brink of an existential crisis, Val took several deep breaths, keeping himself in check. Just start with the simple stuff.

Who am I? What is this place? Where am I? Why has this happened to me? How has this all happened? If the life graft is the cause, then Lifetronics is the cure.

Fingers trembling, Val typed Lifetronics into the web search.

No result.

Whatever happened at Lifetronics, wherever he is now, he's trapped. Although the scene outside is familiar, he's ignorant of the script and the plot, doesn't know his role and worse, doesn't know how to change any of it.

What I've known is now foreign. What used to be true is now false and what is up is now down.

Trying to keep his head above the wave of panic, he begins the takeoff cycle, knowing that even if he doesn't know where he's going, it's better to keep moving rather than sit and do nothing.

He lifts off and heads to where Lifetronics should be. His Vennier jump craft is a deluxe model, equipped with autopilot. He engages it and turns his attention out the forward windscreen and out his pilot's side window.

Just as it had been several moments ago, the view outside is both familiar and strange.

Everything looks almost right, or is it slightly wrong?

He can't decide. On the whole, when seen from a distance, the picture looks correct and coalesced. Only when he focuses his attention on a single aspect does the image of reality begin to pixilate.

Even then, the differences in one minor detail poses no issue to his psyche, but in aggregate creates a different picture of what should be, fracturing a world of should be into a world of should nots.

Wondering how deep down the rabbit hole he's fallen, he makes a call. He initiates the onboard AI.

“Jasper,” he says.

“Yes, sir.” the AI replies.

Huh. At least that’s one thing that’s remained the same.

“Please call Mae.”

“Yes, sir. Would you like me to connect her private line or her work line?”

Val pauses, thinking about the two options Jasper has given. As long as he’d known Mae, she’d worked in the accounting department at Val-Co.

“Please connect me with her work line, but if you wouldn’t mind, please connect me to the front desk and not her private extension.”

“Very good, sir.” Jasper says.

The sound of the phone ringing interrupts the ensuing pause. After three rings, a pleasant older sounding lady answered. “Good morning and thank you for calling Industrial Robotics. How may I direct your call?”

Val swallowed hard as yet another nail pounded into the coffin. He disconnected the call.

“Jasper, please connect me to Mae. This time, connect her direct line.”

“Yes, sir. Connecting.”

Another pause.

“Hey you,” Mae said. “To what do I owe this honor?”

Val hadn’t planned far enough to know what he was going to say. He was winging it as he went along.

“Hey, um, well,” he said, searching for his words. “I was wondering if you’d like to grab a drink and maybe a bite after work instead of eating at home.”

“First a weekend home with you doting on me like you did when we were dating, and now you’re asking me on a date? On a Monday night? What about the game tonight? I thought you were going to Mick’s place to watch it.”

Val didn’t have a friend named Mick. That was the final nail in the coffin.

“Yeah,” Val said, “well there will always be a game to watch. Can I help it if you command more attention than two teams of grown-ass men playing a child’s game? So, what do you say?”

There was a long pause. Val looked at the display screen to make sure the call hadn’t disconnected.

Finally, “I don’t know what’s gotten into you,” Mae said, “but I think I like it. Sure. Let’s meet. Where did you have in mind, Romeo?”

Looking out the side window, Val saw a world disconnected from everything he’d known. Mind spinning, he sure as hell didn’t know the restaurant scene, nor what could’ve been their favorite place. How was he going to get that information without raising suspicion?

“Tell ya what,” he answered. “You name the place and I will be there.”

Another long pause. “What are you up to, Val Bradling?”

His reply was instantaneous. “Nothing, just want to spend some time with ya. I mean, we had an enjoyable weekend.”

“Yeah, we did, didn’t we? Alright, how about we meet at Donato’s? Say 5:30?”

“Looking forward to it already,” Val said. “Donato’s at 5:30. See ya then.”

He disconnected the call before she could probe any further. How was he going to explain to her that which he didn’t comprehend himself?

Looking down at the cityscape below, he recognized the layout of the neighborhood he was flying over.

“Jasper,” Val commanded, “disengage autopilot.”

“Yes, sir. Your craft.”

Taking manual control, Val banked to the left and headed toward the building where Lifetronics had been in the hopes he could divine some nugget of truth.

Since everything else is different here, he thought, perhaps it's not called Lifetronics, but still has the same functionality.

Five minutes later, having landed at the adjacent landing park, Val stared at the building that had been Lifetronics last Thursday. The signage affixed to the building now read Newman Pipe, Inc. Definitely not a place where one would go to shop in the alternate realities.

“Sir,” Jasper said, “I’m receiving a call from an unknown caller. The number is not in my database, but the call did come in the moment we landed.”

“Can you tell where the call originated?”

“Negative, sir. Would you like me to connect?”

“Yes.” There was a click, then Val said, “Hello?”

“Val Brumford? This is Scott Newman calling from Lifetronics. We’ve been looking for you.”

Flush with anger, Val lashed out. “I bet you have. What in the ever-living hell happened, Scott? Where the hell am I?”

“I can appreciate your anger. You must be in proximity to where you thought Lifetronics was. Are you looking at a building called Newman Pipe, Inc.?”

Overcome with paranoia, Val looked around. Was he being watched? How could Scott know that?

“Yes,” Val answered.

“Alright, so here’s the deal-e-oh. Our AI made a slight error when we performed the life graft intended for Mae. Instead of Mae coming from there to here, you went from here to there.”

“A slight error? Are you kidding me?”

“Yes. Well, yes, a slight error and no, I’m not kidding you. Although quite rare, this inversion, as we like to call it, can happen from time to time, but I’m sure I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know. You signed off you were aware of this possibility before proceeding with the life graft. You did read the waivers of liability, correct?”

“Scott, do I sound like a guy who’s in the know?”

“Fair,” Scott replied.

“Okay, so let’s dispense with the legal bullshit. How do we fix this?”

“Well, it’s good you came to where you did. Proximity is key, so don’t leave the area, as there is a limited space where the two sheets of reality are sufficiently close to make swaps.”

Now understanding what occurred, Val grasped the ramifications.

“Wait. If your AI made an error or inversion or whatever the hell you call it and you swapped the wrong person, where’s the me that’s supposed to be here and why in the hell did I not realized something was amiss right away? How is it my jump craft AI and my house the same?”

“First, you from there is here with us. We’ve got him under sedation, so he’s unaware of anything at all. Second, as far as you not realizing anything was amiss, I can only assume you were so enraptured with being with Mae, your immediate surroundings were nothing but a haze.

In answer to your third query, we only perform lift grafts from neighboring universes, so most aspects remain the same in each universe with only minor details askew.”

Recalling the first few hours with Mae, Scott was right. He’d not been aware of anything but her.

Coming back to the moment, Val asked, “If proximity between the two universes is key to the life swap, how did me from here get to Lifetronics?”

“In a twist of irony, he worked here, well, there. In that reality, he worked at Newman Pipe. He was the day supervisor, but normally has Friday’s off. But he was here on an unscheduled shift. That’s how the AI error occurred.”

Staring at the building, Val envisioned himself inside, a version of himself. A version he knew no more than he knew anybody else in this reality. Even Mae. It was odd to think of himself as a supervisor at a pipe manufacturing plant.

“Alright, so how do we fix this?” Val asked.

“Well, we have two workable solutions,” Scott replied.

“I’m all ears.”

“Option one. You get Mae to come to your location. Once she’s there, we’ll transfer you both here and your sleepy counterpart here will go back home.”

Running the scenario Scott laid out, he knew he could get Mae here, could envision them back in that reality, but saw more complications than a clear aim.

“Wait. You make it sound so easy. Just snap your fingers and poof! You switch realities?”

“Of course, it’s not that simple,” Scott replied. “But nothing ever is. When you go to an upscale restaurant, the food imitates art, does it not? The presentation appears effortless. Do

you really believe it is easy? Of course you don't, but you don't think about it. You just admire the craftsmanship and not how much work went into preparing it. It's no different from this."

Frustration and anger bubbled over.

"No! Scott, I need to know exactly what will happen. Won't me there come back to this reality and not have Mae? And how will the Mae from here know her place there?"

Scott paused a few beats making sure Val was done purging before answering. "Again, it was all in your paperwork you signed, but I understand you're upset, so I'll explain it again."

"Yes," Val responded. The acid in his voice eroded any pretense of courtesy. "Please do."

"At its most simple," Scott said, "you here will have what a layperson would call a memory wipe and fresh memories inserted to assist in the transition, making it as seamless as possible. The same will occur for Mae of there to make her transition to here as seamless as possible. Since your grafting into that reality was in error, you received no memory wipe or replacement information, so nothing will happen with you since you're already suited for this reality."

Val let that information sink in, and with it, felt the same knot he'd felt in the kitchen earlier twist in his stomach.

That's why Mae told me I was acting differently this morning. From her point of view, I was different. I wasn't the same me she'd known.

"You said there were two choices," Val said. "What's the second choice?"

"Well, we can bring you back here, put you that's here back there and call it good. Of course, we'll refund your money, as this was our error."

"Let me make sure I understand, lest I not recall the legal fine print this time," Val said.

Scott remained quiet.

“So,” Val said, “me there will get his memory wiped and you’ll implant false memories in their place so he’ll assimilate into this reality with no issues. Am I clear?”

“Yep,” Scott answered. “Of course, there will always be a bit of fragmentation, a point at which the psyche will detect a fracture of reality, but the psyche and surrounding awareness will bridge any fissures without too much difficulty.”

Fragmentation? Fracture of reality? Bridging of mental fissures? He talking about these thing as if he were reading off the 5 o’clock air traffic report.

“Uh huh, yeah. And what about Mae? Will she experience fragmentation, fractures, and mental fissures as well?” Val asked.

“No more than she would’ve had the life graft gone according to plan and that you’d already agreed to.”

Val said nothing for a long time.

“You still with me, Val?” Scott said.

After another long pause, Val said, “Alright. Hold tight. I’m going to call Mae, get her to come to me. Should you and I lose connection, how do I get a hold of you?”

“No need to worry. We’ve got you locked in. Just don’t leave that location. When you have Mae, you give me the word and I’ll take care of the rest.”

Moments later, Val had Vesper make the call to Mae’s office. After a tense few moments and a couple of fibs later, Mae was on her way to meet him.

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The New Carolina landscape unfurled like an emerald green carpet below Val's jump craft. This time, the terrain looked whole and familiar. He stole a glance at the passenger side and smiled. He felt at peace with his decision.

Spotting their house, Val began the landing cycle and two minutes later set down in the garage and made his way inside.

In the kitchen, he stopped at the sink at the same spot he'd watched Mae stuffing her face with penne a few hours ago, albeit in a different universe. He rubbed the counter where her hip had rested as he looked around the empty kitchen.

Mae was not here. The house was empty and would remain so forever.

Relishing the accident that provided the means to snatch back what death in this universe had robbed him of, Val smiled.

Savoring the memory of the alabaster smoothness and symmetrical beauty of her face as he kissed her for the last time, the smell of her perfume in her hair as they shared one last embrace, the cute tilt of her head when she'd failed to understand all the things he needed to say after she'd died, his heart overflowed with gratitude for being able to set things straight. With that gratitude, Val felt closure.

With closure came an outpouring of a love he'd not known possible. A love that knew no limits. A love that possessed the power to eradicate a sadness born from its own hand. A love that had rotted on the vine, now through its own redemptive power, had been reborn.

"I love you, Mae Brumford," Val whispered.

He knew a whisper sufficed to fill the thinnest of voids that separated this universe to the next, that his whisper is all he would need to cross that thin void and remember the gift of her; not only in the here, but in the always.

The End

