

FOREWORD

"Arrakis teaches the attitude of the knife - chopping off what's incomplete and saying: 'Now it's complete because it's ended here.'" - *Dune*

If it's true that you have to kill your darlings, you can consider this a form of public execution - but it's also sincerely intended as a celebratory wake.

After finishing "Probability Experiment" at the beginning of 2022, I spent almost the whole rest of that year alternating between working on the book project[°] and planning and writing what I fully intended to be my next novel. That was this one. I had a good premise with a lot of fun opportunity for worldbuilding, a core cast I liked and looked forward to bouncing off each other, and a rough idea of a satisfying theme for the story.

[°] (It is coming, I swear - it's just taken a lot longer than I anticipated, mostly because I lost a lot of time in discovering the *wrong* ways to do layout and typesetting. But it should be out by the end of the year, God willing.)

Unfortunately, I just couldn't get it to "click" the way I wanted. I was lucky with "Probability Experiment," which after the first couple chapters came to life so readily that it practically wrote itself in my head, aside from a few trouble spots. "Nyandemic Story" never did come together that way, no matter how I persevered in trying to write it. And the more I wrote, the more it felt like the whole thing just took too damn long to get moving. Worse yet, I really couldn't figure out how the story overall worked - how the beginning connected to the end, why the end was the end, or what came in between them and why. I had ideas for a bunch of assorted incidents that I liked, but absolutely no structure into which to fit them.

And then, around late October, I was struck by inspiration for another story - one which I like a bit better, which doesn't dawdle so much in getting underway, and most importantly one which I have a clear idea of the progression for. I'm enjoying writing it and I look forward to publishing it, once I've gotten the book project out the door and made sufficient headway on the new story.

But the problem is, I just haven't been able to get over "Nyandemic Story." I keep feeling like I'd rather be working on the one when I'm trying to work on the other, and vice versa - and there's too much shared DNA between them to do both, even if I had the time and energy. Continuing to develop this story would involve pilfering stuff that fits better in the other one. No matter how I might like each of them, I have to choose one or the other - and if I have to do that, I'm not going to choose the one I was already stuck on.

And yet, I *do* like this story, dammit. I like the setting, I like the characters, I like various bits of business that I got to write. I don't want to just throw it away, and I *can't*, anyway, because when I try to do that I find pieces of it sticking in my head and trying to reincarnate in the new story. I don't want to just assemble that one out of cast-off bits of this one simply because I'm too attached to let them die.

And so, I'm doing this: just publishing the damn thing as-is, incomplete, **clearly labelled as a fragment** and **not planned to be continued**, not because I think it's bad or I'm unhappy with it, but because I'm trying to focus on something that I hope will be better still, and this keeps getting in the way. It's an exorcism, if you will, and I hope this thing can find some rest.

(And yes: this is, in part, a satire on Current Events. If you think that's in poor taste, well, I won't tell you you're wrong, but I'm of the opinion that, having suffered through the real thing, we've all earned the right to at least get a few snarky chuckles out of it; if it triggers bad associations in you personally, you have my sympathies. In either case, you have my blessing to ignore it and go on your way. The new story won't be like that, for what it's worth.)

- *NothingSpecial*

1. THE CAT WHO WALKED BY HIMSELF

I still remember the day the virus was reported to have made landfall in the States. We were forty minutes into a fifteen-minute meeting, with no sign of rescue.

"We *really* need to get these BPAs scheduled," Bryce was saying. In the background, the phone screamed with about six different calls all coming in at once, and only one of us was *supposed* to be answering during the morning stand-up; that was Sam, who was taking yet a seventh call at the moment.

"This is *the* key thing setting us apart from our competitors," he said, continuing with the usual litany. "Our clients pay the rates they do because they know we're *best in class*[°] and they can expect this kind of expertise and care, and we can't afford to be lax about it. We have clients that haven't had one in *six months* and counting, guys!"

"BPA" stands for "Best Practice Alignment," not that you care. In house parlance at Fulcrum Solutions, that meant driving out to the client site with bagels, spending five or ten minutes failing to do any glad-handing because everyone there was busy with actual work, and blowing the next two hours running down a zillion-item checklist to ensure that nobody had an attack of the galloping crazies and plugged the backup server into the toaster oven in the last couple months.

[°] ("Best in class," for the record, meant "not actually best in class, but if we repeat it enough it'll come true, maybe.")

You see a lot of this in corporate IT: practices that might've *started* with the kernel of a good idea, but accreted layer after layer of over-engineering and unnecessary formalization in the name of "standards" and "best practices," finally ossifying into this Byzantine hassle that only got in the way of dealing with the *actual* issues our clients paid us to handle.

Much like the morning stand-up, which was *supposed* to end at 8:00, when we "opened," but regularly ran to 8:30-8:45. Today, we'd be lucky to finish by 9:00. There was no good reason for it to run this long; everything we actually *needed* to discuss could be covered in about ten minutes, if people spoke concisely and stayed on-topic. The hell of it was, *most* of us could do that - it was the people who loved to hear themselves talk that were the problem.

One of them was Bryce, who called himself the CEO despite being the only management in the company, because all of his golf buddies were CEOs.[°] He was a big believer in cargo-cult management: the idea that if you simply have enough meetings and use all the right buzzwords, success must follow, in accordance with the principles of sympathetic magic. If it were possible to make a facsimile of an IPO out of bamboo and coconuts, we'd probably spend our mornings doing a ritual dance around that instead.

[°] (Apparently being an owner or president just doesn't cut it anymore.)

The other was Curtis, who was now on an extended bloviation about tickets he hadn't gotten around to yet, how he'd *actually* been doing *other* very important things that'd eaten up all his time, and how he was much too involved with what he hadn't started on to hand it off to anyone else. He was the type that gives Trekkies a bad name: *totally* unable to distinguish between relevant information and useless minutia, always preferring two of the wrong words to one right one, and not nearly as smart as he thought he was. With him and Bryce in the same meeting, even simple tasks like reviewing the support queue turned into an ordeal.

If there was a saving grace here, it was that we had two separate offices and those of us in Rancho Dorado could enjoy the wonders of teleconferencing: the mute and blackout buttons. As long as the three of us in the bullpen didn't do anything visible over-the-shoulder from our webcams, we were free and clear. My strategy was to stick to MUDs and public-access Unix hosts - anything Bryce saw running in a terminal window he figured was technical and beyond his ken.

Not everyone was subtle about it, though. Giles worked right in the home office and it wasn't hard to notice that he spent these moments on his wife's Instagram account (she was big into "mermaiding," which was all very fine except for the part where he kept dropping references like we were supposed to be impressed with *him* for it.) But since he had random eye-catching graphs running on four of his five monitors,[°] Bryce never paid attention to the fifth.

° (More monitors equalled more productivity - this was as close to a core principle as anything Bryce believed, because the golf buddies had *three* monitors at their employees' desks, so that was the bare minimum. I had two, which was all I really needed, and he was forever after me to get a third set up.)

...where was I? Right, the *virus*. While Curtis gradually wound his way towards something like a conclusion, Mike pinged me on the company IM system. He was a strange hybrid of mellow, easy-going backpacker hippie, blue-collar salt-of-the-earth type, and surprisingly well-informed news junkie, and was always sending me links to headlines he ran across. His commentary this time was simple enough.

Michael: *Told ya.*

The IM client's auto-preview told me everything: the bizarre new infection we'd heard rumours of had finally turned up on our shores, with the first confirmed cases up in Portland. We'd all talked about it in the weekly review meeting last Thursday, and the monthly financial-report meeting the week before that.° Bryce was blithely hopeful that travel restrictions would keep it confined to Eurasia, but once we learned that it incubated up to two weeks before showing symptoms, the rest of us privately agreed that it was probably already here.

° (More meetings *also* equalled more productivity.)

Christopher: *Yep, that figures.*

It mildly irked me that the IM system was set up with my given name - but it was "best practice," because Bryce's golf buddies agreed that official company communications were no place for frivolity like nicknames, no matter how long you'd gone by one...

Michael: *Guess that means lockdowns 'n shit. 'Least I can still go camping.*

Christopher: *Hell, get a 5G hotspot and a generator and you could probably just live out there.*

Michael: *:D Don't tempt me, man. Out in God's country, just me 'n Bonzo...*

A slight smile crossed my lips. I was definitely not a dog person, but Mike loved that mutt like a brother, and I couldn't help but find it bemusing.

Christopher: *'Course, then you'd never get those BPAs done.*

Michael: *XD Cryin' shame, that.*

Christopher: *So useless. I got more done when the Bug was in the shop, just 'cause I didn't have to haul all over Creation for site visits.*

Christopher: *Really, I could just work from home and be done with it...*

Michael: *Ah, I kinda like 'em. Just don't need to do 'em every couple months is all.*

Christopher: *Yeah, that's 'cause you're actually the social type.*

Michael: *LOL too true. Guess you're gonna be fine with lockdowns, eh?*

I almost fired back; it annoyed me when people acted like I was antisocial, which was usually when I didn't want to come to their parties. I was okay with people, I thought; I could *do* social stuff, if I wanted to. I just...didn't really *want* to. I only needed so much "people time" per month (or year;) there was nothing wrong with that, was there? Why did the more social types get to act like the *rest* of us were the weirdos...?

But Mike wasn't really pushing that view, just amiably ribbing me. I replied with a shrugging emoticon and turned back to the meeting to see if we'd gotten to anything *important*...

"Kit? Kit...?" Bryce was saying. "Mr. Robbins? Your headset working?"

"Huh? Wha...?" Shit, I hadn't been listening. What were we talking about...? "My, uh, my connection was glitching for a minute there. What was the question?"

"We were just hoping that you'd be able to make it this time. Can we count you in?" God, this was about the company picnic again; *speaking* of parties I wasn't eager to attend...

Bryce was dead-set on making this a Big Deal (presumably because the golf buddies did,) despite there being a grand total of seven employees (with the accountant,) and it was an eternal mystery to him that nobody in the Rancho office wanted to join in. We'd explained that yes, the mountains *were* lovely this time of year, and the lake was a nice place for a picnic, but it was also two hours' drive even from *my* place up in Sutter Springs, plus he always reserved spots on *their* side; but it went in one ear and out the other.

And what would I get out of it? A few hours sitting on a beach blanket eating middling hot dogs and chips, drinking the ultra-dank IPAs you just couldn't escape on the west coast, and trying to not watch Giles's wife too closely as she frolicked in the surf,[°] to tune out Curtis talking my ear off about things he didn't understand but thought made him sound smart, and to avoid getting too drunk to safely navigate down winding mountain roads at night. I could think of much better ways to spend Memorial Day weekend; 'course, I'd *actually* just stay indoors and keep to myself...

[°] (Is it still "surf" if it's on a lake? If not, what *is* it?)

"Uh, not sure." I had my strategy for these things: hem and haw, wait for the question to drop, then hope they forget to ask again. "Car's still a bit tetchy with really long hauls," I said, putting the emphasis on *really long* just in case a clue might penetrate his skull. "Think it's about due for a carb rebuild; I can do that over a weekend, but I'll need to get the kit ordered first."

He gave me the kind of *oh, you weirdo* look I was used to getting from people like him. "You might want to think about getting a more reliable vehicle," he chuckled, as I silently bristled. "Mr. Finch can point you to a good dealer, right?"

Yeah, and his Mini's been in the shop how often...? I thought, but I didn't feel like dragging Giles into this. "Most reliable car I've ever owned," I said with a shrug. It was true; a '69 Volkswagen had its issues, but it beat the hell out of the mid-'90s American sedans I used to drive, plus it was simple enough that even I could understand it...and, okay, I'd wanted one since I was a kid, so sue me. They're just *fun*, alright...?

He let it drop, and my hackles settled back down. A mere ten minutes later, we *finally* concluded the meeting - only to find that there were over a dozen new tickets waiting once Sam caught up with the voicemail, on top of what we had open from yesterday. Bryce gave us a grin and a pumped fist over the Zoom connection. "Let's go get 'em, guys!" he said glibly.

"*Gaaahhh*," I hissed, "as if we don't have *enough* on our plates...!" The phone was *still* ringing, but less constantly. I glanced at the clock. "God, I was supposed to be working on CBDA's Exchange server like twenty minutes ago."

Mike shrugged, moseying over to the coffeemaker for another cup. "No helpin' it, man. Boss-man wants to do this, we gotta do it. 'Sides, they're chill over there."

I wondered, out of nowhere, what Robbie would've made of this place. I'd met him at another of the random IT jobs I'd bounced through over the years, back when I lived in Lakeside: a more overt misanthrope than myself, but we got on fairly well regardless, bonding over shared interests and mutual annoyance with our useless sysadmin, who'd been hired on years prior for a regulatory-compliance project we still weren't compliant on by the time I got laid off.

That guy reminded me of Curtis, being a useless blatherer, though he was more the "uncle nobody wants to invite to Thanksgiving" type than the "blowhard dork" type. I'd been annoyed by him, but Robbie *loathed* him; he had zero tolerance for people who talked lots and said little.

God, I hadn't thought about Robbie in, what, two years? Three? I still had his contact info, but I'd never ended up keeping in contact. I had a real knack for that; it wasn't that I didn't *like* some of the people who passed through my life, but...staying in touch was hard, and it wasn't like I had a deep, pressing *need* to talk to them. And then after a year or two, the whole idea of talking to them at all got awkward, so I *really* didn't feel like it...

"Probably can't help being chill when your whole job is beer," Sam chuckled, interrupting my reverie.

"You'd think," Mike said, taking a long pull. "Never seem to have any in the fridge, though. Seems like you oughta get free samples from everybody you're distributing for..."

"It's probably a tax thing," I said, scanning over the support queue. Okay, none of this was *that* critical; I'd better work on my existing tickets, late as I was. "Any time booze changes hands, the government wants a cut. I'm surprised they don't tax parties for the drinking."

"What do *you* know about parties?" Sam chuckled; he was pretty rotund, and I could see it ripple through him. Like Mike, he was an odd duck: on the surface, a typical slacker gamer bro, but unlike most guys in their early twenties he actually had a real financial portfolio and took a serious interest in his investments. It was all Greek to me, but I had to respect him for it anyway.

"Enough to know I don't like 'em," I said dryly. "Everyone you *know* there is talking with someone else, everyone you don't has their own social circle, the beer's never anything you like, and the 'punch' is just cheap vodka and Kool-Aid. The music sucks, if there *is* food it's just chips-'n-dip or hot wings, and if it's at someone's house you feel weird about using the pool. So you spend twenty minutes browsing the bookshelf and feel weird about *that*, then you make awkward excuses and go home, sober and alone." *And they're all just fine without you, and you wonder what you were even doing there...*

He laughed. "You *must* be the life of 'em. You should join us down in the basement at some of my housemates' get-togethers - no pressure or awkwardness, just Xbox, snacks, and edibles if you want 'em."

"I'll, uh, keep it in mind." It bothered me a *little*, but again this was different from Bryce's attitude; maybe not quite laughing-*with*-vs.-laughing-at, but with these guys I didn't feel like I was being *mocked* or condescended to, just joshed with. I...could cope with that. I'd probably half-forget them in a few years, too, and it wasn't like I had a desperate need for any kind of party, basement gaming or otherwise; I was fine by myself. But, y'know...I'd hate it less, probably...

We got on with our day, *finally*, powering through the stuff that'd come up while we sat around yakking as best we could, and more or less kept our heads above water. After the initial rush, I took an hour or so to tend to the automated backups. It was oddly soothing for me, like pruning a *bonsai*; or so I assumed, having never done *bonsai* myself. As usual, I spent my lunch hour as an enchanter in another world as I scarfed down last night's leftovers; then it was back to hitting the queue, and before long it was 5:00.

I clocked out, grabbed my things, and left, strolling down the balcony that ringed the courtyard in our little office complex. On the ground floor, I spent a few minutes staring into the *koi* pond to calm myself, then went out to the parking lot, thinking longingly about home, a nice hefty stout, and my battered recliner. I popped the wing window on the Bug, reached in to open the door (the outer handle had succumbed to fifty years of metal fatigue and a sudden cold snap last fall, and I hadn't gotten around to fixing it,) got situated, and fired her up.

Now don't get me wrong: it *is* a fun car to drive, and it was one of the upsides to living out here that, without four months of road salt each year, I could use it as a daily driver without the floor pans rusting out. But commuting in a major metro area is a special form of Hell, no matter what you're doing it in.

It was only three miles to the freeway entrance, but always fifteen or twenty minutes of constant stop-and-go. The drive home was forty miles on the map, but the first half could take forty minutes itself, with traffic. My daily commute time was north of two hours, and after over a year it was *really* starting to wear on me. I'dve happily gone full work-from-home, if we weren't so stupidly insistent on office presence and site visits...

Normally, I'd at least have the radio to keep my mind occupied; the local classic-rock station did a solid commercial-free rush-hour block. But I hit the freeway, rolled down the window, and cranked up the volume, only to find it pre-empted by a news bulletin stating that the governor's office, following direction from the CDC and the federal government, was recommending lockdown measures, effective ASAP, in response to the arrival of the pandemic on the west coast.