

## The Faces of William Treiss

*“Time forks perpetually toward innumerable futures. In one of them, I am your enemy.” – Jorge*

Luis Borges, “The Garden of Forking Paths”

Every day, William Treiss sits in his office and talks to people he will never meet. These distant souls are awkward, reticent. It’s understandable. They’ve humbled themselves before a stranger and asked him to help decide their life. To many, it feels like surrender. But when the money runs out in twenty years, the proud ones who refuse to bow to circumstance will find themselves broken.

William knows when to bow and when to bend. His well-worn life has assumed a comfortable shape after years of striving. He is waiting for the day he can quietly fade away from the world.

(But there is a little book beneath William’s bed at home that he has not looked at in years, the book where he put all his dreams, sitting, gathering dust... William tries not to think of it.)

In the meantime, William is occupied with the ninth call of the day. The customer’s name, amusingly, is also William Treiss.

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Bill Treiss is slowly dripping an oily fluid into a milky solution when his phone rings unexpectedly. He drops his pipette into the solution and curses as it begins to melt.

Bill checks the number, muttering vague but graphic revenge threats. He answers the phone.

“Who is this?” says Bill. His lips are thin and withdrawn, like a snake’s after it swallows a mouse.

“Hello, William? You told us that you wanted to talk about your finances?” Beneath its syrupy tone, the voice sounds oddly familiar.

Bill looks at the clock and sees how late he’s stayed. His co-workers cleared out hours ago. He can never tell. The lab feels much the same either way.

“Listen, I got caught up in a project. Which you disturbed. I’m very busy right now, can I call you back?”

“That’d be just fine. Call back when you can. Ask for – and I think you’ll appreciate this part – ask for William Treiss, and we’ll talk.” An empty laugh interrupts the empty bluster.

“Who’d have thought there’d be more than one William Treiss in the world, eh?”

“Goodbye.” Bill clicks off the phone. He looks at the solution, now inky black and smoking.

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William sighs. The customer voice always tires him out. He wonders why he bothers when they can hear its false notes as clearly as he can. But that doesn’t matter right now. What matters is that there’s one more call to be made before leaving.

He turns to his schedule, carefully printed by his supervisor and stuck to his desk every day. William never reads the customers’ names until right before their calls come up. He likes to surprise himself now and then.

For example, he is surprised to see that the next name on his list is once again William Treiss.

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Will Treiss's portfolio is looking exceptional this year. It has for years on end. Yet here is Will Treiss, sitting in his cavernous office, glancing at his tasteful gold watch, waiting for a call from a financial planner.

To pass the time, he sets off the mechanism on his desk. It's a gift. He forgets who gave it to him. It's a Newton's cradle, a series of brass balls suspended by wires from a frame. He watches them click against each other, swinging back and forth endlessly. The contraption is cold, mechanical, pointlessly efficient. He has to admit that in some ways, it suits him.

Will's mind turns, unaccountably, to a poem he once read (back when he still read poetry). It described a lecturer who, to thunderous applause, charted the cyclic movements of the stars, the mindless arcs they traced so much like the perpetual motion of this toy before him. In the poem, the speaker went out to look at the night sky and refresh his soul, sick of measurements and calculations and inevitability. Will hadn't seen the stars in years; the lights in the city were too bright, and after a while, he stopped bothering to look, there or anywhere else.

The metronome carries on, heedless of its absurdity. Its rhythmic click-clack fills the room like the rattle of bones in a stone coffin. Abruptly, Will stops it with one hand.

The phone rings. Will readies himself for what he has come to think of as The Test. If anyone was sitting nearby, they would see his expression harden from melancholy vacancy to the righteous scowl of a crusader.

He answers.

"Hello... William... You wanted to talk about your finances?"

"My finances are great. Probably better than yours, champ."

The phone is silent for a bit. "I'm sorry...?" says the voice on the other end.

“Here’s what you should know about me. I earn more than you. I double it, redouble it, every few months. I’m doing fine. You’re not. What are you hoping to get out of this, anyway?” says William.

“You scheduled this call...” begins William, his customer voice abandoned.

“This isn’t about me, this is about you. How do you keep going? Small man in a small job, no prospects or legacy... how do you live?” Something about the planner’s voice bothers Will, but not enough to distract him.

“Do I even know you? What did I do to you?” William says.

“What have you ever done for anyone?” says Will.

Silence.

“You can’t even answer. You know what you are? You’re a waste.”

“What kind of person hires someone just to attack him?” says William, angry for the first time in a long while.

“Who are you to compare yourself to me?”

“Well, I’m... another William Treiss,” says William. He kicks himself mentally for not having a better comeback.

Now Will is silent. Briefly.

“Bullshit,” he says. “There’s only one Will Treiss.”

“William Treiss, son of John and Irma,” says William.

Will: “*Bullshit*. Where are you from?”

William: “Owl Creek, North Carolina.”

Will: “Where’d you go to high school?”

“There was only one –” begins William.

“In the whole county,” finishes Will. “And I prefer not to think of that bumpkin hellhole, so I never tell anyone I went there. You shouldn’t know that. You shouldn’t know any of this. And I don’t know what you’re doing, or how, or why. But don’t think you can win this little game. Don’t think for one second that I’ll let you fuck with my head because you’re bitter that you haven’t achieved what I have. You want to pretend you have my life? Well, guess what? You’re not me. You can’t even compete. I’m the only Will Treiss. And you? You’re nothing.”

Click.

Miles away, William Treiss is still holding the phone, staring at his cubicle wall as he listens to the static.

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The drive from the office is long and tense. Every car behind William is tailing him, and every driver is another angry Will Treiss.

William stops at a diner by the side of the road. It’s an old favorite of his, and he could use the familiarity.

Just after his food arrives and the waitress turns away, he finds he has an unexpected guest. It’s a man in a white coat with graying hair who slides himself into the opposite seat of William’s booth. William looks at the familiar face and feels his stomach perform some death-defying acrobatics.

The man who looks just like him is holding a knife. His twin is holding it so loosely that William thinks the man just forgot to put it down. Then William notices where the knife is pointed.

“Check please,” says William.

After an agonizing minute, there is no response.

**“Check please!”** shouts William.

No one seems to hear. The waitress is busy and glassy-eyed. The people in the booths nearby get up, normal as can be if not for their uncanny synchronization, and leave without looking his way. It is not that they are avoiding him; it's that it never occurs to them to look.

The scene has taken on an air of unreality. It is as if the diner were taken from the world and reduced to a drawing, two-dimensional and crude. At the corner of his eyes, William can see flickering, as of a dying television.

The world is receding from William Treiss, leaving only himself and his mirror image, his own worst enemy – himself. Bill. Another William Treiss.

“I thought I recognized your voice. Less sugary than on the phone, but unmistakable. It should be. I've heard it often enough.” Bill's voice is casual and familiar, as if he's known William his whole life. Which, come to think of it, he has.

“See, I thought there was something strange about how your call came at the worst possible moment,” he continues, tracing figure-eights in the air with his knife. “How, at a stroke, you wiped out years of work. And I thought to myself, ‘This can't be coincidence. Someone is out to destroy my legacy. Someone wants me to die in obscurity, alone.’ So I replayed the call again and again in my mind, until I recognized your voice for what it was: a mockery of my own. And you even look like me! Best plastic surgery I've ever seen. It's not just improbable, but impossible.”

William feels as if lightning is about to strike.

“So,” says Bill, as his eyes widen and the false charm falls away, “if we've entered the realm of science fiction, then what does that make you? A clone? A shape-shifter? My evil twin? And before you jump in and say you're as confused as I am,” Bill adds as William begins to

protest, “know that I don’t like being patronized. There is no coincidence. Not like this. And you may have taken my legacy from me, but I’m not going to let you take my life.”

William’s dodge is as graceful as one might expect of a cubicle-bound office worker, but it is enough. He runs – away from the now-torn pleather seat, the shiny countertops, the still-steaming food, the knife-wielding maniac, and the strangest day of his life so far.

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When he gets home, William emerges from his car with the easy grace of a routine so deeply ingrained that not even the fundamental breakdown of reality can disturb it. But then again, Will is in a much better position to appreciate his life’s recent detour to the Twilight Zone than most. For years, he has waited with a sick and hopeful heart for the universe to pull the rug out from under him. As a child, he could never believe in the painful mundanity of the world he saw around him – the lines and forms and telemarketing. In the last few years, that is all he has believed in. Almost. But today’s events have relit the flame of his fantasy. All those years of hoping for the mystical, the science-fictional, vindicated!

If only this new reality weren’t so terrifying.

William remembers a story he read once (back when he read stories) about time. Not one time, or even many times, but *all* times: the possible futures which emerge from any action, anywhere, by anyone. Entire worlds spring up from every decision, the story said, because where else would the unchosen choices go? According to this hypothesis, every time William buys a pack of gum, or confesses his love to a woman, or gives up on a hope, another world emerges with another William who does otherwise. These worlds, these Williams, are as real as each other, but separated by an impassable metaphysical gap, so that they might as well be fiction. Or so he thought.

William wonders which possibility is worse: that this breach of the laws of physics is the random fluke of an uncaring universe, or that *something* has taken a very personal interest in William's life. Or, more appropriately, lives.

And of all the Williams he could have met, why a mad scientist and an overcompensating bully of an executive? Straight from central casting or the nuthouse, he thinks.

Then, of course, there's the fact that no one else noticed his encounter, seemed to be actively *prevented* from noticing it, which raises even more disturbing possibilities that William is not prepared to contemplate right now.

When he reaches the living room, William collapses onto his couch. He turns on the TV, hoping for the comforting white noise of a sitcom rerun to blot out the clamor in his head. Instead, he gets the news.

There are no reports of an attempted doppelganger murder in a local diner. William wishes he could say he was surprised, but he's honestly not. He knows that he's gone beyond the world of police investigations and televised manhunts. Subtler forces are at work here, blinding people to the unreal happenings before their very eyes.

What does surprise him is the image of Senator "Willy" Treiss, (D) Ohio, bowing his head before the press corps like a falling colossus.

"Senator, why did you allow that base to close, despite the cost in jobs to the state?"

"Senator, who is the woman in these photos?"

"Senator, can you explain —"

William punches the remote and the screen goes dark. But the image of the demolished statesman sticks in his mind. *There but for the grace of God go I.* William is haunted by the thought, and by the now certain knowledge that Someone is fucking with him.



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In his darkened bedroom, William lies awake.

An hour ago, for the first time in years, he allowed himself to really think about the notebook under his bed. It was his life, or most of it: a remnant of childhood that he kept alive until a few years after college. In the pages of that book he had recorded his most cherished and harebrained thoughts since age 8. He filled it with his hopes, his goals, his novel ideas. It had been an anticipation of his legacy. But with time, he learned practicality, and he set aside such childish things.

Then, for just a moment, he had reached for the dog-eared old book, before letting his hand fall away from it.

Now William is sleepless, and seeking solace, he turns on the radio. He's looking for a jazz station, but the dial misses it. Instead, he is treated to the sound of Billy Treiss's latest hit, "My Cross to Bear." To his horror, it is country.

*"Lord I know I'm born a sinner/Born headed for the grave/But I give my highest thanks to you/'Cause I know that I've been saved –"*

William slams the off-button with righteous fury. After another hour lying awake, he admits to himself that he cannot get that twangy tune out his head.

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The next day is a Saturday, and William decides to go to the mall. He expects that this familiar sight will anchor him in reality. But the marble and white tile, once so elegant and charming, today seems sterile and alienating. For the first time, William realizes the absurdity of this place, the gaudy façade that barely conceals naked greed and envy.

And in the windows and floors of the mall, in shiny marble and tile and glass, he sees a thousand William Treisses, reflected back at him, warped, mocking, inescapable.

William is about to leave when he sees his spitting image emerge from a tailor, looking at a gold watch. Before he can run away, his twin looks up – straight at him.

For a moment, their eyes lock.

Will Treiss takes a step forward.

William runs.

The sound of his flight and Will's pursuit echoes through the unreal halls of the mall, yet no one seems to notice. The shoppers in their way sidestep unconsciously, not even turning to look at the desperate chase. No one is coming to William's rescue; he might as well be in another world entirely.

At the edge of his vision, the flickering returns, intensifies; the air seems to warp and crackle with strange energies. William wonders if this is what a man sees right before leaving his body, and hopes very much that he won't find out just yet.

Eventually, and much to his own shock, William gets enough of a lead on Will to hide. He ducks into the dressing room of a sportswear store and waits for his lungs to stop burning. He looks at the mirror for a while in spite of himself.

And then, as William sighs in relief, Will enters.

They are the same height, but Will seems to tower over him. His suit is as tattered as a dog's plaything, his face crimson, his eyes bloodshot and dilated. He leaves neither William room to breathe.

"You..." Will begins. "You have no idea what you started. You thought you could just fuck with me? Copy me and try to take what's mine?"

“Oh, for God’s sake,” says William, “why do I always have to talk so much?”

“You don’t, *I* do!” says Will. “And you’re damn well going to listen. You and all the other two-bit fuckers have always wanted what I’ve got. You can’t get together with each other without plotting to take what’s mine. You even managed to copy my voice and my looks. But deep down you know you’ll never be me. Because you gave up. You don’t care enough to do better, so you steal from someone who does. Pathetic.”

William has officially had it with this shit.

“And you’re a paragon of humanity, is that it? Arranging calls just to tear down people you’ll never meet, blustering on and on about your superiority... Know what I think? I think you’ve done nothing with your life – nothing you really care about. If not, why defend it so much against people who never asked? Why try so hard to find out how they justify their lives, if not to find a purpose for your own? Could it be that no matter how hard you try, something’s not quite right?”

Will narrows his eyes. “You... you don’t know that. Goddam it, what do you think you are?”

William answers: “Better than you, champ.”

Will is on William in an instant, knocking him to the floor, raining blows from above. They are inept, but powerful. William cannot think, cannot see, can only feel pain and muster a burst of strength to twist out from under Will and push him...

... into the mirror. Hard.

The mirror shatters, and Will and William fall through into another dressing room, identical in every respect, except for the shattered glass and blood on the floor. Will lies in a crumpled heap, his face down and dripping. William cannot tell if he is breathing.

Will's watch and clothing shifted during the fight, and the things they once hid are now in plain sight. William can see a tightly-wrapped bandage on his doppelganger's wrist that the huge watch covered, and a note that spilled out of Will's suit pocket. He picks it up and reads the hastily-written text. It rambles, but it is clearly not the work of a man who wanted money to be his legacy. It chronicles the long descent of a man who cared too much: the pressure for success. The slowly growing hollow space in his heart. The desperate attempt to find a purpose turned to ritualized verbal abuse to strangers, in a perversion of the Socratic method. The disappointment. It ends like this:

“How do I live with myself? How does anyone?”

William looks up from the note and into the room that should not exist. The flicker is no longer in the corner of his eye. It fills the space around him like heat haze, warping the air, the walls. There is more light in the room than the fluorescent fixtures should allow.

William considers turning back, but sees that the mirror through which he entered is perfectly intact. He looks back to the floor. It is still covered with blood, glass, and the body of another self who may or may not be dead, which William refuses to confirm one way or another for fear of what he might find. William feels bile rising in his throat as he looks down at the possible corpse; he cannot stay in this room any longer. He barrels out of the dressing room, out of an identical sportswear store, and into the atrium of what looks like, but is not, his mall.

The atrium is filled with himself. The unnatural light reflects off the too-shiny surfaces of the walls, creating uncountable reflections beyond even what William had already seen. The memorial statue at the center of the atrium is his body cast in bronze, hand upturned to the glass cupola in the ceiling. And walking across the floor, with many gaits on many paths, are other Williams: some scarred, some fat, some healthy, some half-dead on their feet. They flicker into

and out of existence like rain passing into and out of sight. Most are blind to the rippling space around them, but some notice each other, and run, or fight, or die.

One of them notices William himself and walks over with an easy smile.

William feels like an ant looking up at the descending foot of an angry god.

“So,” says the other, “I take it this is your first time. Do you still go by William?”

After William accepts that one of his alternates is not immediately trying to kill him, he answers yes.

“Call me Liam,” says Liam. “And let me bring you up to speed. Come on, walk with me, talk with me.”

Liam leads William on a path around the statue as he explains:

“We both read that story, when we were kids, about the many worlds our actions create. They’re supposed to exist in parallel, never making contact with each other. Well, that part’s wrong. Sometimes, the... borders, I guess you’d call them, weaken. They worlds bleed into each other. But the breaches are small. Typically, the effects are limited to one person.”

“That’s no small thing to that person,” says William.

“Believe me, I know. The first time you meet yourself from another world seems unbearably crazy, but that’s nothing on the second, and the third... but you know that. Eventually, assuming you don’t lose your mind, you get used to it.”

“It’s still happening to you? For how long? Wait, is this my life now?”

“Not necessarily. Some versions of me – us – whatever only had it for about a minute. I know because I only saw them for about that long before they faded out of my world and back into theirs. Some last longer. Some get it twice, like I did.”

William: “Well, that’s shit luck.”

Liam: “In an infinite multiverse, it had to happen to one of us. On the plus side, it meant I was here to help you out a bit. Maybe you have good luck. Or Someone’s looking out for you.”

William: “Please. Two of my alternates tried to kill me, and one sang country music. Someone hates my guts.”

Liam: “Well, you know they say, I – I mean, *Someone* moves in mysterious ways. If He’s done things right, you won’t know He’s done anything at all.”

William: “Did you just refer to yourself as – ?”

Liam stopped walking and looked at his bare wrist. “Well, look at that! If my calculations are correct, you’re about to run out of time. You’ll fade out of this intersection between worlds and go back to you own. Maybe you’ll have to deal with this again, and maybe you never will. This might be your last chance to get some answers from someone\* who knows.”

William: “Why were all the alternates I met so... so...”

Liam: “Insane and/or miserable? Why is anyone? Why are *you*?”

And William feels himself being pulled back through the throbbing air and the sportswear store and the two dressing rooms, until he finds himself back where he started, staring into a mirror. The man who looks back past the blood and the cracks is both himself and not himself. He sees, like a brilliant, distant star, the man he would be, the Platonic idea of William Treiss, staring back at him. He has always been there. He has never been there.

And he is fading, as he always does, back into that other world that no one can ever reach.

*\*Or was it Someone?* William wonders a few seconds later

William is left looking at himself – here, now, standing over the body of another William Treiss. He is immensely tired. He leaves the room, trying not to stumble, and hopes for mercy for all the poor William Treisses out there. Even Will, if he's not beyond it.

William goes home. Tomorrow, he will return to the changing room and see no sign of Will but a cracked mirror and the note he left. But for now that doesn't matter. Because today, William has taken out his old notebook. He reads until he reaches a blank page. Then, slowly, he begins to write:

“Every day, William Treiss sits in his office and talks to people he will never meet...”