

' -- and Subsequent Construction' (v1.1)

Spider Robinson

God gets away with things no one else could.

Want proof?

The greatest comedians of the last century, the ones who lasted longest commercially and physically, were named *hope* (who always looked young), *burns* (who always looked old), and *miltin' b[oy/g]irl* (remembered for his drag routines). Then there were *skel[e]ton*, who slumped when he got tired; *'kay*, who was absurdly agreeable; and *Cid Caesar*, who returned from the dead when he slowed down, slimmed down, and got control of his ego. The only woman one can call to mind from that generation was named *ball*, whom they loved loose, see?; enough said there. Not many would accept irony that heavy-handed from an author ... yet the twentieth century swallowed it from God without comment, laughing their heads off. Today, in 2010, I'm the only one who seems to have noticed.

Remember that: it may help you with what follows.

I'm a mathematician by training, and I've been a relativist. I've logged trips to six different star systems. I pray not to a god, but to the Nameless; and I don't try to send my prayers anywhere -- I just try to *be* them. I remember well the prayer I was being that night as I drove from home to my lab ...

Thank you, Nameless!

For all my life, the statement [(good luck) > (bad luck)] has tended to obtain -- consistently enough to compensate for my basic tragedy: having been born a supergenius. Want proof? The foster parents who have always sworn they picked their little Iris on the basis of my toothless smile happened to be a NASA image specialist and a chaoticist: experts in, respectively, the universe's surface appearance and its underlying causes. They tutored me at home until I passed their competence at age ten and was admitted to UCLA. Mom was a Buddhist and Dad a Taoist. No other sort of background could have prepared me so well to be a relativist -- that's why there are so few of us, which is why we're so absurdly well paid -- and if I hadn't been a relativist I would not have met my beloved husband Teodor (whose name means "gift of God").

In case you missed it, I've just defined an ascending curve from First Luck to Best Luck ... because a good marriage is one of the most worthwhile things a human can make.

The proof of that statement lurks within the proximate cause of the prayer I was being as I hurtled down the highway that night. Just before I'd left our home to drive to work, Ted had given me a series of orgasms so exquisite and intense that it was a good thing the act of driving is these days essentially finished once you've defined your destination to the car ... and furthermore, he had declined my offer to return the favor. ("Sometimes I just like to make my Iris dilate," he'd said.)

Do you see why that was so special? One of the hardest things a person can learn is to forgive herself for the massive extent of her own selfishness -- and such selfishness is *necessary*, because you can't love anyone else until you love yourself utterly. I'd always had trouble in that area until I met Ted; thank the Nameless, he was able to persuade me that he enjoyed my sexual greediness as much as *I* did ... which freed me to appreciate *his* sexual greediness, whenever the wind blew from that direction, and all the other kinds of delicious mutual greediness as well.

My smug contentment at owning a marriage so good that we didn't feel the need to keep books on each other was so pervasive, that evening, that there was no room left in my heart for frustration at how poorly my work was going --

-- until my car, counting off broken-white-lines traversed, concluded it had reached its required coordinates, shut itself down, scanned the area for unfriendlies, and unlocked my door. At the sight of my lab, sitting amid endless hectares of cemetery like the millionaire's mausoleum it might yet become one day, I did an instant emotional one-eighty and became depressed.

What use, I asked myself, are genius, wealth, fame, and one of the great marriages of the Solar System ... if your work won't work? I actually tried to slam the car door.

This funk persisted while I persuaded the lab door I was me, entered the building, stripped in the antechamber (unlike most people these days, I dislike driving nude), and entered the lab proper -- whereupon sadness vanished.

Standing at the far end of the room was someone I recognized at once. I part my hair in the middle, so it was the breasts that confirmed the identification: right noticeably larger than the left. This was no mirror-reversed image.

My visitor was me.

"Thank the Nameless," I cried happily, and then, "What *took* me so long?"

Me grinned at I.

The profession he created was ideal for me. It paid the highest salary in human history -- in return for which I was *required* to spend days at a time meditating on the imaginary distinctions between mathematics, physics, philosophy and religion. In itself, that should have contented any supergenius ... but one relativistic "day," as I was contemplating the second of Ikimono-roshi's three splendid 4-D *jukugo*, drugged to the eyeballs with don't-sleep (somewhere between Sol and Sirius A/B -- going to the dogs, that is), I achieved the insight that should have made time-travel practical.

Which caused me to shut down the engine, forfeiting my pay for that trip, and go look up a passenger named Teodor I'd met during turnover and drag him off to bed with me, which helped us finish beginning to fall in love, which inspired him to write a song so good it forced us to get married -- yes, he's *that* Teodor -- but these are other stories. Another time.

It took Ted and me four agonizing years to force the government to let me retire - - hell, I understand their position; there were only forty-six relativists alive and sane at that time -- but finally I was free to chase my chimera full-time. Perhaps my motivation will seem inadequate to you, especially if you're one of the hundreds who debarked at the Sirius System two weeks later than you expected, but it was sufficient for me: I wanted to go backward in time and meet my biological (as opposed to my "real") mother. Emotional considerations aside, it would have been useful to finally know rather than deduce my medical and genetic history. But only a

fool puts emotional considerations aside: above all, I needed to know whether I forgave her.

In any case, there finally came a time when I was able to enter my ideal laboratory/zendo and put my full attention on time travel for ten hours a night. (I wish the biophyzzle folks would buckle down and solve immortality; 200-odd years just isn't enough time for a person to get any serious thinking done. There's always *something*, you know?)

What ensued was two solid months of frustration ... which got worse as time passed. The question that kept digging around under my skin like a burrowing parasite was: *where the hell was I?*

(Am I going too fast? Brunner tells the story of a prof scrawling equations on the lecture-hall blackboard who declaimed, "It is therefore obvious -- " ... frowned, scratched his head, left the hall amid growing murmurs, and returned ten minutes later to announce triumphantly, "I was right: it *is* obvious!" I often have the same trouble communicating with those more fortunate than myself. Hyperintelligence is a very mixed blessing.)

My antinomy was this: if I were to succeed in inventing ... oh, let's give in and call it a time machine ... I was sure the first thing I would *do* with it (after testing it for safety) would be to come back and tell me I was going to succeed. Naturally I would not have told myself *how* I'd done it -- don't you hate it when someone tells you how the book is going to come out? -- but I'm so cocky I didn't see how it could hurt to have my cleverness confirmed in advance.

So the fact that I had not met me during my first two months of work had been unnerving. No: maddening!

And now, at last, here me was. The sense of relief was overwhelming.

"Eventually," me said, "we'll either have to restructure English, or speak math. But for now, let's try to keep this as simple as possible. You can call me Jay, eh?"

I believed I understood. Jay is what comes after Eye-for-Iris in the alphabet, and the way Jay phrased it raised resonances of another old-time comedian we both loved because he had only a single joke to his name: his name. I forgot what sort of bird a jay is.

Pantomiming the classic "Me Tarzan, you Jane," I said, "I ... Jay ... 'kay," and had the satisfaction of seeing my self smile at one of my own puns. No one else but Teodor ever does.

But there was something about that smile I recognized all too well, even without the usual mirror-reversal.

Jay was *miserable*, through and through. So saturated with sadness, I think even another person could have seen it.

"What's wrong?" I cried ... and then remembered what had once made me look that sad, and what had cured me. My yo-yo heart plummeted again. "Oh, *no!* Ted's -
- "

"No," Jay said at once. "It's almost worse than that, Iris. He's still alive. But we're divorced. Bitterly."

I screamed. First time in my life. Then: "WHY?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Hell. Of course not. Thank you. Any ... any hope at all?"

"I don't think so," she said.

Despair. "Ah Jay, Jay -- why did you *tell* ... cancel: I asked you. Oh, *damn* me! And my cursed curiosity ... "

I had never in my life wished more fervently that I'd been born a normal human being, able to *not* think things through if I chose. Can you imagine how fervently that is? I wasted ten whole silent seconds feeling sorry for myself -- a lifetime record -- before I was able to turn my attention to feeling sorry for my *other* self ... who had been in this pain for much longer than I had. That selfishness I mentioned earlier. "Is there anything I can do to help you, Jay?"

"Yes."

"What?"

Jay didn't answer. In a second, I got it. If you'd lost your life's one love, wouldn't you give anything to be with him one last time if you could? "Here," I said, and gave her my key ring.

A fraction of her sadness seemed to lift from her. "Thank you, Iris!"

"He'll be pleasantly surprised," I told her, trying to make this sad consolation-prize as happy as possible. "He's ready for some loving, and not expecting to get it sooner than dawn at the earliest. Just tell him your selfish need to hear him groan with joy overcame your need to work; it'll flatter the hell out of him. Uh ... if you think of it, afterward, kiss him once for me."

"I will," she promised. "I should be back by dawn. If ... if you could use some consolation yourself, then ... "

The concept was horridly hilarious, mind-boggling; I groped in vain for a response.

She turned and left hastily.

My pain was so great that I could not contemplate it. Greater, in other words, than the fire at the heart of a star-drive. My choices were to go mad, or to drown myself in my work.

After all, I knew now that I could succeed. That I had ... would have had ... done so.

First invent the time machine, Iris. Then revamp English to fit the new facts.

I booted up my computer and got started. Somewhere in the back of my mind as I worked was the mad, less-than-half-believed hope that somehow I might employ a completed time machine to avert the disaster in my future, to use an "undo" key on reality. It was illogical, but so is all hope.

An hour later I roared with frustrated rage and pounded on my keyboard. Zero progress.

No. Less than zero. I had succeeded in *proving* that the line of attack I'd been using was a dead end. And I could see no other.

I wished I'd cheated, and pumped Jay for hints before letting her go.

Why hadn't I? In too much of a hurry, yes ... but *why*?

It hit me like a slap. One small component of the eagerness with which I'd agreed

to Jay's pitiful request has been ... oh, shit ... relief. Relief from a minor nagging guilt. At having accepted Ted's gift of unreciprocated pleasure, earlier that night.

I had welcomed Jay's intervention because it would help me balance a set of books I prided myself on not keeping.

Why? Because now that I knew I was going to be divorced from Ted some day, I was subconsciously operating in accordance with one of the basic principles of star-travel: "When the ship lifts, all bills are paid." I had been able to live with unbalanced books because I'd believed the ship was never going to lift. But if Ted and I *were* going to separate, my selfish subconscious did not want to leave owing him any debt -- even one as trivial as an unreciprocated orgasm.

... which implied that I felt the separation was *imminent* ...

The second insight hit with the force of a death-blow, although my subconscious seemed to have known it for an hour.

Oh, Nameless! All she has to do, in the heat of passion, is to make the slightest slip, offer the most harmless of hints. Ted's quick: he'll pick up on it at once, even in the heat of passion, and then he'll get the whole story out of her --

-- *and what will he think of me then?*

What would you think? Suppose you learned that your spouse had conspired with her divorced future-self to take advantage of you ... to steal from you love and affection *which you would have withheld if you'd been in possession of all the facts?*

Future-Ted presumably had what seemed to him good and sufficient reasons to withhold his love from Future-Iris, from Jay. Therefore Jay's actions constituted rape, seduction-by-guile. Ted would see that at once if he learned the truth --

-- and I, present-I, Iris, his trusted wife, had collaborated in his rape --

Dear Nameless -- had I destroyed my own marriage? No wonder he was going to divorce me: I had betrayed his trust. In order to do a favor for Jay, for my self. Without thinking ...

Only a supergenius could have been so stupid! To confirm the awful inevitable, I phoned home.

There was no answer -- the answer I'd half-expected -- so I punched in my override code to activate the home-camera anyway. It showed our ... what had been our ... bedroom, empty, sheets snarled by illicit love. There was something visible on the floor; I zoomed in on it.

It was a sheet of paper, handwritten; dear Ted was so old fashioned. At max magnification I could read what was written on it.

The best song he'd written in his life. So good that even the best melody could not have added much to it. More than a song: a poem. I can reproduce it from memory:

Iris by Ted Rowe

*Tending to tension by conscious intent, declining declension, disdaining dissent,
into the dementia dimension we're sent: we are our content, and we are content.*

*Incandescent invention and blessed event; tumescent distention, tumultuous
descent; our bone of convention again being spent,*

*I am your contents, and I am content to be living ... to be trying ... to be crying
... to be dying ... I want to be giving ... to be making ... to be breaking ... to be*

taking all you have ...

Assuming Ascension, Assumption, assent, all of our nonsense is finally non-sent ... with honorable mention for whatever we meant; you are my content, and I am content

How glorious, to see such a song, with my name on it.

How terrible, to see that the sheet of paper on which it was written had been torn nearly in half and flung to the floor.

Jay had made some slip; he had guessed.

I broke the connection and buried my head in my hands.

My next conscious thought, an indeterminate time later, was:

How could me do this to I?

How could Jay, my very own self, have done this horrid thing -- when she had to have known it would blow up in our face, that it would precipitate all our mutual misery?

With that question, my brain woke up and began to think for the first time that night.

My line of work had required me to study a little astronomy -- an interesting field for a mathematician -- and one of the few anecdotes from the history of astronomy which had stuck in my mind was the story of Fritz Zwicky's "Method of Negation and Subsequent Construction." Zwicky said he *began* with the absolute certainty that dwarf galaxies must exist, *because Edwin Hubble said they could not ...* and thus certain, was able to prove their existence. This form of reasoning had amused me, so I'd remembered it.

I employed it now.

I wanted so badly to believe that Jay could not be me -- that not even time and sustained pain could make me so stupid as to cause that pain -- that I *assumed* it.

And that single axiom made all anomalies disappear, caused things to fall into place with an almost audible click. I came close to shouting aloud the word, "Eureka!"

I'll take you through it step by step.

Postulate that my unknown biological mother was at least highly intelligent. Not a supergenius like me, necessarily, but I can't see her as a dummy. Even now, no one knows for sure how much of genius is hereditary and how much is environmental, but grant me the premise.

Admittedly, she lived most of her life during the dark ages just ended. Provisionally accept the current theory that genius and genius-plus children tend to be borne by mothers over 30, and say that Mother (as opposed to Mom, who raised me) was born around 1955. The Stone Age as far as women were concerned.

But even if you assume her luck was minimal, that she was a poverty-stricken handicapped ugly single-parent in an era which treated single-parents barbarically ... still and even so, it would *seem* that she ought to have been able to cope with parenthood, at least for longer than the week or two she stuck it out.

But suppose the poor bitch birthed *twins* ...

Suppose further that my hypothetical identical twin -- let's call her, for the sake of the argument, "Jay" -- had even fractionally less than my own good luck in foster parents. Not hard to believe.

Endless studies have uncovered cases in which identical twins raised separately, unaware that a twin existed, had lived astonishingly similar lives, down to their professions, IQs, favorite swear words and the names of their spouses and children.

But with even a slight wrinkle in the blueprint, Jay might have grown to maturity without ever having learned the single most crucial life-lesson I had learned to date: that it's okay to be selfish.

Supergenuses who lack that realization cannot love themselves fully. This must surely inhibit, twist their intelligence. Such a crippled supergenius might well cause her own marriage to self-destruct, to drive away a loving husband because of her inevitable contempt for anyone stupid enough to give unconditional love to a monster like herself.

That list of great comedians I started with? One I left out was *marks*, who said, "I could never belong to a club that would have me as a member." He went through quite a few broken relationships before merciful death eased his magnificent, needless suffering.

How might such a self-contemptuous woman punish herself for hurting and driving away a good and loving man?

Well, if she knew or somehow learned that she had a twin, she might be moved to research her. And if that twin's life was turning out infuriatingly better than her own, she might just construct an elaborate and cruel hoax to wreck her sister's marriage too ...

As far as I was concerned the thing was proved. Yet I turned to my terminal. I intended to finally use some of the awesome clout and access even an ex-relativist can command to smash through all the bureaucratic barriers against my learning the name of my mother and the circumstances of my birth and adoption. I had not planned to do so until I had a working time machine and could act on the information ... but I was aware that Negation and Subsequent Construction is a ladder of dubious strength, and I wanted this nailed down.

But as my modem program came up on the screen, the door to the lab opened and Ted came in. He was pushing Jay along before him by brute force; she was swearing brilliantly in Russian, my own favorite language for cursing. He locked the door behind them with his coded card, released her, and stepped past her to face me.

"I'm sorry, darling," I blurted, springing to my feet. "I wasn't thinking clearly -- "

"In your place I think I might have done the same thing," he interrupted. "It was a sweet, selfish, human thing to do. Nothing worth losing a mate like you over. Very few things warp your judgment, my love: I'm flattered that the prospect of losing me is one of them." He smiled, and burst into tears.

So I did too. We embraced fiercely.

"I know how *I* figured it out," I said when I could. "But how did *you* figure it out?"

"You'll like it," he promised. "Nothing I could think of could have suddenly made you so bad a lover."

One of many reasons I love my Ted: he keeps his promises. I tightened my

embrace.

"You can't hold me," Jay snarled. "This can't be construed as a citizen's arrest: nothing I've done is a felony." She poked futilely at the locked door.

"You seem to know me pretty well, sister," I said. "How much do I care for law?"

She paled. "What are you going to do to me?" she asked us.

"Your privilege, love," Ted said to me.

I nodded. "The nastiest, most sadistic, most poetically appropriate thing I can think of," I told my twin. "We're going to try to heal you." She looked shocked. "You're crippled with self-hatred, and I think we're just the two people who can fix that."

"Without my consent? That's ... immoral."

"If you were anyone else," I said, "I would agree with you. I believe people have a general right to keep their neuroses as long as they think they need them. But in this special case, I cannot accept the risk. You're damn near as clever as me, and as long as you remain damaged you will mean harm to Ted and me. I decline to spend the rest of my life burning energy to stay a step ahead of you. Out of raw self-interest, I propose to teach you things you don't want to learn, and keep you prisoner until you've learned them." I smiled wickedly. "And make you like it. You'll thank me when I'm done -- isn't that *awful*? Just remember: you asked for it."

She tried to attack me, but my husband is very quick and very strong. She ended up with one arm wrenched up behind her.

"And if we can manage to fix the kink in your heart," I went on while she cursed and struggled, "we're all going to track down your ex-husband -- Russian, like Ted, isn't he? -- and try to heal your marriage. And if that works -- "

Ted was grinning broadly. " ... if that works," he finished for me, "the two of us may just marry the two of you one day."

She was speechless.

"It's certainly worth thinking about," I agreed -- and suddenly it was as if two continental plates had slipped inside my skull: a massive realignment that was over in an instant. "Now if the two of you will excuse me," I said dizzily, "I've got a time machine to invent. It just now came to me: *two* fields, almost but not quite identical, just out of phase. If it works, I'll be waiting for you both at home when you get there." I caught Ted's eye. "We'll lock her up in the guest room for the night, and make other arrangements tomorrow. I'm going to make you write that song to me retroactively, darling. Very retro, very actively."

"Yes, dear," he said mildly, and got the hell out of my lab, dragging Jay with him.

That's another reason I love him. He doesn't try to top my puns.

And as I turned back to my workstation, there was a small clap of thunder, and a pressure change that made my ears pop, and my *real* future-self winked into being a meter away, wearing a grid of wires, a headband, a plastic backpack that hummed softly, and a smile.

"Congratulations," me said.

After a moment's hesitation -- it had been a *long* night -- I returned my smile.