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Swimmers

The secret, according to Fazéh, is to regard time not as a line but as a solid; not as one dimension, but as three. Do that and the paradoxes disappear.

Continue, if you like, to believe in cause and effect. Only remember that precedents, in their complex combinations, are no easier to determine than consequences; that while not every road leads to Rome there are many ways to get there and roughly the same number of ways to leave.

The times I might have entered Rome I was traveling west through Utica but most likely stayed on the Thruway and headed straight for Syracuse. In the past I'm using now, though, I spend those weeks in the loft above Wong's Chinese, still in Nyack. Maybe when I'm looking back from a farther future, I'll opt to have been in Syracuse again.

Still trapped in your linear modality? Still clutching your one-way ticket on that old temporal

railroad? Fazeh invites us to be as fish, swimming in time like the sea. Fish need no rails to restrain them, no ties to bind them, no loco motives to make them go. Come swimming in time with Fazéh.

Once he might have gestured toward the tank where April kept her tropical fish. I might have lived with April for five years. We might have had a young child crushed beneath the wheels of my old Plymouth Valiant, but that past is gone. There are much easier pasts to choose among. Nevertheless, Fazéh might have gestured toward the tank saying, "Look, the pink and silver one dragging that long string of turd. Watch it. Your past is like that turd. It flicks back and forth, this way and that, always changing, but always leading to now."

You won't change a past made up of steel rails spiked hard against creosoted timbers. You won't even try. The same is true of the future. Oh yes, I know you believe you have choices, places where the tracks branch off toward Melbourne or Memphis or Mars, but such choices scarcely constitute freedom. Think of the fish. Think of changing both the future and the past with a flick of the tail. Fazéh teaches us to flick our tails.

Fish turds. If I don't stop him he goes on like that for hours at a time.

It's not good here, but much better than many places I can recall or foresee. There's time to think here, and the drugs are strong as anything we did up in the loft over Wong's Chinese Kitchen. Every spring, Mama Wong made up a batch of her snake oil, what she

called "spring tonic." It would knock you flat, and that's just how I was when I met Kim, flat on my back. Meeting Kim precluded meeting April, you see, because I spent the time in the woods or in the loft or just driving around, ingesting exotic substances and being crazy. I never made it to Syracuse, never stepped out on the path to all that pain. I stayed with Kim for three weeks of chemistry and lust. Afterwards there was not much to speak about. Things happened and things did not happen. In time I met Fazéh, even came to know April in a casual way. In time I arrived at this point, the same point I might have come to by way of Syracuse, but there was far less pain along the way. Far less pleasure, but far less pain.

Stringer believes in pain, thinks it's good for you. I tell him if he likes pain so well to put it in his own past, but for now I prefer mine the way I have it. If I never loved April, then Peter wasn't born. He never rolled marbles down a Syracuse driveway. He never died. It was good enough with Kim, actually fun for a while, and it didn't hurt at all.

Stringer is a foul little man. If only we could pick our presents as readily as we can pick our pasts, I would not be here with Stringer. I would be there, with Fazéh, flicking my tail.

Sometimes I'm tempted to debate, but I restrain myself. To debate with M would tend to validate his delusions, and that would be irresponsible. I do, however, challenge some of his logically inconsistent assertions. If I can get him to experience some

cognitive dissonance, I might be able to get past his defenses and do him some good.

Stringer, like other narrow souls, delights in his attempts to poke holes. He positively glows when he thinks he is about to score a point against Fazéh or, more precisely, against me. He has decided that Fazéh is one of my "delusions." It is not lack of intelligence that perpetuates his extraordinary tunnel vision, but meanness of spirit. He is obsessed by an inordinate need to dominate, to appear superior, to be right. He is the alleged doctor, but I understand his motivation better than he does mine.

Unlike Fazéh, I have no calling to be a teacher, and I certainly have no desire to accomplish Stringer's psychotemporal salvation, but our sessions would be far more satisfying if he better understood the nature of reality. What if April, he asks, remembers meeting me, loving me, having my baby? Is that past less real because I deny it? How can I know her, he insists, if I have erased her from my past?

The answer, of course, is that no past is ever erased. Fazéh teaches us to sift through alternate experiences that form the different paths to our perceived presents, and to select those that best serve our futures. If April is using a different past from the one I have selected, that is not only her right, but what I would expect. All of us alter our pasts, although most never know they have done so.

In one way, M is right. We all alter our pasts in

that we filter our memories through both subsequent experiences and current needs. Just the same, denying the reality of major events in our lives is pathological. I'm considering asking his ex-wife to visit, but he seems too fragile right now. Things would be much simpler if he'd just blocked out the painful memories, but he remembers everything. He just insists that none of it ever happened.

"If you can alter the past," he gloats, "why can't you arrange things so that your son never died?" He refuses to understand, but still I try to explain.

"The pasts where that happened don't intersect with this present. He's not in this present, so either he never was or he ceased to be."

Then he wants to know why, back then, I might have picked a past leading to a future in which my son died, my marriage fell apart, and I wound up in the state hospital. There is an element of sadism to this ploy, although I realize his chief objective is to infect me with the guilt he believes to be the root of my alleged problem. If I appear guilty, he appears right.

The ploy won't work, of course. How can I feel guilt over the death of a child who never was? And even if I were using the past in which Peter lived and died, Stringer is well aware that I would not have met Fazéh until afterwards, at least not from the perspective of this present. I was still limited then, just as mole-blind as most of humanity. Now that my pasts and futures are plastic and protean, it is chiefly my present that oppresses me.

M is much too rigid to be interesting, either as a person or as a patient. Just the same, I find myself obsessing over some of his "Fazéh" stories hours after he's left my consulting room. I've treated plenty of schizophrenics, and some were able to make their delusions sound very plausible, but theirs never affected me like M's. Why should his be different? When I get a chance, I'd better set up a few sessions with Roger and work it through.

It seems probable that his delusory system is a corruption of some little known but legitimate philosophy of time. Clearly it's not M who's caught my interest, but vague hints of an elegant paradigm filtered through the distorting lens of M's psychosis. So far I haven't found any references to a philosopher named Fazéh or to a philosophy that could be twisted around to produce M's delusory state. M's claim to have been Fazéh's personal disciple doesn't ring true, so I'll continue to search the libraries as time permits.

Eventually I'll get the whole story on what I've been calling the "Fazéh perspective." When I do, I'm sure to find the inevitable flaws, but curiosity is an itch I always have to scratch. Anyway, finding the flaws is half the fun.

Fazéh and I no longer seem to occupy the same present, as far as I can tell. Stringer says he has made an effort to gather information on Fazéh and his teachings, but without success. Stringer may be lying, but there are other explanations. Like Peter, Fazéh

might never have been born. He might have died. He might have become something other than a teacher, which would make him a thoroughly different Fazéh.

There is another possible explanation, one which might be nothing more than wishful thinking on my part. There is the slim chance that he might have learned to sidestep, to move laterally to another present, leaving this one behind.

In the past we shared, Fazéh saw the problem of sidestepping as technical rather than philosophical. If time indeed is three-dimensional, distinctions of past, present, and future are perceptual rather than substantive. The main thing that keeps us bound to a single present is the problem of grabbing hold of a point in some possible future and a point in some possible past. If we could do that, it should be possible to yank ourselves sideways, so to speak, into a different present.

If Fazéh is gone from this present, it could be that he sidestepped out of it, leading the way so that another might follow. While I do not have a tenth the wisdom or spiritual strength of Fazéh, the depth of my need for a change of circumstance might be enough to compensate for my deficiencies. If Stringer has done nothing else for me during my time in this hospital, he has motivated me to leave. By whatever means I can, I intend to leave not only this hospital, but this whole dreary chunk of being.

I find myself pushing him hard, driven to learn more of Fazéh. While it's true that knowing more about

Fazéh might make it easier for me to make some progress with M, that's not why I'm so insistent. The closer I get to the authentic Fazéh, the more I think I might be on the brink of a new approach to an ancient philosophical question that also happens to be the central question of modern psychological theory. I've got this gut feeling that Fazéh could offer a new way to attack the problem of determinism versus free will.

Yes, I know it sounds like I'm going crazy too, and no, I'm not saying that Fazéh, much less M, can tell us whether or not we're really free. But if you start with the idea of a future that can branch off into different streams, and maybe reconverge as different series of choices lead back to the same end, that gives you a new way of looking at free will. My big problem is that M's juvenile understanding of the Fazéh philosophy isn't adequate, so I have to dig out the true story of where he learned as much as he knows. He has to accept the realities of his past.

Once again, my past includes Syracuse, April, and Peter. When I told this to Stringer, he puffed himself up like a pigeon, taking credit for bringing me closer to his personal vision of reality. As usual, he is wrong. The idea came to me on Christmas, and it was fully developed by New Year's Day. In truth, it helped that Stringer had gone off to wherever it is psychiatrists go for their out-of-season suntans.

Given time to think without Stringer's endless distractions, the solution to my problem seemed fairly simple. In order to sidestep out of this unfortunate

present, I need powerful attractors, both in the past and in the future. I need experiences strong enough to pull me out of this rut, yank me literally into a different now. I envisage a heavy stone with two lines attached, one leading into the future, one into the past. The stone, which is my current state of being, is the locus of an obtuse angle formed by the lines into time. Pull hard enough at the ends of the lines and the stone moves, laterally, skipping into an alternate present.

To budge the stone, a strong force must be applied. Nothing in any of my pasts draws me as powerfully as a certain Sunday morning with April and Peter, a few sweet hours roughly a year before the day of pain and horror. That puts one line in place, one temporal cable anchored and ready to haul away.

Finding a sufficiently attractive future from my current vantage point is going to be considerably more difficult. Certain nows, like this one, put significant constraints on the possibilities for later.

M has abandoned his imaginary past, but otherwise he's extremely uncooperative. He still refuses to discuss the time following the death of his son, the breakdown in his marriage, or the onset of his delusions. More troubling for me, he won't talk about Fazéh.

Getting away on vacation gave me a chance to think things through and use logic to plug some holes in what I know of Fazéh's philosophy. My reconstruction is still incomplete, but I think I understand enough to finish on

my own if I have to. The problem is I can't publish without knowing just what, if anything, is already in print.

The ex-wife can't tell me anything helpful. She vaguely remembers a name that sounded like Fazéh, and thinks there may have been an old book from a secondhand bookstore. The only thing she knows for certain is that M was no help to her when she had to deal with her grief, and that she wants nothing more to do with him.

Stringer persists in taunting me about Fazéh. "Prove it," he says, "prove your holy man exists." I think of explaining that Fazéh has sidestepped, and therefore no longer exists in this present, but that would only encourage Stringer's insistence that Fazéh is a delusion. Instead, I say nothing, trying to ignore the taunts and concentrate on finding a suitable future attractor so that I too can sidestep, following after Fazéh.

I have looked down the line of many alternate futures, but the differences among them are small. In some, I remain in this hospital. In others, I am released to various conditions of loss and loneliness. Nothing I have found so far is good enough or bright enough or strong enough to match that one Sunday morning and yank me out of this awful now.

Can a responsible therapist justify lying to a patient? What if a lie could jump-start a stalled recuperative process? What if it might be the only chance the patient has to regain his liberty?

More to the point, what if the lie could help answer psychology's most intractable question? What if it could change a responsible but unknown psychiatrist into a slightly irresponsible star?

Stringer says that April asked about me, that she would come to see me if she were not so afraid of being hurt again. Stringer says she never blamed me for what happened, and that she understands it was my guilt that made me so emotionally distant afterwards. If only I were showing signs of progress, Stringer says, he would encourage her to come. It would have to be real progress, he says, because he could not lie to her. Lying would violate his code of professional ethics.

Stringer is a liar.

Suppose there were a chance, the tiniest chance, that April could forgive me. Now there would be a future to catch hold of, a future that could pull me clear across the ragged ribs of time. Suppose there were a future with April, bright as one sweet Sunday morning years ago. Wouldn't that be an attractor strong enough to pull me to another now? It could even pull me to a now where Peter never died.

M is still resisting. I've decided to take him off all drugs as of today -- no tranquilizers, no antipsychotics, no antidepressants, not even aspirin. I suppose some of my colleagues would be horrified, but I mean to let him ride the dragon for a while and see just what gets shaken loose.

The lines are firmly anchored, future and past. My eyes burn white hot, and easily pierce the ragged fabric of this dreary now. There is nothing left but to pull and be pulled, pull and be pulled with all the strength I can find.

I cannot say what will remain once I am gone. Will they find an empty bed, the restraints still fastened but the prisoner flown? Or will I disappear so completely that it will be as if I never was? And Stringer, dreadful little Stringer, how much will he remember? Will he remember Fazéh? Is it possible he might see and understand?

M is dead. An autopsy will be performed, and the cause of death will be heart attack or stroke. Drug withdrawal may be a contributing factor, but the hospital's pathologist won't mention that.

Should I be experiencing guilt? Some might think so, but Fazéh teaches that death is just an illusion created by our narrow view of time. In another now, no more than a flicker away, M lives on. In yet another, he was never born. "Consider," Fazéh might say, "the hairs on your head. The lives we live are far more numerous. Should we weep because a single hair is plucked?"

We are free to choose, but compelled by the nature of existence to choose every possible alternative. In this strand of time, my choice may have caused the death of a patient. In other strands, other choices lead to other consequences. Here, M's misfortune ends. Elsewhere he is still an ordinary man who loves his

ordinary wife and child.

*Come swimming in time with Fazéh. In the vastness
of that temporal sea, everything possible is real.*

And all is forgiven.