

The Comfort of Mirrors

By

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I was on the veranda, sipping absinthe and contemplating the Seine, when I received word that the first clone had killed herself. The lecture circuit had brought me and my lovely wife Rebecca to Paris in late summer. The evening's engagement was a rousing success, and a number of my colleagues had prevailed upon us to dine with them on the river. The company had been delightful, the wit as sparkling as the champagne. Then, the waiter handed me a folded note. I excused myself, walked to a private booth, and took the call.

Her name was Alena. She was 23 years old, or roughly twice that age in clone years. She was the thirteenth clone of me and the first to have been "flipped" to female. She worked the night shift at a lab in London. She lived in a small flat in Soho. She kept a ferret. She played the cello. In the small hours of the morning, she had taken a cocktail of pills smuggled from the lab, lain down in her bed, and quietly expired.

I was stunned. There were 44 clones of me, making mine one of the most replicated private genotypes in the world. In the 33 years since my first clone had been decanted, we had never lost a single one, not to mishap, not to disease, not to foul play. And certainly not to suicide. What, I asked myself, had gone wrong?

I stood in the booth and absorbed the fragments of information until the disparate bits righted themselves and assembled into a coherent whole: a woman in mid-life, single and alone. Orphaned by a car crash some years earlier which killed her adoptive parents, she had no blood relatives and no connections, unless one counted me. And I was her, surely no better comfort than looking in the mirror. She lived in a shabby flat and had worked a series of dead-end jobs. She probably had an antidepressant addiction. It was a thin, limp sort of life; one could see it tapering off anemically in a decade or two, a candle sputtering out. Instead, she had cut the thread cleanly, quickly while she still had the faculty to do so. Yes, I could see reason in her motives. I was strangely touched by the nobility of this lost, lonely clone.

Sobered and thoughtful, I went on to Milan, and then to Geneva. I was wined and dined on the principles of emergent AI, the topology of chaos theory, and the wavelength of fractals. I had just arrived in Munich when Anthony died.

Hanging's a clean death for the departed, not so for the hysterical mother who stumbles upon the macabre display after the bowels have released. But, one glimpsed in the act a rare mental acumen: a teenaged boy who understood that a well-executed knot is a quick and almost painless way to die. Of course, all of my clones are highly intelligent, but genius involves more than scoring well on some psychological exam. When I was 11, I watched ants parading around their hill and understood that there were mathematical principles behind their movements. It was the moment when the

spark ignited, setting me on a separate path from other men. In young Anthony's death, I sensed that practical turn of mind which, when combined with great intellect, should have been so potent. What a shame. What a complete waste.

A homicide investigation was opened after the third suicide, and two detectives from Interpol visited me.

"You are Dr. Alan Archer, correct?" asked the first one, a gaunt, dark-haired man.

I said that I was.

"How many clones do you have, Dr. Archer?"

"Forty-one living."

"You have been cloned 44 times."

"Yes."

"That's an extraordinary number for a private individual, Mr. Archer," said the second detective. He was sandy-haired, and grinned like a wolf. "Why so many?"

"Dr. Archer," I corrected. "When I was young, I made my genotype publicly available on the international genome market to finance my research. After my early breakthroughs drew media attention, mine became a very popular type."

"Do you have much contact with your clones, Dr. Archer?" asked the dark one.

"Almost none at all. Most I have never met."

"You don't meet your own clones?" That was the wolfish one, still with that ear-to-ear grin.

"They don't belong to me. One clone from my DNA may be brought to term every nine months. Interested buyers may bid on it. The winning bidders may request minor tweaks or customizations. The cloned child is decanted, grown, and the winners become its adoptive parents. They raise it as their own. I have no part in any of it."

"Had you ever met or had any form of contact with Alena Saddler, Anthony Hart, or Aaron Sawicki?"

"No."

"Do you have any idea what could have caused each of them to take their own lives?"

I thought for a long moment. "I don't."

Having completed the lecture tour, I threw myself into my work. I had numerous offers to participate in promising research projects, but I wanted something new, something fresh. My early breakthroughs in mathematics had often been achieved by striking out on my own into uncharted territory. I wanted to recapture that, if possible. Perhaps I would have done so, if a clone named Adam Max hadn't microwaved himself to death.

Max was a highly-paid technician, responsible for maintaining the sensitive equipment used to beam power to remote automated units. Properly arrayed, these devices are capable of transmitting gigawatts of power thousands of miles with pinpoint accuracy. Step in front of one and it cooks your internal organs instantly.

By all accounts, Adam Max was a pro. He knew the machines like he knew his own face. He was reliable, emotionally stable, and had a good reputation in his industry. So, when he set an array to full power and stepped in front of it, it wasn't accidental.

What bothered me was that I knew why he'd done it. Surely, everyone has felt that deranged impulse to steer his car into oncoming traffic, or throw himself from a balcony into a crowd below. Our sense of self-preservation prevents us from doing it, of

course; nonetheless, that nagging thought, “What would happen if...?” tugs at our minds. I’ve felt it, working around massive particle accelerators or huge electromagnetic coils. I’m not a physicist, but the tools of their trade afford me priceless glimpses into real, primal chaos. How many times have I stood beside a collision chamber furtively eyeing the access hatch and wondering what it was like on the inside. My rational mind knows that inside there is only vacuum and lethal radiation, but some residual limb of the subconscious still longs for the cold embrace.

That was the pressure point on Adam Max’s mind, the thought that weighed on him every time he focused his warm glow on a distant object. What would it be like to surrender to that soft radiance, to let its energy fill me? Certainly he knew it would kill him. Just as certainly, there came a day when he no longer cared.

I must confess I avoided driving for several weeks after that. Even ensconced securely in the passenger seat, I locked the doors and belted myself in. Who knew if some perverse impulse might become too strong, causing me to fling myself from a moving vehicle? I also buried myself feverishly in research, but instead of immersing myself in the pure realms of mathematics, I plunged into the sea of data I was accumulating on my poor, unfortunate clones. When I had plumbed those depths as best I could, I went to see my friend Dr. Marcus Haverty, renowned in psychiatry and neurolinguistics.

“There is a pattern here,” I said after laying the facts before him. “I know it, but I can’t see it.”

“The human impulse to impose patterns on our environment is an effort to make sense of the world,” said Marcus. “But great care should be taken when studying behavioral patterns. These are systems of unparalleled complexity because they are made up of human minds, themselves perhaps infinitely complex. The most important difference between a human and an electron, Alan, is that a human has a mind of its own.”

“Then, why are these minds destroying themselves?” I asked.

“Ah,” he said, “if only we could ask them. Barring that, however, I do have a theory.”

“Tell me.”

“I suspect that it is all the fault of the first clone to die. Alena.”

“Alena?” I said, shocked. I could find nothing in her bio, which I now had virtually committed to memory, to indicate that she was capable of such an act. “How could she have possibly persuaded the other clones to kill themselves?”

“She didn’t persuade them,” Marcus responded gravely. “She gave them *permission*.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Before Alena died, your clones never considered killing themselves as an option. If they had difficult circumstances in their lives, they struggled through them as they supposed they must. But when one of their number took her own life, she showed them another way. She made the possible *real*, showed them that it could be done.”

And with this, I began to grasp the terrible, insidious pattern. “Alena’s suicide would mean nothing to a much more successful clone,” I began slowly. “But a clone just marginally better off than Alena would view suicide as a way out and might take it.”

“Exactly,” said Marcus.

“So, a clone in slightly more favorable circumstances would see that two other clones had self-terminated and might consider it an option for himself, even though he was not as badly off. He might wonder what the two dead clones knew that he did not? The third clone might even need less of a reason to destroy himself. And so it would go.” Eventually, I thought, seeing that large numbers of his peers were opting for death, even a highly successful clone might be induced to kill himself.

“Indeed,” said Marcus. “The suicide of a single clone could set off a chain reaction.”

“I have to put a stop to it.”

But the pattern was already unfolding, its merciless steel coils unwinding. Two more clones died during the following week, Annalise Mercedes and Anderson Patrick. Subway train and shotgun blast. Annalise ran a successful fashion boutique in New York. It eventually came to light that she had been skimming funds off the top to fuel a methamphetamine habit. Anderson took two other lives in addition to his own: his wife’s and her lover’s.

Mathematics is what I am. It is what I do. I can always escape into its flawlessly rational matrix, a place wholly separate from the twisted knots of human passion. We are all capable of violence, both to ourselves and others. If I had never known its perfect beauty, or if my faculty for it should someday desert me, to what ends might I turn to chase away the days?

I counted my blessings, as the old apophthegm goes, taking careful inventory of every good thing in my life. I had wealth, fame, respect, and influence, but over all these things I prized my lovely wife Rebecca. She put up with my frequent physical and mental absences, making every allowance for my single-minded devotion to mathematics, yet the distance between us had never weakened her resolve. I made an effort to be more attentive to her, taking her to the most beautiful places I knew and buying her anything I thought she might fancy.

At the time, I hoped to make up to Rebecca my shortcomings as a husband. Now I see that I was in fact saddling her with the weight I already wore. We didn’t speak of it much, but it crept into the silence at the end of every conversation, the darkness on the edge of every candlelit dinner.

I made myself almost deaf to the outside world, concentrating my mental effort on blocking it out, as though I were stuffing pillows in the windows to stop the sunshine, but some rays always slipped in through the cracks. I knew when five more clones died. I knew who they were, if not their particular methods of self-destruction, because by this time I had every single name of the 44 committed to memory. Thirty-three remained.

We were in the Appalachians watching the leaves turn when Alex Beverly died. Alex perhaps needs some explaining. He was the only one of my clones to rise to anywhere near my level of prominence. He did so not through science but by navigating a world of which I had only the faintest glimmer. Alex was an actor, a moderately successful one at that, appearing in a number of popular television programs. He used the wealth he accumulated to pursue ambitious philanthropic projects. He was known for his work in repopulating Africa and Indonesia with their native peoples. His charity, I understand, also translated to a certain degree of political power in Hollywood.

Alex married up. He caught the eye of model/actress Claire St. Paul. Theirs was a tabloid engagement, *Clone Woos Supermodel*. What followed was one of those rare, stable marriages on the edge of the Hollywood limelight. When I say that they had been together for 15 years, factoring in a clone's shortened life expectancy, one might begin to understand the depth of their relationship and the shock that we all felt when Alex leapt from a bridge one fine autumn evening and drowned.

Alex was one of the few clones I had actually met and the only one with which I had spent any significant time. His wife was a treasure, a rare beauty, and although I am not naturally attuned to such things, they always struck me as happy together. I wondered if she would seek me out, now that he was gone. I wondered if she would ask me, "Why?" and what I would answer.

These idle fantasies went further. I imagined us finding comfort, if not answers, in each other's arms just once, perhaps, to dull the cruel point of death's blade. Rebecca would never need to know. No. I would abandon her as Alex had abandoned Claire St. Paul. Then, the circle would be complete. I could see the pattern forming, crystallizing, enmeshing me helpless in its lattice. I had to act.

Five clones died that week, all around the world, as the effect of Alex's death spread like a shockwave. Alex was the success story that all my clones must have aspired to, thinking if he had made it, so could they. Alex's failure must have resonated with every one of them. It haunted me.

Most of the remaining clones were children or adolescents, but there were a handful of adults (of course further replication of my genome had been frozen early on in this sordid affair). By the end of the week I had sent out a letter to all six of the survivors, imploring them to join me at a private clinic. It was in fact a highly regarded institution, recommended by Dr. Haverty, under the care of reputable doctors and an excellent staff. I would personally pay for the travel expenses of any clone that would voluntarily commit themselves. We would stay there until we were all in stable psychological condition and had received a clean mental bill of health.

All six clones accepted, but only five arrived. It is probably superfluous to mention at this point that the sixth had killed herself. Apparently, she changed her mind.

The clinic was in California wine country. The climate was picture perfect, even with winter fast approaching. The grounds were well-kept and we were allowed to wander freely. The perimeter fencing and surveillance equipment were tastefully disguised.

We all sat for extensive psychological profiles ("Remarkably different," said the psychiatrist, wagging his head, "yet remarkably similar."), and attended weekly counseling sessions, but much of the time we spent in group therapy. I am not going to lie. I am not going to tell you that I enjoyed those sessions.

I believe it is usual in these sorts of settings for there to be an initial awkwardness and reticence which gradually erodes as the members get to know each other. That dynamic was not at work in therapy. Here, differences seemed inviting and refreshing, but as surface distinctions were stripped away and we saw into each other's souls, the unbearable likeness was undeniable.

"I can't sleep without taking pills."

"I dread phone calls."

"I like playing with matches."

“Sometimes I completely lose control.”

Their voices got in my head and under my skin, making me feel as though I were dirty or diseased. Each ailment, dysfunction, fear, or phobia somehow became my own.

Our initial easy camaraderie quickly gave way to wary distrust. We seldom sought out conversation with each other, but when we did, we talked about each other, behind our backs. Arthur was gay; Allison was a slut; Allen was a pervert. It was reported to me on more than one occasion that I was perceived as arrogant and controlling, although *of course* my informant never held that opinion.

Most disturbing, however, were the rumors about Anya and Aleksandr, two Russian-born clones of similar age. They were said to be lovers, a thought that sickened me. I don't know if it was really true, but looking into the eyes of a female clone was like looking into the eyes of my sister. I could not imagine desiring one in that manner. Yet, deep down, I could admit the attraction of a lover who knew me so intimately, loving my image in the mirror...was I truly capable of such narcissism?

I said earlier that Alex Beverly was my most prominent clone. This was true, at least as far as the public eye was concerned, but of all my clones Allen King was the most successful. He was also the first, and perhaps that set him apart, at least in his own mind. I knew him a little, but knew quite a lot of him. As my first clone, he had held quite a bit of fascination for me at one time.

Where I had devoted my career to pure theory, Allen took more of a practical turn. He went in for economics, where he excelled. This was, of course, partly due to the peerless pattern recognition abilities he had inherited from me, but it was also thanks largely to his complete lack of ethics. Allen had generated a great deal of controversy early in his career by studying “uncharted markets,” specifically those that are illegal or immoral. Most economists would be horrified to perform a supply and demand analysis of sex slave traffic or to estimate the relative worth of a drug mule, but Allen had discarded any such qualms. He delved into the shadowy realms of drug trafficking and human slavery, and naturally it was rumored that he dabbled in them himself. I don't know if that was true. Certainly, he was the only economist I've ever met who always kept a loaded weapon handy, but I will come to that later.

At any rate, Allen King had a great deal to teach me about economics. Of course, I knew the general theories, but Allen knew specifics. Delving into the hidden strata of human commerce had greatly enhanced his understanding of markets, not just the supply and demand that drove them, but the *need* that drove the demand. He had put this knowledge to good use in his career, building a fortune in the exchange markets with ruthless efficiency. He was probably wealthier than I was.

We were conversing one day about the cost of protecting supply chains when Anya ran through the room, sobbing. As quickly as she had come she was gone, a wailing siren receding into the distance. Astonished, I looked over at Allen, who shrugged calmly.

“I think Aleksandr is cheating on her with Allison. I've seen them together too often, whispering or walking in the garden.”

“Have you caught them at it?” I asked incredulously.

“No,” he said, “but the boy is already sleeping with one girl. Why not the other? He has the opportunity. He has the will. I said as much to Anya.”

“You told Anya that Aleksandr was unfaithful to her?”

“It seemed only fair.”

We were several weeks into the program at this point and all was going well. At least, there had been no new bodies. But, at this news, a foreboding of disaster settled in my belly. I felt as though the pendulum of a metronome, carefully balanced on end, had been tipped ever so slightly, and set in motion.

Lovers or no, Anya and Aleksandr certainly had a history together. Anya was an orphan, if such a term can be applied to a person conceived in a test tube. Her adoptive parents had been killed while she was still quite young. No one ever quite knew what to do with the young clone, whom was either a priceless asset or an expensive albatross, depending on who you asked. Shunted between relatives who were variously greedy or unfeeling, Anya ran away from home at age eight. What she did then is unclear, but we do know that she drifted, homeless and impoverished, for some time until she heard that there was another Russian clone of Alan Archer. Being naturally highly resourceful, she was able to track down Aleksandr. He took her under his wing and the two had been inseparable since.

Perhaps, then, the girl was hardly to be blamed for being intensely jealous for her only friend in the world. She attacked Allison with an implement one of the gardeners had carelessly left behind in the garden. She beat the woman senseless, then locked herself in a supply closet. There, she cut her wrists.

I won't recount the scene that followed, the staff feverishly trying to break through the door and Aleksandr screaming and sobbing. It exists with terrible clarity in my own memory and there is no need to hold it up to the light. I will simply say that when they finally broke through that barricaded door, it was too late for poor Anya.

Aleksandr was immediately placed under an intensive suicide watch. This was a good idea as far as it went, but ultimately did little good. Someone should have recalled that where one clone was at risk, all were. Aleksandr managed to break out of confinement in his room and escape the clinic grounds. His body was found, pale and peaceful, 48 hours later. He had taken his life with a sharp piece of jagged metal clasped in his right hand.

As I said, it was unfortunate that the attention of our keepers was focused exclusively on Aleksandr. Arthur killed himself as well during that period, without even having to leave the institution.

The three of us who remained, Allison, Allen, and I, were immediately committed to a maximum security ward. There were padded rooms and soft, comfortable restraining jackets, just like in the movies. Everything was pliable plastic and soothing pastels. Even the TVs were cushioned. We were under surveillance almost constantly, either by cameras or very nosy attendants. We had one with us even when using the toilet.

The worst part of this time was being constantly in close quarters with the other two clones. Their little mannerisms and their nervous tics grated on me. Even so, I found myself absorbing their unconscious gestures, their kinesics. It was miserable. I wondered how long we would have to wait this out before they let us go.

In the end, Allison found a way to kill herself. She was allowed sleeping pills for her insomnia. It later came to light that she had been palming them and storing them away secretly. The prescription was not strong, but she had saved up quite a dose. She must not have slept for weeks, but she slept very well that night, and never awakened.

With Allison's death I finally saw the pattern. I realized, given the tools of my sharp intellect and suffocating intuition, that there was nothing anyone could do to stop me from taking my own life if I had made up my mind to do it. It was simply inevitable. For the first time, I accepted this. I talked it over with Allen King, the last remaining clone.

For the next six weeks, the two of us behaved perfectly. There were no incidents, no suicide attempts, not even an argument or raised voices. We smiled at each other and greeted our attendants and struggled to come to terms with Allison's death in therapy. When we had done so to everyone's satisfaction, they released us.

Allen lived in New York City, so we took a flight to LaGuardia. Sitting side by side in first class, sipping champagne, we must have looked like twin brothers. Allen was roughly my age, as clones count it, and very similar to me in appearance.

At one point I asked him if he really wanted to go through with this.

He took a sip from his drink, smiled at me, and said, "I really think I'm a bit of a monster, don't you?"

I had to agree.

As I said, Allen always kept a loaded weapon close to hand, at least when he was not institutionalized. He had a locker full of them in his massive penthouse suite. When we arrived, he got out two pistols, and gave one to me. We both checked them to ensure that they were properly loaded. Then, we drank some wine and listened to Debussy.

When midnight came, I stretched and yawned.

Allen said, "Is it time?"

I nodded.

We both picked up our weapons and walked to the center of the room. A massive window on the city framed the scene.

I pointed my gun directly at Allan's head and he pointed his at mine. He nodded.

I took a deep breath, and we both counted to three out loud. I looked into my own face and pulled the trigger.

Careful readers will have deduced that since I am the one narrating this tale, I did not die. Allen King's weapon failed to discharge. I don't know why, as I had calculated that even partial synchronicity in the act of pulling the triggers should dispatch us both. Perhaps, at the last second, a glimmer of remorse for what he could have been held him back. More cynically, he might have believed that I would not go through with it and stayed his own hand. If so, he miscalculated because I blew his face cleanly off. I suppose the act was technically murder, but I confess that it does not trouble me much.

It was a simple thing to make Allen's death look like an ordinary suicide. We share fingerprints. The weapons were Allen's and only one was fired. A calm, practical mind could easily see to the remaining details.

As for me, I no longer fear that I will succumb to some secret impulse and destroy myself. I don't know why, exactly. No doubt Marcus would tell me that I have realized that a mirror cannot tell me who I really am.

Perhaps the truth is simpler. Having killed myself once already, I will not try to do it again.

I am done with mathematics, incidentally. Allen King ignited in me an interest in economics, although I doubt that I will practice it as ruthlessly or amorally as he did. But such a complex field could use someone with my flair for pattern recognition. I think I can forge new paths, much like I did in mathematics in my youth. One never knows, I might even do somebody some good this time.

I miss my wife Rebecca. I know she is waiting for me out there, as she always does. I can't wait to get home.