

Futures

Hot buttered grubs

A taste for travel. By Jordan Price



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

“Do you want some popcorn, Sheila?” I ask my office-mate, walking over to the microwave. “I’m feeling frisky.”

“You know I never eat popcorn,” Sheila says, not turning from the video playing on her terminal.

It’s another lazy afternoon at the municipal FMT port in Sandusky. Boring work, mostly cargo. We get occasional tourists, sometimes even groups of 50 or more chattering, tipsy seniors wearing matching T-shirts, excursionists on the ‘Splendors of the Midwest’ or ‘Enchanted Erie’ tours. Those are the fun days.

I glance at the picture of my sister I keep above my desk and feel a wave of sadness. It’s been almost a year since that freak boating accident.

I remember the two of us playing ‘Apinya’ when we were kids. Pretending to disappear from one room and appear in another. Dressing up in our fanciest clothes, stepping into and out of our make-believe, cardboard-cutout

FMT drives. Just like the real Apinya on that historic day. That day, huddled around our dad’s phone, my sister and I watched Apinya disappear from the Golden Gate Bridge and appear a moment later atop the Eiffel Tower. We gasped. My sister, me, the whole world.

Apinya Raumchittawai, so young, so glamorous, so smart and cocky. Apinya, who, within a year of the discovery – that “little nugget of weirdness”, as she called it – had produced the first prototype FMT drive. Apinya, who turned a minor subcontract analysing LHC data into the largest corporation on Earth, seemingly overnight. It was all so exciting. Nobody paid much attention to the scientists blathering about imbalanced probabilities, or whatever.

I glance at the picture of my sister I keep above my desk. I keep forgetting she’s coming tomorrow.

“What should I do with my sister this weekend?” I ask.

“Dunno,” Sharon says, picking popcorn

from her teeth with a fingernail, not turning from her terminal. She’s watching the TED talk again. There’s Apinya, sitting on a couch in the middle of the stage, wearing baggy pyjamas and holding a mug.

“Imagine you’re sitting at home, enjoying a cup of tea,” Apinya begins. “If you’re like me, very shortly, you’ll probably need to use the bathroom.” On a large screen behind the couch, a video plays, showing Apinya hustling down a hallway. The audience laughs.

“Alternately, you might return to the kitchen for more tea.”

This time, the screen splits, showing the same video of Apinya running to the bathroom alongside another video, also Apinya, pouring water from a kettle.

“Couch-you”, Apinya says, patting the couch lightly, “is what we call a node. A branch point between bathroom-you and kitchen-you. She *could* become either. Simple enough, right?” Apinya smiles, then cocks her head.

“But what if instead of a quiet evening at

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home, you'd rather go dancing ... in Buenos Aires?"

The sound of a distant accordion wafts across the stage.

"To get couch-you to Argentina, in a matter of seconds ..." Apinya pauses, letting this sink in, "we simply need to find a version of you that is already there."

Two identical young girls appear on the split screen behind the couch. They move in perfect unison, each reaching for a wrapped gift. They excitedly tear away the brightly coloured paper.

"The morning of your twelfth birthday, an alternate version of yourself received a Piazzolla tango CD instead of a Coldplay CD," Apinya says. The videos diverge. One girl looks delighted; the other's face falls.

"The Coldplay version of you was annoyed, remember? You hate oldies." Apinya winks at the audience.

"That difference, small as it was, had major consequences. Your alternate self became a famous tango dancer, living in Buenos Aires."

Apinya stands, illuminated by a bright spotlight. The rest of the stage goes dark. I always get a little shiver at this part.

"Your personal FMT drive and a municipal

drive in Buenos Aires reach out to each other, linking at the node of your twelfth birthday. A little dimensional subtraction, four minus three, and ... voilà!"

Apinya rips away her pyjamas to reveal a shimmering dress.

"Couch-you steps onto the Plaza del Mayo, ready to dance the night away!"

The lights come up. The couch is gone, replaced by an ensemble of musicians who launch into a soaring tango. A handsome man appears. He and Apinya strut across the stage.

Over her shoulder, mid-dip, Apinya says, "Of course, you don't need to worry about the details ... superpositions, waveform collapse and whatnot. It all just happens, instantaneously, inside our AI!"

I sigh, dreaming about my fabulous alternate selves. I catch sight of the picture of my sister I keep above my desk and feel a sharp ache. It's been almost a year since that tragic gun-polishing accident.

"Listen to this idiot," Shannon says.

On her terminal, a bespectacled woman is speaking. "FMT almost certainly causes catastrophic probabilistic instability, going back decades, if not farther," she says. "Imagine

space-time like a giant rubber band, twisting tighter and tighter ..."

Another talking head interrupts.

"These same pointy-headed Cassandras moaned endlessly about climate change!" he bellows, red-faced. "Look at the air! Look at the oceans! Pristine! Whales everywhere! Polar bears, all that stuff!"

"Probabilistic my ass," Shannon says, spitting out another sunflower seed shell.

We rarely hear from the FMT doomsday crowd anymore. Hard to argue with progress, I guess. There are municipal ports on the Moon, Mars, Titan. Development is exploding across the Solar System.

I catch a glimpse of my sister in the picture above my desk, her scales glittering brilliantly in the sunlight. She was always the most iridescent of us. I am excited to see her tomorrow.

"Do you want some hot buttered grubs, Shelly?" I ask, skittering over to the microwave. "I'm feeling frisky."

Jordan Price is an ex-cellist and ex-immunologist who lives with his husband and son on the edge of a great lake. His website is jordanvprice.com.