

Futures

Would you still love me if I was a wormhole?

Searching for certainty. By Wendy Nickel

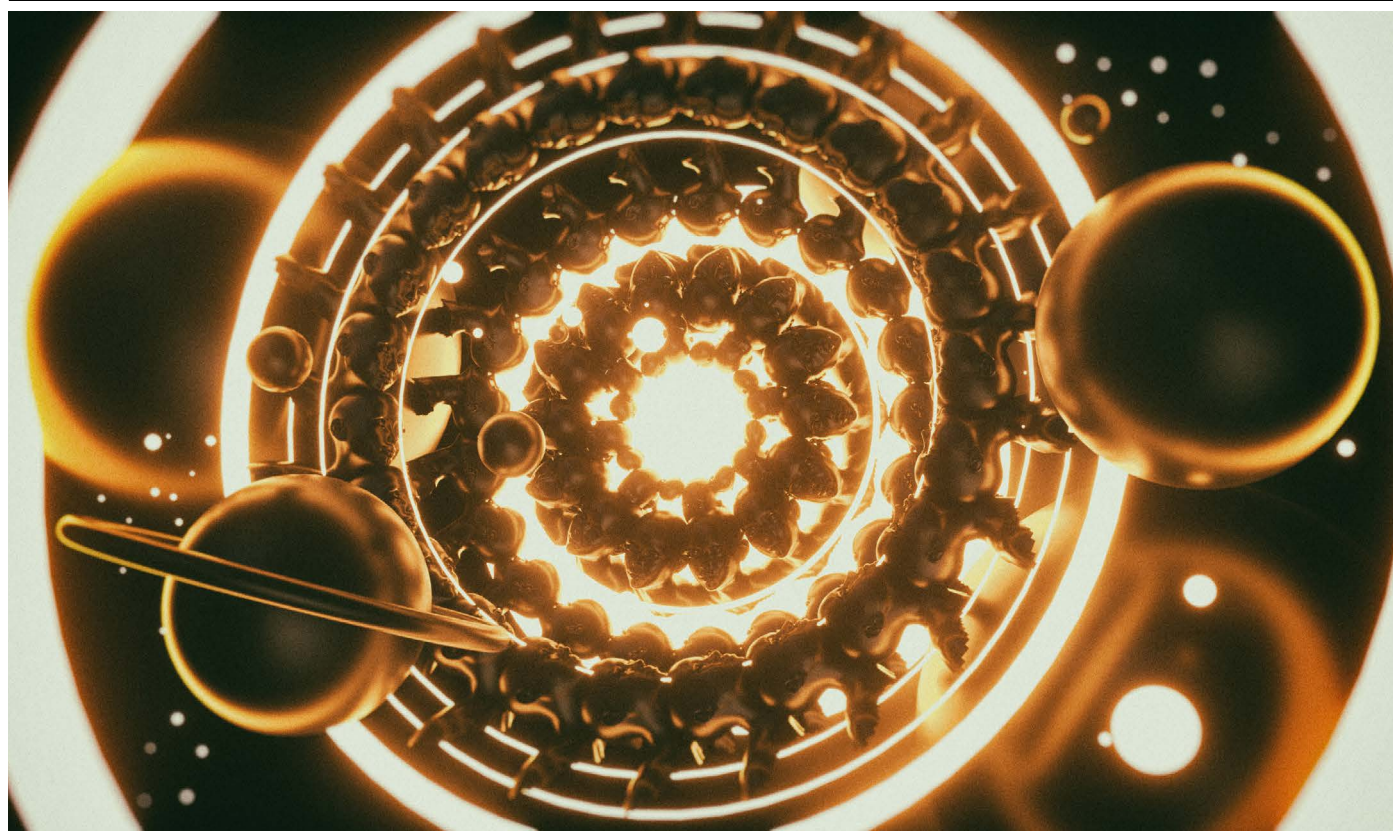


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

Would you still love me if you knew that for the past few months, after we've said goodnight, I've been sneaking into the fourth-floor lab and working on a multiverse device? I know you said it was a bad idea, that there were some lines science shouldn't cross, but there were things I needed to know.

Would you still love me if I was ugly? If I didn't have stylish hair or a trim physique or perfect, glowing skin? In high school, I was dumped over one bad haircut, so I couldn't possibly take this further without knowing for sure that you wouldn't leave me someday for someone more sophisticated, thinner, whose hair didn't go frizzy at the slightest humidity and whose teeth were whiter than mine.

I know you've said you aren't so superficial,

but I stepped into the machine and sorted through the timelines, across millions of overlapping universes, until I found one in which I was besieged by acne and dandruff.

To my surprise, you were still there.

Would you still love me if I wasn't healthy? If I couldn't walk or talk or use the toilet on my own? If my mind was plagued by hallucinations and intrusive thoughts? It wasn't my grandmother's fault she had Alzheimer's, but it was my grandfather's fault that he left her in that state of mind, moving in with a recent widow who could still beat him at Scrabble.

I know you've said this is a forever thing – a 'sickness and in health'-type vow, but I stepped into the machine and sifted and searched the various scenarios until I found one with a terrible black-ice crash on a winding mountain road.

When they released me from the hospital, weak and immobile and burn-scarred, you were still there beside me.

Would you still love me if I was homeless? If I was famous? If I'd committed four counts of bank fraud? If I was allergic to cheese? If I decided I no longer wanted to be a scientist and went into airplane repo instead?

There were so many 'What-ifs' and only so much time before my early lecture period each morning.

It was just like you to notice, then, that I hadn't been sleeping well. That there were circles under my eyes. I was downing energy drinks and yawning through my own lectures and still, I hadn't given you an answer to that all-important "Will you?"

How could I? As a scientist, there were still

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more variables to test, more scenarios to explore. How could anyone ever be sure?

Would you still love me if I took a vow of silence? If I devoted my life to a cult? If I had a secret family in Seattle? If I was a convicted axe murderer?

The machine groaned and complained the farther I pressed it from the present reality. Those distant universes flickered and jarred, and it became difficult to navigate from one to the other. It became harder to navigate home.

Would you still love me if I was a peasant in medieval Europe? If I was a pirate who marooned you on a desert island? If I called for your execution upon a guillotine?

"This isn't you anymore," a voice said from somewhere far away, and I knew that it was you. You'd wondered. You'd gone searching. You'd followed me here, to the lab. You'd been watching my hours of searching. You'd seen all my insecurities, laid bare.

"Come back now," you said, "and we can talk."

Would you still love me if I was a lemur? If I was a penguin? If I was a cow?

I tried to reverse the search, to stop the results, to slow down the spinning of dials, but I'd pushed the machine too far. In scraping out such increasingly unlikely scenarios, somewhere along the line, I'd lost control of the machine. Of myself.

Would you still love me if I was a redwood? If I was a sandstone arch? If I was the vast and mighty sea?

I feel you reach in, tentative at first, just dipping your toes into my salty waters. I try to warn you away, to tell you I'm sorry I didn't trust you, to urge you to let me go, but it's too late. The ocean's words are unfathomable and incomprehensible, and its tides are so strong, and as we spin out, you're pulled under by my waves. You're drowning in my instability — have been drowning for some time now — and it's taken till now to realize.

Would you still love me if I was the Moon? If I was a planet? If I was a star?

I am burning, bright and hot and all-consuming, and my gravity drags you in, and I wish I could tell you how sorry I am for this mess. For what we've both become.

Our stellar collision lights the sky as two bodies merge into one, and I can sense you are there, with me, brighter together than we ever were apart, shining hot, blue light across the galaxy. We are fused, as one, across all time and space, and all I can think is ... *This was what I wanted, wasn't it? But not like this. Not like this.*

Somewhere in a distant universe, across an ocean of time, a multiverse device shorts out, spattering a lab with stardust.

Wendy Nikel is a speculative-fiction author with a degree in elementary education, a fondness for road trips and a terrible habit of forgetting where she's left her cup of tea. For more info, visit wendynikel.com.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Wendy Nikel reveals the inspiration behind *Would you still love me if I was a wormhole?*

For the past eight years, I've been participating in my writing group's annual flash-fiction writing contest, and this year some of the prompts for a particular week were the phrase, "Happiness is..." and a quote from a novel: "You don't always get what you wish for." To me, these two seemed perfect for a mash-up involving a cautionary tale of a person's pursuit of happiness.

Which brings me to the worm — or rather, in this case, the wormhole. "Would you still love me if I was a worm" is a popular meme that (according to KnowYourMeme.com) originated in 2019 but resurged again with Heidi Klum's Halloween 2022 worm costume. The phrase uses a nonsensical scenario to test a loved one's devotion and see if it's just the physical that they're interested in, or something deeper. Its absurdity makes it funny, but, at the heart, it reveals a search for love and acceptance that is more than skin deep.

My story pushes that test of devotion to extreme — and tragic — levels, showing through the narrator's increasingly outrageous questioning humanity's longing for unconditional love and happiness, and how fragile and self-destructive our insecurities make us.

