

Prisoners of the Multiverse

by Jacob M. Appel

WHY WE LIKE IT:

*Our collective jaw dropped when we read this complex, layered and unforgettable story with its troubling undercurrents of guilt and suspicion. There is a wealth of technique and a ferocious intelligence at work in this seemingly simple telling and the psychological chords it strikes resonate in the mind long after one has finished reading. The feminine voice absolutely convinces and Appel's disciplined, prehensile prose pumps life into every sentence. Treasures abound throughout the narrative. Quote: 'I'd always loved the stars, ever since our parents took us camping in grade school, but Vance had transformed my visceral pleasure into a more formal appreciation for the clockwork of the universe.' And 'I considered reaching for her forearm, to comfort her, but it seemed unnatural.' Like all the best writers, this champion storyteller makes the extraordinary look easy. Our feeling is even his grocery lists are beautiful. **Read our review of his 'The Liar's Asylum' in the Nonfiction section.***

PRISONERS OF THE MULTIVERSE

By Jacob M. Appel

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The defining and indelible event of our pre-college years—for me and for my cohort of honors-level classmates at Laurensville High School—was the suicide; at age forty-two, of our twelfth grade physics teacher, Vance Rottman. We wouldn't have been surprised if dowdy Miss Ayler, who so worshipped Virginia Woolf, had filled her pockets with stones and vanished into the Rappahannock. Or if the fastidious Latin teacher, Dr. Ismay, had fallen on a vintage sword

like his defeated Roman generals. But the image of Vance—for that was what we all called him—bolting himself inside his gear-packed office, where only months earlier he'd rigged a working model of the solar system to the overhead light, and ramming a sawed-off shotgun down his own throat, was to be the cataclysm that permeated our conversations and recontoured our relationships ever after. Maybe it was because Vance had everything, looks and charisma and a picture-perfect four-year-old daughter, who made classroom cameos on mornings when her mother did modeling shoots in Richmond, and because we'd believed we had known him so intimately, in the countless hours we'd spent camped around his laboratory desk, sometimes until twilight, attempting to unify quantum mechanics with general relativity, that his sudden, vicious rejection of life pierced a permanent hole in our own armor—such that never again, even in my happiest moments, could I observe another person's joy without wondering what lurked beneath.

My best friend that spring was Lacey Moretti. Soon enough we would drift apart, our natural differences overcoming our common history, so when I saw her at the twentieth reunion last year, where she gulped champagne from a slipper and made a sloppy pass at every unhitched male within groping distance, I could hardly remember what had drawn us together on long-ago evenings studying the polarity of magnets and the trajectories of cannon balls. Yet in those final months at Laundale, we were truly inseparable—so much so that, when a third former classmate sensed the tension between us at the reunion, she confessed she'd always suspected we'd been lovers. The reality was that we'd both been far too innocent for anything like that.

From Lacey, I learned that Vance had died. We'd been planning a drive into Washington one Saturday to pick up our prom dresses—mine a beaded, charcoal gown in an iconic graduation cut, Lacey's something low-necked and scarlet—and I pulled up in front of her house at the wheel of Papa's Plymouth. I tapped the horn. A warm breeze rustled the hedges, carrying

the scent of peonies. Captain & Tennille sang of “one more time” on the radio, as they would do for months to come. From across the boulevard droned the rhythmic pulse of a lawnmower. All I could focus on that morning was my prom date, Seth Sewell, and whether it made sense to keep seeing him through the summer, or to gamble that something better might roll my way—I cringe when I reflect upon how thoughtless and self-absorbed I was at seventeen—so I let my mind drift, soaking up the music, until Lacey tapped on the passenger window. She still wore her bathrobe, her skin pale as eggplant pulp without her foundation and blush.

“I’ve been calling you for hours,” she said.

“I slept at my grandma’s,” I explained—not adding that I’d gone stargazing with my uncle into the early hours of the morning. “You okay?”

Lacey shook her head and braced her hands on the car door. Her entire physique trembled. “Vance is dead,” she declared, her voice wavering—and then she sobbed for five minutes in the passenger seat before she could articulate another coherent word. “His wife’s sister called my mother. They play bridge together....And no, they’re saying there’s no chance it was an accident.”

“But I just saw him,” I pleaded.

“When?”

“Yesterday afternoon. Probably around five.”

I had stopped by Vance’s office to gloat about my science scholarship to Bryn Mawr, also to tell him that I was hiking up Mt. Longbow that night with Uncle Allan. I knew that I’d leave with a hand-scrawled diagram of the spring sky, the not-to-be-missed constellations circled in black marker. I’d always loved the stars, ever since my parents took us car-camping in grade

school, but Vance had transformed my visceral pleasure into a more formal appreciation for the clockwork of the universe.

“He never came home yesterday,” said Lacey.

“Oh God. That means I could have been....”

He must have had the gun in his office already, I realized. He must have known how the school day would end, even as he mapped out *auriga* and *canis major*.

“Did he seem okay?” asked Lacey. “Did anything *happen*?”

I reflected back on those twenty minutes that we’d shared at his desk—the first of the many thousands of times I have replayed that scene. Every moment of our meeting is alive to me, still: the cusp of clean white T-shirt visible above Vance’s open collar, his parting words on the promise of the multiverse. Not even my own wedding day, or the birth of my daughter, stands out for me so vividly. And Lacey was to be only the first among many who demanded the details of that encounter, the magical key that might unravel the horror that followed.

“Nothing happened,” I said. “I can’t think of anything.”

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Melissa Hunter phoned early on a Monday morning, and I caught the call just as I’d returned from walking Emily to the bus stop. I didn’t recognize her name at first and her Virginia area code made me wary: Ever since my husband, who chairs the geology department here at Yale, started testifying for the ACLU in anti-Creationist lawsuits, we’ve received a handful of angry phone calls each month, usually from states below the Mason-Dixon Line. Nothing frightening, just an ongoing nuisance. My ties to Virginia have grown increasingly frayed since my parents retired to Arizona, so Melissa had hardly said her name when I was already focused on politely ending our conversation.

“Honestly, now *isn't* a particularly good time,” I said.

“I’ll only take a moment, Ms. Hertz,” replied Melissa. Her voice was high-pitched and punctuated by short nervous giggles. “I’m calling about a mutual acquaintance. Vance Rottman. Am I speaking to the right Rebecca Hertz?”

“Vance Rottman,” I echoed—instantly alert. “Yes, I knew Vance.”

“Thank goodness,” said Melissa. “You’re the fourth Rebecca Hertz I’ve talked to this morning. One of them hung up on me.”

If she hadn’t mentioned Vance, I might have done the same. I glanced at the digital clock above the microwave. I was leading an Audubon Society bird-watching tour of the local marshlands that afternoon, and I still hadn’t retrieved my hiking boots from the repair shop. “Vance Rottman was my high school physics teacher,” I explained to the caller. “I’m not sure what else I can tell you about him.”

“Neither am I,” Melissa replied. She laughed nervously again. “But I have something that I want you to see. I can’t really do justice to it over the phone.”

“I’m not sure I understand. What exactly is your connection to Vance?”

“Oh, I thought I’d told you,” she replied. “I’m his daughter.”

Vance’s daughter. I pictured the flaxen-haired preschooler who’d impressed her father’s students by naming the planets in order of their distance from the sun, always concluding with the wisdom that Pluto was also Mickey Mouse’s dog, but the woman who’d called me would be in her late twenties. We’d raised money that summer after graduation to pay for her college tuition: baking coffee cakes, washing cars. And then I remembered that Vance’s wife had kept her own name—a rarity among married Virginia mothers in the 1970s—and how much I admired Vance when I discovered that his daughter had become a Hunter and not a Rottman. It

suddenly struck me that my own daughter, who has my husband's last name, was older now than Melissa had been during those classroom visits; that I was already six years older than Vance when he died.

“Would you mind if I stopped by your house this week? Maybe Friday?” asked Melissa. “I don't want to impose, and I promise I'll only stay for a few minutes, but my mother passed away last month—and it's important.”

“I'm sorry,” I said instinctively. “About your mother.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Would Friday work? I'll be driving up from Laurenvilleville, so late afternoon might be best.”

I had plans to attend my book club that Friday, a discussion group for faculty spouses that I'd co-founded with the elderly gay partner of a chemistry professor. And I've always had a very low tolerance for pushy people—whether they've been men pestering me for dates or strangers marketing door-to-door. Melissa Hunter, I sensed instinctively, had become one of those women who glom onto you like a barnacle.

“Late afternoon?” she asked again. “Only a few minutes, I swear.”

“Okay. I can do that,” I conceded. “My schedule is flexible.”

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The rumors erupted even before the funeral. Someone claimed to have seen Vance's wife lunching with another man at a bistro in Fredericksburg, others to have spotted Vance himself with a provocatively-attired woman in Locust Crossing. A girl whose cousin worked at the county hospital revealed that Vance had been suffering from a malignant brain tumor, but this was the same girl who insisted she'd babysat for Amy Carter, and had made out with Bob Dylan's younger brother, so we had reasons to doubt her. Below these rumors coursed a darker

current of speculation, suspicion and outright myth: that Vance had been caught with a male sailor behind the Iwo Jima Memorial, that he'd run up two hundred grand in gambling debts on the horses at Colonial Downs. I'd been the closest to Vance of the girls and guys in our circle—our family had even had him over to our house for dinner a handful of times, when his wife and daughter were visiting a homebound aunt in Tennessee—so my friends vetted these accusations on my emotional doorstep, and nothing I said or did could ever convince them that I also knew nothing. Secretly, I relished the illusion that I was privy to more than I admitted. After speaking to Vance's widow once on the phone, to thank her for asking me to deliver a eulogy, I made a point of dropping references to this call in my conversations, so my classmates might infer that my relationship with Calliope Hunter was far more than incidental. Like everyone else, I suppose I wanted to claim my share of Vance's legacy.

My friendship with Lacey Moretti—forged memorizing the periodic table to a patter tune for our eighth grade earth science class, and later as co-editors of the yearbook—crumbled during those final months in Laurendale. In the initial turmoil after Vance's suicide, of course, our bond intensified. We spent hours lounging on the threadbare sofa in Lacey's basement, sometimes with Phoebe Clauson, or Trish von Elsing, or other girls who'd also idolized Vance, and sometimes only the two of us, recalling his arguments for the existence of extraterrestrial life, and his comedic impersonations of Isaac Newton, and Enrico Fermi, and Copernicus, how the Polish astronomer came off sounding like Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. But increasingly, Lacey yearned to know *why* Vance had taken his own life, while I was content to accept that some questions cannot be answered. By prom—three weeks after the funeral—I was conjuring excuses to avoid afternoons at Lacey's, unable to handle another round of interrogation. We still saw each other on weekends—at graduation parties, at keggers. One

Saturday, a dozen of us explored the grounds of our old elementary school, and Seth Sewell carved his initials and mine, SS ♥ RH, in the panels of the same swing-set where I'd once learned how to pump for momentum. To Lacey, I pointed out the splintered door of the equipment shed where we had chipped our names into the paint-face three years earlier, above the phrase *Frendz 4ever*, but she just shrugged her shoulders and turned away.

The next morning, early—while Papa planted marigolds in the naked beds alongside the patio and Mom accompanied my grandma to eight o'clock mass—Lacey pummeled our doorbell until I staggered downstairs in my nightgown. She looked as though she'd been awake all night, her eyes frenzied and bloodshot like an addict's. I remember her face vividly, because it inspired pity rather than empathy.

“Let's go for a drive, okay?” she pleaded.

“Sure, I guess,” I agreed. “Just give me a second to find some clothes.”

Thirty minutes later, we were cruising up I-64 toward Charlottesville. Lacey had already polished off half a pack of cigarettes. She'd floored the speedometer to the cusp of the red zone and I clutched the ceiling strap every time we rounded a curve.

“Where are we going?” I asked. “All this secrecy makes me nervous.”

“We're almost there,” promised Lacey. “Five more miles.”

Our destination, as it turned out, was the cemetery in Cumberland County where Vance Rottman lay buried. His funeral service had taken place at the Richmond Ethical Culture Society; only Vance's immediate family had gone on to the interment. I'm still not certain how Lacey found out the location of the grave, but I sensed that she'd already been to the site on a prior occasion, as she led us to the precise spot without stopping at the cinderblock headquarters. Our physics teacher, who'd preached a gospel of spiritual atheism and earthly joy, rested beneath

a quiet knoll in the colossal shadow of two massive Civil War era cenotaphs—memorials to wealthy brothers who'd sacrificed themselves for the Confederacy. A cross festooned with desiccated gladiolus marked the ground for a future headstone. The stark finality of the spare grave made me nauseous.

“I’m sorry I’ve been such a bitch,” said Lacey. “It’s just that you seem so calm about everything...so willing to pick up the pieces and move on...and I’m not ready to just forget about what happened. I can’t do that—not yet.”

“You haven’t been a bitch,” I lied. “Really.”

Lacey sank to her knees in the uncut grass. “I keep thinking that if I only understood *why*, I could accept things better.” She held her face in her hands. “And to be honest, I’m jealous of you. Of all the time you spent with him.”

“It wasn’t *that* much time,” I said truthfully. “We *all* spent lots of time together.”

“Come on, Becky,” she answered. “You were his favorite. There’s no need to pretend you weren’t—it was kind of obvious....” A quake of tears overcame Lacey, and as she cried, she kept repeating, “I wish *I’d* been his favorite....”

Only at that moment did I realize that Lacey had genuinely been in love with Vance Rottman—that maybe all of us, in our own way, had been in love with him. I hugged her then and we returned to Laurenvilleville with pledges of renewed friendship. But my next three weeks evaporated quickly, pre-registering for courses, packing, triaging blouses and shoes, without either of us picking up a telephone, and we didn’t speak to each other again until Thanksgiving break. By then, I’d already started to think of Lacey Moretti as a girl I had been friends with back in high school.

In the days after Melissa Hunter's phone call, I found myself thinking about her father more than I had in many years. I'd revisited *his death* on countless occasions, but this was the first time, as an adult, I found myself considering what it had been like to *be* Vance Rottman—to walk around in his tattered penny-loafers. In high school, we'd known that he held a Ph.D. in physics from Princeton. To bookish teenagers, such a credential elevated him to a stratosphere above *Mr.* Benchford, the other physics teacher, or even Dr. Ismay, whose doctorate was an Ed.D. in classroom dynamics from Florida State. But as the wife of an Ivy League geologist, I finally understood what it meant to earn such a degree and end up teaching twelfth graders in suburban Virginia. When Vance discussed the multiverse—that infinite reflection of alternative universes paralleling our own—I suppose that in many of those other worlds, he was running a laboratory at Cal Tech or commanding legions of junior researchers in Los Alamos.

It has taken thirty years for me to see my childhood teachers as human beings, to realize that Miss Ayler's "girlfriend" was really her *girlfriend*, that autocratic Mr. Bumby was despised by his colleagues as much as by his students. Details lost upon me at seventeen resonate with the passage of years. In Vance Rottman's office, for instance, cluttered with whirling tables and manometers, I don't ever recall seeing a photograph of his wife. Looking back upon his memorial service, where hundreds of current and former students crowded into the ornate Georgian lecture hall of the Ethical Culturists, what strikes me now is the absence of Vance's colleagues—and how those in attendance, several of whom had taught Vance when he'd gone to Laurendale in the Sixties, did not seem nearly as torn up as Lacey and Phoebe and Trish von Elsing. It wasn't that anybody was pleased that Vance had done away with himself, of course. Nothing like that. But, in hindsight, I can recognize that Vance kept his coworkers at a friendly

distance—how different the mood among the adults was that day, for example, from their heartbreak, two years later, when beloved Mr. Feig succumbed to cancer of the pancreas.

Reflecting upon Vance's life inevitably made me think about my own. Had I been wrong to leave my graduate program in astronomy when Emily was born? Would I end up teaching high school physics someday, after my daughter was grown, lecturing adolescents on the opportunities of the multiverse? Was there something—anything—that could drive me to unload a sawed-off shotgun into my throat? *No*, I reassured myself. *Of course not*. But if the multiverse is infinite, I understood, then there are parallel universes where I do precisely that, much as there are others where Vance Rottman does not, where he removes the shells from the shotgun and drops them, one by one, into an open drawer.

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Vance Rottman's adorable poster-child had grown into a somewhat pudgy, broad-faced creature who favored polka dots and pastels at far too young an age. Melissa's pageboy haircut partially concealed her strong brow, but at the expense of accentuating her wide, bony jaw. She had inherited Vance's features, in short, not her mother's, and my initial reaction upon opening our door for our meeting was that, had she been more attractive, Vance's daughter would not have had the time to waste tracking down her father's former students. I afforded her a loose hug, then led her through the toy-strewn foyer into the parlor, where I'd set out plates of cucumber sandwiches and sliced halva. I felt anxious, ill-at-ease. Although I'd informed my husband about the phone call, and the rendezvous, meeting with Melissa to talk about her father made me feel like I was committing an infidelity, that I'd crossed some point of no return.

Melissa settled into an armchair, clutching her canvas bag in her lap.

“I can’t tell you how grateful I am,” she declared. “I was afraid you’d want nothing to do with me—especially under the circumstances.”

“I’ll be glad to help in any way I can,” I replied. “But to be quite candid, I’m not sure what I can do for you.” I held the plate with the cucumber sandwiches toward her, but she waved me off with her fingertips. “I can’t imagine I can tell you anything about your father that you don’t already know....”

“*Can’t you?*”

Melissa’s tone wasn’t exactly unfriendly. Still, its edge was too sharp to let pass.

“No,” I said crisply. “I can’t.”

An uncomfortable silence followed. It was a bright, balmy afternoon, and beyond the plate glass window in the dining room, chipmunks cavorted on the low-hanging branches of the crabapple tree. Several blocks away, over home-baked scones, my book club was discussing the origins of the solar system. I couldn’t help wondering if Melissa Hunter felt as self-conscious—as downright uncomfortable—as I did.

“Let me put all my cards on the table, Ms. Hertz,” said Melissa. “You’ll forgive me for being blunt, but when you grow up with lots of unanswered questions—lots of innuendo, that’s the best word for it—you learn to ask things point blank, to make people say exactly what they mean. That makes sense, doesn’t it?”

“I suppose so.”

“It *does* make sense,” said Melissa. “So here’s what I want to know. Were you having an affair with my father?”

The question ought to have shocked me, but it didn’t. Somehow, I knew it was coming. Why else drive six hours to interrogate a stranger? A malicious part of me longed to announce

that I *had* had an affair with Vance Rottman, that we'd made love on the smooth-tiled countertops of his laboratory only hours before he died. That would serve this woman right, I thought, for leveling unfounded, and pointless, accusations. I'm still surprised at how angry I felt toward Melissa—maybe for disrupting the tranquility of my life—even though she was as much a victim of the tragedy as anyone.

“Really,” I said. “I don't know who gave you that idea....”

Melissa cut me off by withdrawing a binder from her bag. It was a self-mount photo album with a leather cover. She thrust it into my hands.

“What's this?” I asked.

“I found it when my mother died. With my father's things,” said Melissa. “Mom pretty much left his stuff alone after the suicide. I don't think anybody stepped foot in his study for at least twenty-five years.” Melissa punctuated her remarks with another of her nervous giggles; she also toyed with her ear. “Go ahead,” she urged. “Open it.”

“I don't think I want to,” I said.

Melissa did not encourage me again. Instead, she reached across the end table and opened the volume herself. The first page contained a discolored newspaper clipping: an article about my second-place finish in a debate tournament, replete with a photo of teenage me and Trish von Elsing at opposing lecterns. The second page of the album contained Polaroid shots of me, and my cohort, at a picnic I no longer remembered. On the third page, all of the photos were of me alone. I closed the album and set it firmly on the end table.

“I was one of your father's favorite students,” I said. “So he kept a scrap book of my accomplishments. What does that prove?”

“This isn’t the only one,” said Melissa, ignoring my question. “There are four others—different girls in each—but yours was the most recent...the only one from that final year. And you *were* the last person to see him before he died.”

“Who told you that?”

“It doesn’t matter who told me, does it? It’s true,” she continued. “Now, I’ll hope you’ll forgive me for asking you in this way, but is there anything you can tell me about my father that might explain why he killed himself? *Anything?* I don’t care how awful it is, you understand. I’m prepared for that. But I’d rather know than not know.”

Melissa’s entire body had gone rigid, as though braced for a blow. Desperation rose from her face like heat—the same expression I’d seen on Lacey Moretti’s features, so many years before, weeping in the passenger seat of Papa’s car. Outside, a pair of blue jays had commandeered the crabapple from the chipmunks. Emily’s bus would stop on the corner soon, and I would retrieve her, and Bruce and my daughter and I would sit down to a family dinner, while my guest drove back to Laurenvile. I considered reaching for her forearm, to comfort her, but it seemed unnatural.

“I’m not sure what I can tell you—”

“What you can tell me,” she interrupted, “is what happened. What happened between you and Daddy on the day he blew his brains out?”

~

Vance’s door stood open that Friday—as it always did for several hours after his last class—and he was seated opposite the window, blinds drawn, leafing through a popular science magazine. In my memory, there was irritation in his voice when he responded to my knock on the open door, but his expression melted when he recognized that it was only me. “Look what

the cosmos dragged in,” he said. “If it isn’t the best and the brightest herself. And to what good fortune do I owe such a pleasure?”

That was a standard Vance greeting. He was always showering us with superlatives, but playfully, never anything remotely improper. I slid my knapsack off my shoulders while he cleared space for me on a plastic chair, brushing a mass of tangled wires and damaged pulleys to the floor. In the corridor, two girls hurled insults at each other over some minor slight while a pack of guys cheered them on. Vance rose decisively, strode to the door and shut it. “That’s enough of the unwashed masses for one afternoon,” he said. “Now where were we?”

“I’m going stargazing tonight,” I announced. “My uncle’s taking me.”

“So we’re going to make a scientist of you yet,” said Vance. He settled into his desk chair and retrieved a stack of scrap paper from his filing cabinet. “Here I thought you’d come for my company,” he added. “But all you really want is a free lesson in naked-eye astronomy.” Vance sighed for effect. “Very well....”

One by one, Vance drew out the night’s constellations for me: *Cassiopeia*. *Gemini*. He connected Bellatrix to Betelgeuse, transforming haphazard dots into the mighty shoulders of Orion. While he sketched the limits of the visible universe, I gloated about my Bryn Mawr scholarship, thanking him for his recommendation.

“So you’re really leaving us,” he said.

“I’ll come back to visit,” I promised. “Often.”

“That’s what they all say,” said Vance with a mock-jaded grin.

He handed me his completed sky-scape.

“Never underestimate the power of the stars,” he said. “Whenever I feel like I’m a prisoner of the multiverse, I look at the night sky and anything seems possible.”

Then he placed his hand on my shoulder—a gentle, delicate gesture that lasted only a few seconds—and he wished me a cloudless night.

In some reflections of the multiverse, Vance’s hand rests upon my shoulder for too long—so long that I can feel the warmth of his flesh through my blouse. In others, he does not touch me at all. In the version I share with his daughter, his touch lasts just long enough, so that it’s not even worth a mention, so that it never happened: our entire cosmos is compressed to seconds, and then those seconds are compressed to ether, gone forever, and what remains is something different, something purer, a core of untainted generosity around which an entire new universe can be built.

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

I make a point of telling people that all of my stories are the product of imagination and in no way reflect my experiences or those of people I know. Of course, as a psychiatrist, I understand this is far from true. I suspect most authors write fiction to revisit and revise their childhoods—filling in the gaps with their own fears and fantasies. I recognize that I do. Vance Rottman and Lacey Moretti are almost I knew growing up...and Rachel is almost me, though, of course, she’s not really me at all.

BIO:

Jacob M. Appel is the author of three literary novels including *Millard Salter’s Last Day* (Simon & Schuster/Gallery, 2017), eight short story collections, an essay collection, a cozy mystery, a thriller and a volume of poems. He currently teaches at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City. More at www.jacobmappel.com