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## Multiverse and you

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# Multiverse and You

Paul Lovelace and his brother were summoned back to Noble by their beloved grandmother, a woman they fondly referred to as Pookie Pookie or occasionally Pookie Squared. They arrived after a five-hour drive from Kansas City. There she was, Pookie Pookie, ninety-seven and shrinking, her hunched body framed in the doorway. She wore a yellow cardigan with three out-of-date Libertarian pins over her sagging breasts. Her teeth were smeared candy apple red with lipstick.

"My wondrous grandsons!" she cried. "My magnificent, perfect grandsons!"

Paul knew to let Jared embrace Pookie Pookie first. He would've liked to hug her at the same time—he'd seen many films and sitcoms involving boisterous group hugs and it looked like an awfully nice feeling—but Paul was sure that the combined mass of their bodies would not fit through the doorway. He was large—that off-putting combination of height and girth—and Jared was narrow. His younger brother wore spotless burgundy cowboy boots and a flannel shirt tucked into jet-black jeans. Paul watched him pass and waited his turn to hug their grandmother.

"My grandsons!" she said again, tears rimming her eyes.

Inside, Pookie Pookie fried sliced potatoes and boiled hot dogs, both of which Jared declined. Paul devoured two helpings. The kitchen looked exactly how he remembered it. There was the white stovetop spattered with spaghetti sauce. There was the framed painting of a steer, its insides divided and labeled with the names of the various cuts of meat such as "rib eye" and "fore shank". And there was the family portrait from so many years ago—the two Lovelace boys, their older sister Jenna, their parents, and of course Pookie Pookie. During one of her annual depressions, she had taken to their parents with a red marker and X-ed out their faces.

"You meet Jenna's fiancé yet?" Jared asked Pookie Squared.

She left the stove and joined them at the table with a steaming cup of tea. "Not yet. But we'll all get our chance tomorrow at the wedding, huh? How's that sound? The whole gang back together again. Minus your parents of course."

She tilted her face towards the heavens. "What did we need to shoot astronauts into outer space for anyway? Am I right or what, kiddos?"

Neither brother replied. The topic of their parents' astronaut deaths was still taboo two decades later. Paul closed his eyes, chewed his potatoes, and pushed the life he could've had out of his mind. Instead, he concentrated on the feeling of love that radiated from the folded prayer book in his back pocket. He knew the front cover by heart. A drawing of fifty unique and individual Earths, beneath them the text *You are not the only version of yourself. Suffering and Happiness are fleeting.* It seemed like good advice.

"Hey, Jared," Pookie Pookie said suddenly. "Where's that foreigner of yours I like so much? The one with the titties? She stay behind in Kansas City? She don't want to visit Oklahoma no more?"

"Under the weather," Jared told her. "So listen. That drive really took it out of me, Pook. I think I'm going to get my eight hours if that's all right by you."

Paul wanted to prod him further but let things drop. Under the weather? What did that even mean? Jared's girlfriend had long been a presence in their lives and Paul found her absence troubling—without her, they had endured the car ride in silence. Jared pushed back from the table and kissed his grandmother on the forehead.

They listened to him clomp up the stairs. "Oh, your brother always had a touch of the doldrums? Didn't he, my Paulie boy? Speaking of women," Pookie Pookie said, "Jill Foot's going to be at the wedding tomorrow. Remember Jill Foot? She had quite a crush on you back in high school.

" Paul considered this. "No she didn't. Jill Foot had a crush on Jared."

"Well she asks about you from time to time. When I see her in the Price Chopper that is. She's always buying azaleas and grapefruit and I say to her, 'Hiya, Jill Foot! What's with all those azaleas and grapefruit, you big nut?'" Jill Foot. Paul had long ago tried to empty his brain of all memories from that terrible atomic period known as "high school", and all he recalled of Jill Foot now were bouncy pigtailed the color of Hershey chocolate and the downy smell of her uniform vest. Wait. Jill Foot. It was coming back to him. Slowly. Jill Foot in Study Hall senior year, a couple rows behind him. Jill Foot. A plain, soft-spoken girl. Paul remembered how she once favorably commented on a polo shirt he'd purchased from the ShirtBarn on the interstate.

"What do you say about me?" he asked.

"Oh, the usual." Pookie Pookie blew on her tea even though it was no longer hot. "I told her you were an astronaut like your parents. I'd stick to the lie if I were you. Women dig astronauts. Trust me."

Paul said nothing and the conversation stalled, and despite his attempts at lighthearted brevity—"How about that new reality program, Chompers the Super Genius Dog? That pooch is a certified riot!"—Pookie Pookie yawned in his face before finally retreating to bed. Paul rose and piled up the dishes and listened to his grandmother chanting in the bedroom above him. Oh, that familiar sound from childhood. How had he ever forgotten? Pookie Pookie, alone on her knees every night before bed, gazing up at a velour picture of a mugging Jesus, purple rosary beads tight in her cold hands. This was her nightly tradition and it filled Paul with a somber hope. For so long, she had been the only religiously inclined member of the Lovelace clan, and Paul would have loved to march upstairs and show her his Multiverse and You prayer booklet. But he knew better than to act on this impulse; the non-Judeo-Christian religions only upset her.

He turned on the faucet and ran his fingers under the warming water. It grew hotter and hotter until steam started to rise off his pink flesh. He was home.

#

Paul Lovelace's search for God was irrevocably connected to the malaise he felt at every level of his existence. But where did this malaise come from? Paul could not say. Perhaps it had to do with all those sci-fi paperbacks he read—girls can smell that chunky stink on a man, can't they?—or perhaps it was due to Paul's inherent nihilism and belief that humans were terribly flawed. Maybe it was because he was fat and lived in an apartment above a bowling alley/nightclub. The Ball Buster Party Emporium was loud—not as loud as the bowling balls crashing into pins—and the thum-thum-thump of the music vibrated against Paul's floorboards like a digital heartbeat. During the club's busiest hours—Friday at midnight, Saturday just before close—Paul listened alone in his living room and awaited his favorite song, Booty Blasters in the Year Twelve Thousand. He stamped his feet and flailed his heavy arms. He danced his overworked heart out.

Paul didn't think his brother's life was any prize either, but he had to admit Jared was doing marginally better than himself. Jared worked as the night accountant in downtown Kansas City for Cowboy Upholstery©, a

company that sold cowboy themed car covers and cowhide bar stools. He was quiet and enjoyed deep sea fishing, betting on pinball tournaments and thinking the world owed him a vast sum it had yet to cough up. Jared lived with his fiancée Maria, a sleek Scandinavian who took pottery and accounting lessons at Concorde Career College. Paul hoped things would work out between the two lovebirds, because during the rare occasions they invited Paul to their apartment, it was Maria who spoke to him and listened to his many and varied opinions. Jared, meanwhile, watched America's Dumbest Yokels, a television program where people belly flopped into aboveground pools and upended them. Occasionally, he would reprimand Paul for going after the final salsa chip and make fun of Paul's "sad, little job" subtitled gay pornography for the deaf.

Paul decided to fill the void in his life with religion. Over the past eight months, he'd learned and abandoned the major tenets of Christianity and Judaism, had sat through lessons on the Muslim faith and Buddhism, and had even begun attending different "Faith Workshops" at the YMCA in the Garment District of KC. Foodies and Spirituality. Pets: Are They Like Little Jesuses or Something? Prayin' that the Large Hadron Collider Doesn't Kill Us All. Despite promises of radical teachings, all these workshops were basically the same. A slight man in oversized glasses pontificated to a circle of bedwetting nincompoops.

Then he discovered *The Multiverse*.

*The Multiverse and You* was nothing like *Atheist Communion* or *Valhalla Vision Quest*. For one thing, *The Multiverse and You* was helmed by former University of Kansas Professor of Agriculture Dr. Rufus Steingold, a barrel-chested man with curls the texture of velvet. Dr. Rufus Steingold did not preach to a circle of chairs. He'd lugged his podium to the small classroom on the twenty-seventh floor of the Y and lectured as though he'd never left his academic post. His creed was simple: there was not one world, but an infinite amount of duplicate earths, each with very minute differences. Example: in tenth grade you signed up for art instead of creative writing. Maybe in a duplicate world you signed up for creative writing. Maybe your favorite color there was blue instead of red. Maybe your brother never called you fat or disgusting because on an alterative world you were not doomed to loneliness, but were clever, friendly and loved. Perhaps your parents had lived.

And what had become so very clear to Paul Lovelace was this: what happened in this world didn't matter because there were millions of you in

existence, some in agony, some in ecstasy. The grand accumulation of earth's feelings came out even in the end.

#

When it was appropriate to do so, Jared Lovelace knelt in the wooden church pew. He clasped his hands and closed his eyes. Sometimes he would open them and look at the altar. There was his sister Jenna marrying her third husband, an oil tycoon with a white handlebar mustache and two glass eyes. Jared and Paul didn't speak with Jenna because of a falling out involving the death of a prize winning red ear slider turtle named Monty Vanderbilt IV. Over the past few days, Jared tried to prevent premonitions of death from overwhelming his thoughts which were usually concerned with monster trucks, the first cigarette of the day, or the startling articles he read in his lone household subscription, *Weird World News*. But every so often Pookie Pookie would grab his arm and just like that Jared's mind would drift to Maria and her floundering luck and ongoing flirtations with eradication.

She'd discovered blood in her stool earlier that month and had been undergoing test after test in expensive machines at the Kansas City Medical Center. Cancer most likely. Jared dealt with this trauma by drinking a great deal of whiskey, shooting blow darts at cows on the MeatCorp Farmland, and cursing the cruel circumstances shat onto him by a recalcitrant God.

Cancer!

The State of Her Uterus!

Death! Death! Death!

"Oh, weddings always make me cry," Pookie Pookie said as she wiped her runny nose on the sleeve of Jared's suede jacket.

The reception was held at the Pat Sajak Memorial Country Club, a two story building with hardwood floors and great open windows that overlooked the front nine of "the best damn golf course in Noble" according to the Sooner Report. Guests could dance, drink or listen to feats of strength and fortitude as told by Uncle Mort who had served in Iraq. His artificial leg was shiny and beautiful.

Jared set up shop at the bar with his brother. He alternated between whiskey and pints of lager while Paul, a lightweight if ever there was one,

worked on a single Sex on the Beach. Pookie Pookie kept darting back and forth between the brothers and Jenna in an attempt to get the siblings to acknowledge one another. Jared responded by double fisting his booze.

And in this way Jared became drunk. He knew this because he started thinking about how he didn't really love his brother, a realization he'd come to many years earlier and had halfheartedly attempted to bury. So fat, so pathetic, so embarrassing! He sealed this line of thinking away in a rarely used sector of his brain—the portion reserved for fractions and laws of matter—and instead, Jared thought about The End. "Brother," he said, "do you ever think about death?"

Paul swirled the tiny umbrella in his drink. "No, not really." He paused. "I think about mom and dad from time to time. Quite often in fact."

Jared nodded and signaled the bartender for another lager. "I think about death all the time." He rolled up a dollar bill and slipped it into the wine flute designated for tips. "It's all I think about these days. What it means to die a bad person. If I'm a bad person..."

"You're not a bad person, Jared."

"Yes I am. You don't know the half of it. The things I've considered doing over the years. The things I've done."

"I do know. I love you. We're good people."

These words surprised them both and shocked the brothers into a chilly silence. They busied themselves with their drinks and Jared wondered how on earth they would get through the remainder of the reception with only each other to talk to, let alone the ride home to Kansas City. He turned away from his brother and there was Pookie Pookie cramming a slice of cake down her throat by the bathroom. She waved at him with her free hand.

Chemotherapy!

Bald women!

Death! Death! Death!

Jared turned back and saw a plain woman hoisting herself up on the stool beside Paul. She was tiny—her head only came up to Paul's

manboobs—and overcompensated with a pink feather she'd stuck in her black headband. Jared would have ignored her completely had it not been for Paul's cartoony gestures, the way he slapped his cheek at the sight of her like something out of a rom-com from the previous century.

"Jill Foot," Paul cried.

She turned. She cocked her head and thrust a hand on her hip. "Well I'll be!" Her voice twanged like a country pop song. "If it isn't the infamous Lovelace brothers!"

Jared took a second look at her face—the dimpled cheeks, the frizzy hair, the slight upturn of her porcelain nose—but couldn't place her. It was clear from the way she spoke about their old gym teacher's limp and the piano accident that had killed Mark Slott junior year that they'd gone to high school together. But he couldn't link her present identity to one of those nameless faces from their shared past. Jill Foot. He could imagine her though. Forgettable, something vaguely pathetic emanating from her like body odor. He slugged back another whiskey and slit one eye at her.

Paul touched Jill Foot's exposed forearm. "Hey, Jill," he said. "Let me buy you a drink."

At first it looked like she'd accept, but then she shook a finger at Paul's bulbous noggin. "Hey, wait a second. Drinks are on the house, ain't they?"

He grinned and folded his arms beneath his breasts.

"Oh, you're a clever one, ain't you?" Jill jabbed him with her index finger. "You're a regular barrel of monkeys." She jerked her thumb in Jared's direction. "What's a matter with Marlboro Man over here? He don't talk or what?" Jared went to tip his cowboy hat in her direction, but halfway through realized he wasn't wearing one. He kept his hand in the air and grunted pleasantly at Jill Foot. He vaguely recalled the rumor that she'd gone down on one of the chess players in the caf bathroom sophomore year.

"Ma'am," he said as he finally lowered his hand.

"Did my grandmother tell you I'm an astronaut?" Paul snaked his arm behind Jill and let it just barely graze the small of her back. "Because I am. I'm pretty much the best astronaut in the entire hemisphere. How about we grab a table and I tell you astronaut tales?"

"Sure! That'd be fine!"

Jared tapped his boots against the bar. "You two go on without me. I'm of a mind to get good and stinkin'." "You don't say," Jill said, "so am I. Don't be a pussy."

Jared ran through his options. He could either A) sulk alone and think about death, B) watch from the bar as Pookie Pookie flirted with small time oil men from Slaughterville, or C) sit at a table with tubby and matchstick. "What the hell?" Jared gave his broad shoulders a shrug and ordered another lager and whiskey. They set forth across the still-empty dance floor—the wedding band, a group of travelling gaucho singers from Tijuana, had only just begun their nasal crooning—and retired to a small table far away from the bride. Pookie Pookie gave them the stink eye.

What Jared discovered in only just a few moments with Jill Foot was that unlike his brother, she very much had a taste for what she referred to as "straight thug boozin". Her poison of choice was "glass of red, please" and she kept going back to the bar during their wandering conversation. She'd return with wine and drink it down in long gulps like some kind of bird regurgitating for a newborn chick. Jared nodded occasionally and listened to Paul tell a story about NASA, how there were gophers all over Cape Canaveral and it was his secretary's job to lure them away. It was lifted directly from *Caddyshack IV: Astro Revenge*, but Jill didn't seem to notice.

When the story concluded, Jared cleared his throat and opened the nearby window. He spat on the tee-off green. "I fucking hate weddings," he announced.

Jill wrapped her fingers around her glass and stared into its contents. "Agreed. They depress the bejesus out of me." She poked Paul in the stomach; she had a habit of poking. "What's a matter, pickle? You afraid of booze or what? You've been nursing that girly junk for twenty minutes."

At this Paul hesitated. Jared watched his brother blink stupidly and once again turn the umbrella in his now-empty *Sex on the Beach*. He knew why: Paul's famous tolerance, or lack thereof. On the three occasions when Paul had consumed more than one adult beverage, he'd woken up the following morning snuggled up to a lumpy mattress in the Kansas City dump.

"I'm going to order another *Sex on the Beach*," Paul said.

"Thata boy."

"Grab me a lager and a shot while you're there."

"And a glass of red, please. It is time for some straight thug boozin'!"

Paul hurried off to the now crowded bar while the gauchos sang their sad Mexican songs.

"So what's fat's story here?" Jill asked.

Finally, Jared's demeanor softened. The prospect of having to sit through the painful hours it would take his portly brother to win over this duck had initially depressed him. But calling Paul fat made Jared look at her in a different light. Maybe she wasn't so cut and dried after all. Maybe she had a little mean streak in her, a little piss and vinegar, the human muck he liked to dig out of people.

"Paul? He's a grade-a doofus."

She finished her wine and set the empty next to the yellow heels she'd taken off. "When's the last time you think he saw his wiener?"

"Probably when the doctor slapped his ass the day he was born."

Jill leaned forward and held her face in her hands. "He's not really an astronaut is he?"

"Hell no. He's just a big, fat ignoramus." Jared paused and patted his coat pocket for his metal lighter. He pulled it out, remembered he couldn't smoke at the country club, and idly lit a flame and trained his eyes on the blue.

"Our parents really were astronauts though. They died in a spaceship explosion. They wanted to explore Pluto." He made a figure eight with the flame and Jill Foot followed its every movement with her head. "I remember reading about it as a kid. You're not the only one who's suffered," she said. "My stepsister killed herself last month. In the suicide note, she said she did it because she was in love with me."

"My fiancée has cancer. We were going to have kids. Boatloads of beautiful, wonderful kids." Jill Foot reached across the table and placed her hand over Jared's.

#

Paul had ordered and received the drinks, but he'd yet to leave the bar. He stood there and finished his second Sex on the Beach and asked for a third. His head felt light, his knees rubbery, but he knew he couldn't stop. Jill Foot had become sloppy. Before he'd left the table, she'd swayed side to side, and Paul had seen her bra strap poking out from behind the fabric of her pink dress. She was so beautiful! And that tiny space between her two front teeth! He could picture himself parting that opening with his tongue. He could feel himself getting hard beneath his khakis. But if there was any chance he might profess his love—physically and spiritually—surely it wouldn't be right if she was drunk out of her gourd while Paul was sober. No! He must drink! What would Dr. Rufus Steingold say? Chivalry demanded he drink a third Sex on the Beach!

The bartender handed him a fresh Sex on the Beach and Paul set it on the tray with the rest of the drinks. He crossed the still-empty dance floor and set them down on the table. Something had changed. Paul couldn't be sure what it was on account of his escalating inebriation, but he thought it might have to do with the light in the country club. It seemed to have changed over the past few minutes, to grow so much brighter. Almost hard to stomach.

"Who wants drinks, you big lugs?" he asked.

"Oh," Jared said.

"Mm," Jill said.

They sat in silence. Paul finished his third Sex on the Beach far too quickly. The landscape tilted.

"That sure puts a fire in your belly, eh?" he asked.

"Oh."

"Mm."

And then, like something out of a beautiful dream, the travelling gauchos began to play Paul Lovelace's favorite song, the one he'd danced to so many times while it pounded in the nightclub beneath his apartment. This was an acoustic version of course—the techno pyrotechnics of "Booty Blasters in the Year Twelve Thousand" would never be appropriate for a

wedding—but Paul could recognize that opening verse anywhere. You got a booty/I want to blast it/In the year Twelve Thousand!

Paul stood up. He was unimaginably drunk and regally got down to one knee. "Miss Jill Foot," he said, "may I have this dance?"

She gulped down her wine and looked at Jared. "Let's all dance."

The Lovelace brothers followed her out to the empty dance floor. She took them each by hand and sashayed her hips and tapped her foot. Every few seconds she'd make a terrific clap. It wasn't much of a dance, but Jared followed suit. He placed his hand over her flat behind and bobbed his head and knees. Paul gyrated his hips. He jiggled his arms in the air. He'd rehearsed this on so many lonely weekend nights in his gummy apartment.

A few onlookers pointed in Paul's direction, but he didn't mind. Pookie Pookie shouted, "Yowza yowza!" from a nearby table and tossed her straw hat onto the dance floor. Then came Paul's favorite part of the song where the singer screamed "Booty Blasters!" twenty-five times in a row. He jumped up and down and tried to time the landings with each new "Booty Blasters!" refrain. On the seventeenth, Paul Lovelace made an awful discovery: the violent turbulence of modern dance did not mesh well with the Sex on the Beaches churning inside his stomach. He knelt down and clung to both knees. Neither Jared nor Jill seemed to notice; they were too busy grinding their crotches against one another.

"I think," Paul declared, "that I am going to need some fresh air, stat!"

He stood up and ran through the crowd of marital well-wishers outside to the tee-off green. He listened to sprinklers turning on in the distance and decided to circle around to the front entrance where he'd originally come in with Jared and Pookie Pookie. There was a bathroom in the lobby, far enough away where none of the wedding guests would hear him hurling out his guts. He threw open the doors of the men's room and entered the first of two stalls. He locked the door behind him and hugged the toilet close to his mouth. Why had he jumped around so much? Why? Why? He emptied the contents of his stomach and watched his insides mix with toilet water. His face was sweaty and his mouth tasted like the mattress at the Kansas City dump. He backed up against the far edge of the stall and tried to keep very still.

The restroom door slapped open and he heard two giggling humans rush into the stall next to his. Paul dared not move, dared not even breathe. It was a

man and a woman. He could tell from their feet peeking beneath the stall walls. Cowboy boots and bare feet?

Cowboy boots and bare feet!

The woman bent down to her knees and Paul would've recognized that fluffy pink dress anywhere. Then the sound of a zipper zipping down, then the pants around ankles, then the slurp, slurp, slurp Paul had imagined hearing his whole sad life. Then his brother's voice, a low guttural growl like a subway train.

"You like that cock? You like that fucking cock?"

She murmured approval. Paul knew Jared drank a lot and it would take a long time. He closed his eyes and listened to Jill choke and gasp for breath. He already knew what he would do. He waited, and twelve minutes later listened to his brother orgasm into Jill Foot's mouth. All the while Paul imagined the multiverse and all the parallel worlds humming with life and beauty on the periphery of our consciousness. He thought not of a universe with a Paul Lovelace who was loved, or one where Jared Lovelace was a better person. Not even one where his parents were still alive. No. Paul sat huddled in the bathroom stall and listened to his brother orgasm and imagined a place where humans weren't quite so terrible, that's all, just one lousy planet in a multiverse of trillions where people were even a fraction less monstrous.

It took a few minutes for Jared and Jill to readjust themselves after they were finished, but soon enough they were fully composed and left for the dance floor. Paul finally left as well, but he did not head back to the reception and instead went outside to the parking lot. He would no longer play second fiddle to his brother; he would no longer be belittled. He took out his cell phone and hit 6 for M. Maria. Jared's fiancé.

"Hello?"

"Maria." His voice sounded grave and full of purpose, the type of voice he'd imagined possessing all his life.

"This is Paul Lovelace, Jared's brother."

"I know. It says that right on the phone."

"Regardless. I have important information I have to tell you." He paused. A white bird of some kind was flying in the distance. He eyed it with suspicion. "Your fiancée has had relations of the oral variety with another woman. I thought it was in your best interest to know."

Paul knew so little about the complexities of women that he was actually surprised when Maria began to cry softly into his ear. He looked around for help and found no one.

"It's ok. It's ok."

But she kept repeating, "Now this on top of everything else," like a mantra, like a prayer.

So Paul listened, unsure of what Maria meant, and tried to think of what a heroic astronaut might say.

"Everything is going to be fine, Maria. You're young and beautiful. You've got your whole life in front of you. You'll find someone else. Everything's going to be ok. "Everything's going to be ok," he repeated.

## About Salvatore Pane

Salvatore Pane's novel *Last Call in the City of Bridges* is forthcoming from Braddock Avenue Books this November. His chapbook *#KanyeWestSavedFromDrowning* will be published by NAP Magazine in October. His fiction has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and has appeared in *PANK*, *Hobart*, *Annalemma*, and others. This fall he'll begin work as the new Assistant Professor of English at the University of Indianapolis. He can be reached at [salvatore-pane.com](http://salvatore-pane.com).