

DADDY FATE

I'm really excited to announce that Quinn Norton, whom many of you may know from her great reporting at Wired, is starting to write again after a too-long hiatus. Even better, she'll be sharing her work here, after she releases it to her Patreon supporters. The work will include both fiction (like this story) and non-fiction. Welcome, Quinn! -EW



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g up we called it the Fate Machine, and eventually we weren't allowed to talk about it when Daddy Blanda was around. Daddy had worked on the machine, first on some of the mathematical modeling, and then on some of the operational code, but right around the time we were becoming teen older sister and preteen younger brother he took a medical buyout, and left. Eventually he went on medical disability for PTSD, in the first wave of the Stress Crisis, and Daddy Mitchell told us we were only allowed to get news feeds in our rooms, at night, after Daddy Blanda went to bed. We moved into a smaller house, and we had to share a room, but Daddy Mitchell said it made it easier to take care of our other daddy.

But by then, we understood what our daddy had been working on.

The best way to put it, at least the way Daddy Blanda used to explain it to us at bedtime

before he stopped talking about work, was that they'd found a part of spacetime, the fabric of everything, that corresponded to certain changes being more likely. A property of luck, inherent to the way the universe was woven together. The biologists had found the clues. Given the viciously competitive way life had grown on our planet, it makes sense that one of the winners would find a relatively low energy way to manipulate the field. Some species of diatoms always found the molecules they needed for their colony structure, some of their predators had statistically unreasonable levels of predation themselves.

From there it went to the physicists and mathematicians. Daddy Blanda was both, and we were taught by both of our fathers to love and revere science. "Get the numbers," Daddy Blanda was fond of saying, "the numbers don't lie." We understood our family was part of science's move towards making a better world. Daddy Mitchell would remind us of how proud we should be of that.

In my teen years I learned about the research team that my dad was part of, which had worked out that bad outcomes could be reduced through a kind of focused deflection around a given event. Car accidents, breast cancer, broken marriages, they could be deflected harmlessly into local spacetime regions, and change the odds of impacts on a moon or the shapes of storms on Jupiter. The reduction was sometimes low, only 12% for car accidents, but at the high end, over 30% for breast cancer, with no ill effects on the rest of humanity.

By the time it got out to the media, there was no question about using the technology. We could save lives and families. Cities and countries were clamoring to build their own, with just a few hold outs. The Nordics read the specs and said at once they'd have nothing to do with it, and that letting the effects seep onto their territory was a cause for war.

Like all deals made with Fate, it came with a

catch. To deflect, you had to focus, and then, as Daddy put it, kind of, bounce it off the local spacetime region. That wasn't exactly right, but it was the best my Daddy could explain it to me.

But people lived in those regions. And so, for a few months or a year, some spot would take it all. A locality of spacetime as my father put it, where all the breast cancers or car accidents or meth addictions or whatnot would happen to the people who were there. Daddy's new division worked out where a given pattern had been projected. At first, the government sent notices to everyone informing them that unlucky things wouldn't happen to them. But any delay in getting one seemed to drive people crazy, and the families of the fated complained that they couldn't prepare. So after the first couple years they sent the notices the other way. Imagine that, getting a notice that said: This year, an estimated 19,000 people in your town will be injured or killed in car accidents. Because of this, more than 10,000 people will not be in major accidents at all.

The press was sad and reserved at first. The notices on breast cancer went out to Chicago when I was 13, and they covered the resulting epidemic of cancer that struck the city, always pausing to point out that fewer than 30 women anywhere else in the continental United States had come down with breast cancer. The CDC and NIH moved in with a joint clinic, and cancer researchers from around the world flocked in to use the impending disaster to understand cancer better, and beat it fair and square. They even made some great breakthroughs. But it was hard to watch the death toll. Women, and a few men, in Chicago being interviewed, always seemed to ask the same questions, why? Why us? That was around when Daddy Mitchell banned news from the house if Daddy Blanda was awake.

For a while after the program started, a kind of tranquility really did envelope America. You'd have imagined that people would have gone crazy,

taken risks, when they found out they were protected by the Fate Machine. But it wasn't like it prevented death or harm, just one specific thing was very unlikely to happen to you. Most people drove safer when they weren't in the auto death city, it became a kind of gratitude to those whom the Fate Machine had chosen. That's what the operations came to be called by the media – the choosings. Some people condemned the whole thing as playing God, but many people said the places hit by the choosings must have had it coming, been condemned by God himself. People would stop visiting. Even the media sometimes sent in drones, the reporters not wanting to go somewhere bad things were fated to happen. People ran of course, but the fate ran with them. When the Fate Machine chose you, you were chosen.

When a big place, like Chicago, happened, it was in a way not so bad. The place could absorb it, albeit painfully. When it was an empty place, sometimes that meant the bad thing would happen to almost no one and the rate of casualties would be next to nothing that year. The worst was when it hit a city only maybe a couple times larger than the disaster that was fated to strike them. One year, all the car accidents happened to a swath of communities in Michigan. Some small towns were wiped off the map.

Late some nights, Daddy Blanda would cry and talk about how he'd killed all those people. I tried to say, didn't you save all those other people? But it didn't seem to help. It wasn't just Daddy Blanda, though. The choosings meant we knew who was going to suffer. Daddy Mitchell explained to us that people finally had a way of understanding what had always been statistics before, and that's why the Stress Crisis started, that people couldn't stand knowing. After several years of rising health and prosperity, rates of stress related illnesses shot up. It was hard to keep enough people working on the Fate Machine, because so many of them became ill, or depressed, or withdrawn. One person my father had known locked themselves in

their house until they starved to death. My brother and I found out about it from a newsfeed, shared under a blanket on my bed, at night when the daddies couldn't hear us.

"Everyone's wrong to be so upset," my brother said at the end of the report. He was hugging his knees, and looking through narrowed eyes into the dark room. "Daddy Blanda is helping people, he even showed us how the math works."

I thought about this. "But the people he helps are just numbers to everyone. They don't understand that they are real people, who didn't get hurt because of the Fate Machine," I said.

We sat in silence for a while. I could hear my brother starting to cry. "Is what Daddy did wrong?" I heard him whisper between tears.

"I don't know. I know he was trying to help people," I said.

"Helping people is hard," my brother replied, and put himself back in his bed. I wanted to help him, but he was right. I didn't know how to do it.

The Fate Machine was almost shut down during the Stress Crisis. But the government went on a media blitz to keep it going. They pointed out that every disaster had also been a research opportunity, and even a few more years could make everyone safer without needing the Fate Machine at all. Sometimes it was hard to even think about, even without the research we knew the Fate Machine saved lives, and made life on the whole better. But as the Stress Crisis slowly faded and life started to seem more normal, I think people realized they didn't know how to deal with knowing what was going to happen. What had been media no one could look away from became something no one wanted to talk about or hear about. Stories about the Fate Machine dropped off, and even bringing it up in public became taboo. I was in high school by then, and Daddy Mitchell moved us to a new town and told us not to tell anyone about Daddy Blanda's former career. But my little brother

talked about it, and started getting in fights at school with other kids about the Fate Machine. Daddy Mitchell started talking about moving again, but Daddy Blanda stopped the discussion, scraping a chair across the floor before sitting in it and looking at his family. "We face what we are, or we'll be running forever. I'm too tired to run forever." My brother and I were relieved, but Daddy Mitchell looked trapped, glancing between us with lost eyes. We didn't leave, but my brother changed schools a couple times. I did ok, but I mostly kept to myself. My best friend remained my brother. Like all teenagers we felt like we had the world against us, but I knew it wasn't just in our heads. Everyone hated being reminded of the Fate Machine.

That year, the bit of Maryland where the Fate Machine and all its workers lived was hit. That choosing was about addiction, and thousands of addiction specialists from around the world quietly descended. Somehow it made everything even worse – we didn't get hit, but almost everyone who understood what it was like to be us did. The media moved in again, covering, sometimes with relish, the addicted and broken lives of the employees of the Fate Machine and their families. My brother was 15 by then, and he tried every drug he could lay his hands on, trying to get addicted, as far as I could tell. He gave up after a couple months, and settled for being morosely sober.

The addiction choosing is what finally did the Fate Machine in, at least in America. It became a simple staffing problem, they couldn't hire anyone to run the machine after so many of its staff started fighting with alcohol, meth, gambling, sex, and so on.

Then the leak came out – that there was a second Fate Machine, being wired up to focus disasters, not deflect them, in the DoD. Everyone freaked out, of course. Testifying before congress the head of the DoD pointed out that the Fate Machine couldn't manufacture disasters, so no

more people would get hurt and die than usual, but that the ability to focus existing problems could give the USA a real strategic advantage over her enemies.

An old senator, in his two minutes to ask questions, spent the first thirty seconds taking his glasses off and cleaning them, looking like he was struggling with time and emotion. He finally raised his glasses with a a shaky hand and put them back on and said, "Sir, haven't you worked out yet that there's things human beings don't know how to know?" The camera lingered on him as the man tried to answer, but no one, in the room or the world, seemed to hear the reply. I must have watched that clip 50 times in a row.

The DoD Fate Machine was mothballed after the worldwide outcry, and technology turned to detection of Fate focusing, so no one else could get away with trying something like that. Daddy Blanda was invited back to work on the detector. I remember we sat down all together over the dinner table after that visit from a government man. Daddy Blanda laid out the offer, how it would be a lot more money, and the government would take care of us. But his face was flat the whole time, glancing at me and my brother, and resting on his husband. None of us had a clue what he wanted to do. Daddy Mitchell seemed to almost explode at the end, "We're never going back there. Never."

That was the end of it. Daddy Blanda did a little remote work for the Fate detector, but he never discussed it or let his husband catch him doing it. We came to understand that our dads pushed each other, but never too far. I said to my brother one day, "Do you think we'll ever find anyone to love the way our dads love each other?"

He replied without looking over from what he was doing, "I don't think I ever want to."

That's when I understood, in the deep way a sister can, that the Fate Machine had broken my brother from the world. I tried to get him back,

to reach him, but I never really knew how. And it was all more than a young girl could really manage. As I was packing to go to college, he said goodbye to me one day, and held me for a long time. He pressed a note into my hand, and left. I looked at the note when I was alone, it just said "Not your fault." That night, he managed to kill himself in a car accident. I let my dads think it was just an accident. Cars were safer by then, since there'd been two choosings, with all the studies that come with them. But a few people also have to go, don't they?

There are just some things humans don't know how to know.*This writing is supported by my patrons on Patreon. If you'd like to contribute, you can do so here. If you already do, thanks so much for making this and my other work possible!*