

**Riley Towers**, Chapter 5: “Nora: to the (N)th Power”

*Last night I had the strangest dream,  
I sailed away to China,  
In a little row boat to find ya,  
And you said you had to get your laundry cleaned,  
Didn't want no-one to hold you,  
What does that mean?*

- **Mathew Wilder, “Break My Stride”, (1983)**

By the 1980's Indianapolis was a “less racist” place – but still more racist than the Indianapolis Jack knew. As Jack walked towards *Sullivan's* he got looks, fleeting glances, from folks on the sidewalk coming towards him – women clutching their purses, men with angry scowls, a cop or two who seemed to follow him ... a few blocks ... to make sure he wasn't causing problems. Of course, parts of America in Jack's time were still like that – hell, parts of Indianapolis were still like that – but not the downtown, the Mass-Ave, the hipster paradise that Jack knew. Jack also understood that the hipsters had their own prejudice, their own “outsider/insider” dichotomy, so none of this made Jack angry ... it simply represented a potential obstacle on his quest, a problem to be avoided.

“ ... whatever you do Jack, don't give some fucking cop a reason to check your I.D. ... fuck ... you could get stuck here ... but ... SHIT! ... you could invent the internet in 1985 too ... make billions ... damn ... crap ... FOCUS JACK!”. Jack was on a mission, and this “universe” was not putting up obstacles to it so far ... thankfully.

At *Sullivan's*, Jack focused on the “quarter dispensers” - and had a plan.

Jack knew enough about the older coin dispensers to know that they looked for crude features on currency as part of their check – and that his money would work just as well as older money. Jack walked slowly up to the line that formed at the “quarter machine” and waited for his turn. He had 100 bucks in his pocket, and back then it was not abnormal to see kids, even adults, changing “cash for coins” in those quantities – during the golden age of the video game arcades. Jack fed his twenties, tens, and fives into the machine and collected the results in a plastic cup he asked for at the bar. Jack kept a low profile, scanning the bar, but Nora hadn't arrived yet – this was good too, Jack needed to catch his breath and devise a plan.

Jack played a couple games of Space Invaders, he then walked up to the bar and ordered a beer – a Budweiser – and sat, slowly nursing the beer and watching the front door for Nora and her girlfriends. After about 40 minutes of waiting, or around 7:55 PM, Nora and her friends walked in – and at first he did a double-take, not believing he was there or she was.

Nora came dressed in a denim skirt, knee socks, and well fitted pink t-shirt ... with some Japanese character or script written on it ... she also had a denim jacket, showcasing sequenced patterns of blue, pink, and silver. Her hair was the blond from the photograph, in a style reminiscent of that time – asymmetric hairspray induced patterns of jaggedness. She wore one earring that was 3 inches long, dangling like a fishing lure from her right ear lobe. Her shoes were penny-loafers, with actual pennies in them – she was out of some museum to 80's pop culture, a prototype Madonna ... a valley girl reject. But this was all for show, all part of being “fashionably young” – Jack saw the same thing on Mass-Ave in his time. “We all have our clothes, this was hers ... whatever ...”, Jack was not a fan of the “80's fashion”, but he was infatuated with what was packaged - underneath it. Jack wanted to know the mind of that girl more than anything, and she was classically beautiful as well – this was an important, but secondary, consideration for Jack.

“Crap ... now what ...”, Jack pondered his next steps ...

Jack wasn't the only “black guy” at the bar, but the others were dressed more in line with the times – his outfit was simple, current, boring. There was very little about Jack that set him apart from the crowd; once you got to know him, he was probably “interesting”, but it was the “getting to know him” part that was hard. Jack needed a plan – and fast, he had just 200 minutes left to get back to that spot on Alabama Street, out in front of the Towers.

Jack didn't go to chase girls, he didn't have any clever pick-up lines. He could recall, from college, the lines his friends used – but in hindsight they all seemed like semi-clever annoyances of conversation. In truth, Jack didn't remember any of his friends be successful in bars. But he was resourceful, and he knew that Nora was special – perhaps even as curious as him.

“The phone ... fuck ... my phone might work ... even with these old networks.”

Jack didn't know this, but the basic mobile switching architecture was far less secure and easier to hack than the mobile networks of his time - “the future”. His android phone might be more advanced than the clunky “bricks” the yuppies carried around, but it was still capable of working (at least the phone function) on older networks – and the older networks? - they had no way of truly restricting or blocking his calls. So Jack decided upon a course of action, a simple one – move up to the bar, sit a few

stools down from Nora, and pull out his phone and make a call. He had to test the phone first, so he asked the bar tender what the phone number for the bar was – 653.8823.

Jack walked outside for a minute, with his plastic cup full of quarters in one hand and his smart phone in the other – Jack dialed the number, and after a few concerning moments he was connected:

“Hello ... Hello ... Who is this? Is this you Brad? Stop fucking with me BRAD!”

So the phone works – this met one of the requirements of his plan.

Jack walked back into the bar, only barely making eye contact with Nora – and then he sat down at the bar with one stool separating her from him. He ordered a beer, another Budweiser, and sat there for a moment. He wasn't sure what he would say if she struck up conversation - “I'll have to improvise ... I took that improv class a few years ago ... what did my teacher say? ... ALWAYS BE SAYING YES! ... I can do this ... Jack – YOU CAN DO THIS!” Jack sat there, for about 5 minutes, psyching himself up, getting himself ready for the first, only, and most important acting job of his life.

Jack pulled his phone out of his pocket, and the glances from around the bar were limited at first – but then he dialed a number, his grandmas number, as a prankster.

“Yes ... who is this?”

“This is Barney ...”

“Barney? From the church?”

“Yes ...”

“Hello Barney, why are you calling me this fine evening?”

“Well ... I don't know what to say Patrice, but the pastor wants to talk with tomorrow about the upcoming bake sale ...”, Jack knew that his grandma had been involved in her church forever, always baking, so this was not a stretch.

“Yes ... I was planning on making my peach cobbler again.”

“That's it Patrice, Pastor wants to speak with you about the cobbler.”

“Oh dear, hmmm, ok, I'll see him tomorrow.”

“Good night Patrice ...”

“God bless you Barney.”

That short conversation, which no one could really overhear because of the noise in the bar, was enough to have everyone looking at Jack. The people of the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century were always on the prowl for the latest gadget, the latest techno-trinket, something that would set them apart from the rest. Nora, who was no stranger to technology, was mesmerized by Jack's phone – and after Jack hung up she

nonchalantly shuffled from her stool to the one next to Jack.

“Is that a phone?”

Jack had her hooked ...

“Oh ... sorry ... yes ... it's a phone ... a prototype ... should be available to the public in a few years.”

“Kewl ... really, really, kewl ... like ... I can't believe it's so small ... and that screen, it looks like it has a TV set built into it ... is it liquid crystal?”

“Uh ... yeah ... LCD ... but still buggy ... we haven't quite gotten the colors right yet.”

“Well I don't know, I would say it looks operational ... kind of awesome ... shit man ... I wish I could get one of those phones ... probably costs hundreds of dollars”, Nora was shifting her fixation from the device to Jack and this was Jack's moment.

“Yeah ... these are being tested by employees, I work as an engineer for the corporation so they give me this to try out and test ... I like it, I do, but the battery only lasts a week or so.”

“SHUT THE FUCK UP!”, Nora almost shrieked with a smile, “ ... you're saying the battery for that phone lasts 2 weeks?”

“Yep ... it's a new lithium technology ...”, Jack knew lithium batteries were in limited use during the early 1980's, he wasn't really giving anything away – and besides, Nora wasn't going to be “in” 1983 much longer.

“So, you work in Indy?”

“Yeah, small company ... a tech company ... off of Meridian ...”

“Oh, up north then?”

“Sure, up around 60<sup>th</sup> ...”

“Ok, kewl ... I'm actually finishing up my last year at Purdue ...”

“That's cool, what are you studying ...”

“DON'T LAUGH! ... Physics ...”

“Why would I laugh?”

“Oh, you know, because a lot of guys see 'blond' and 'girl' and think ... well ... they don't think physicist ... but I'm going to CALTECH next year ... I'm kinda psyched ... lots of cool stuff going on out West ... I'll probably get my PhD and look for work in San Francisco ... well ... that's what I'm thinking right now ... what's your background?”

“Me ... yeah ... I actually got my BS from MIT in physics.”

“No WAY!”

“Yes WAY!”

“NO WAY!!”

“Yes ...”

“Wow ... well ... I think that's something ... and not because you're black or anything ... shit ... that didn't really come out right ... words ofthen travel from my mouth, to the outside, and skip the little man who says 'Nora ... you shouldn't say that!' ... I'm sorry.”

“Don't be ... don't be sorry ... hey, this might be presumptuous of me, but would you like to go with me to a party? ... I just got done talking to my friend, he lives off of Alabama Street, and, well ... I think you would have fun ... lots of people from work ... really smart people like you ... any ways ... I think you would have fun.”

Nora shuffled back to her original stool, and Jack thought he blew it. He decided to play it cool, sipping his beer, pretending he didn't care what she did – but he did care. He could see Nora chatting with her friends and the argued a bit – then one of her friends came over.

“Buddy ... if you slit my friends throat and leave her for dead ... dumping her body in the White River ... I'll find you!”, Nora's friend was drunk, weaving, barely able to stand.

“I'm not going to do that.”

“GOOD! THEN WE'RE CLEAR!”

“Yes, crystal ...”

“HA! - that's my name ... Krystal ...”

Nora's friend rejoined the “girls night out posse” and Nora said her goodbyes.

“So where's your car?”

“Oh ... I walked here ... I don't drink and drive.”

“Walked ... huh ... where do you live?”

“Near Alabama Street ...”

“Ummmm ... well ... ok ... I'll drive.”

“Have you been drinking?”

“I've had one tiny drink ... an hour ago ... I'm fine.”

“Ok ...”

Jack followed Nora out of the bar. Nora was so amazed by his “magical phone”, she didn't really notice the brick sized metal box Jack was carrying – not until they got to the car.

“What's that?”

“What ... this?”

“Duh ...”

“Oh ... it's part of the testing process for this phone ... it measure EMF ... you know ...”

“Yes ... yes ... I know what electromagnetic force is ... so ... ahem ... you'll have to explain more once we get to the party ... where on Alabama are we going?”

“700 N. Alabama.”

“The Riley Towers?”

“Yes – the Towers ...”

“Do you live there?”

“I do, and my friend does ...”

“Ok ... kewl ... how do you like it there?”

“It's ... I dunno ... alright.”

“You don't sound very enthusiastic.”

“Well ... it's not what I expected when I moved in.”

Nora had an old Volkswagen BUG, red. She had a radio/tape-deck combo stereo and she turned on the music once they began driving.

“OH I LOVE THIS SONG!”

On the radio was “Break My Stride” by Mathew Wilder – Jack knew this song, he had it on his workout mix ... on his phone.

Nora sang with the music, moving her shoulders side-to-side, driving safely but giving the impression of a young spirited woman ... who was carefree ... disconnected ... moving in all directions at once. Nora didn't know that a few hours later, a different Nora ... a Nora she would never meet ... was going to be murdered. Jack watched her, coolly, keeping his composure. He wanted to sing with her, but he knew that his personal had to be “straight cool” for this to work. “She needs to think I'm some geeky yuppie dude ... geeky yuppie dudes don't 'rock out’”, so Jack played his part, smiling every so often ... at her ... making coy eye contact, but not being too aggressive.

Nora parked the car across the street from the Towers. Jack got out first, opened the door for Nora, and he led her – holding her hand – to the spot where he arrived.

“Listen, before we go up I have to conduct an experiment for work ... and I could use your help ... Can you stand right here ... stand still ... hold onto my phone?”

“Totally! TOTALLY!”, Nora really wanted to touch his phone.

Jack and Nora were standing on the right spot, the same spot where Jack arrived barely two and a half hours earlier. Jack flipped open the see through cover on the “initiator” device, allowing him to press the button and return home. So Jack pressed it ... then pressed it again ... and nothing happened.

“What's wrong?”, Nora asked.

“Oh ... nothing ... I think this thing my be busted.”

“Hey, let me take a look”, without asking Nora grabbed the device out of Jack's hand and began inspecting it ... she smiled ... and then looked back at Jack.

“Ok, do you see this?”

“Yeah ... what's that?”

“It's a reset button silly ...”

There was tiny hole on the back of the device, inside of which was a pen sized black reset button. Jack, in all his hurry, didn't even notice the damn thing. So Nora grabbed a hair pin from her purse, pushed on the reset button until the light next to the button turned green.

“Want to try again?”

“Yes ... yes ... let's do that ...”, Jack was a bit stressed about the device, but he could see that Nora had a mind like his.

Jack pressed the button again – and this time everything got weird ...

A car that was driving by them, at that moment, froze – the headlights stretching out in the distance, bending, and then twisting in all directions. He could feel the burning on his skin again, a ringing in his ears, and a startled and rather freaked look on Nora's face. Nora's hair was straightening, standing up, and tiny pulses of electricity were arcing from one strand of hair to the next. Nora lunged at Jack and hugged him – probably out of fear, but Jack didn't mind.

Sparks, light, and then blackness ... quiet.

Jack and Nora woke up, back in the closet – in the secret sub-basement of Riley Towers.

Nora was in shock and could barely speak – actually, she didn't speak at all.

The door on the closet opened, and Jack and Nora made their way to the ladder and back out of the sub-basement. The hatch was closed – the hatch that opened to the basement above, but there was a lever that looked to operate it, and it did, and they were able to get out and up to the basement level. The two technicians were gone – as if nothing had happened. The incinerator was still there, but it looked to be functioning normally. Jack held Nora's hand and Nora followed – Jack didn't know if she

was in shock, amazed, confused, temporarily catatonic, or all of the above. Her hair had frizzed, and this made Jack chuckle – but only on the inside, he couldn't be a dick like that ... not at that moment.

Jack and Nora took the elevator to Jack's floor, he opened the door of his apartment and Nora followed him in. He grabbed a beer from the fridge and handed that to Nora. She drank, heartily, and then asked for another. He had a whole six pack left – so he complied.

“What's your name? I never asked your name.”

“My name is Jack ... Jack Vance.”

“Did you drug me Jack?”

“No.”

“Are you an alien?”

“Uh, no.”

“Then I'm confused.”

Jack didn't know what to do, so he grabbed Nora by the hand, sat her down on the couch, and turned on his notebook computer. Even in shock Nora's curiosity about this new device, this amazing computer that Jack could hold on his lap, changed her mood – softening the harshness of the moment.

“My dad has a COMPAQ ... it's a portable computer ... it weighs almost 50 pounds ... it cost him, I think, about 15,000 dollars ... what kind of computer is that?”

“It's ... it's not important ... not right now.”

“So you are an alien”, Nora smiled when she said this.

Jack opened up a browser, went to GOOGLE and searched on “Nora Brown 1983”. A list of links were returned from his search, top three all pointed to an Indianapolis STAR archive news article – the one about Nora's death. Jack clicked on the article, made sure it was the right archive, and handed the notebook computer to Nora ... and Nora read, Jack showed her how to scroll up and down.

Jack got up and grabbed a beer leaving Nora on the sofa. He could tell from the expression on her face that the shock of the moment was far from wearing off. He first saw sadness, then anger, then sadness again – and then, after about 10 minutes, Nora placed the computer on the coffee table and sat there ... still ... staring off into nowhere.

“I died ... and this is ... Heaven?”, Nora asked ... with a perplexed look on her face.

“No ... you're not dead.”

“Then where am I?”

“Indianapolis ...”

“No ... this isn't Indianapolis.”

Nora stood up and walked to the windows of Jack's apartment. She saw the city stretching out to the East, lit up faintly by the Sunlight still getting through from the sunset in the West. Nora could tell it looked “like” Indianapolis, but some things were missing – and some things had been added.

“This isn't Indianapolis.”

“It is ... it's just ... well.”

“Well WHAT!”, Nora was angry.

“Nora ...”

“I didn't give you my name yet ... how do you know my name?”

“I know your brother, Dan.”

“Funny ... I know all of Dan's friends.”

“Nora ... you 'knew' all of Dan's friends.”

“Now I'm really confused ... but this isn't fucking Indianapolis.”

“Nora ... this is Indy ... this is Indy in the year 2020 ... I left to visit you tomorrow ... did I just say that ... I arrived yesterday, with you ... today is Wednesday, September the 9<sup>th</sup> ... same date, different day of the week ... believe me, I'm just as confused as you ... I'm tired, confused, and I can't even begin to explain ... not now ... I need to sleep ... I will make up the bedroom for you, and I will sleep on the couch ... can we both sleep and talk about this in the morning?”

Nora looked out at the dimming light, the sunset time, the fading memory of her Indianapolis – and what had replaced it. She nodded her head, and Jack made up the bedroom.

Jack stayed up – he really couldn't sleep, he just didn't have the energy to talk Nora through this. He assumed a “good night's sleep” would be the solution – and perhaps it was.

And then, something not quite right happened ...

Jack heard the lock on the door being tumbled, the door knob opening ...

Jack stood there, looking at the stranger – and the stranger stood there, looking back at Jack.

And then, in unison, they both said the same phrase:

**“what the fuck?”**

Jack wasn't home – but the other “Jack” was ... there was a Jack inside “Jack's apartment” and there was a Jack at the door, just outside, that was the true owner ... which means “true Jack”?

Jack had travelled backwards in time, but it turns out the universe doesn't allow deep contradictions to build in the time-line (or the space-time continuum) – rather, it exchanges energy across the quantum barrier to maintain a kind of ... I don't know ... “universal homeostasis”<sup>1</sup>. The net effect of this universal law is to guarantee the following two features:

1. Universal adherence to the Laws of Thermodynamics (referenced before).
2. Universal protection of causality – which means actual logical contradictions must be prohibited. “A and NOT A” is never allowed to be true.

So ... yeah ... you can travel backwards in time – spoiler alert: you can't change the past. I know this seems weird and impossible, but follow me for a bit ...

Most people believe in the “Back to the Future” or 'classical' model of time travel ala H.G. Wells. That form of time travel would create nothing but havoc for the universe. Of course, hipster millennials, x-gen, y, baby boomers, and a whole slew of other freaks have been impacted by the “Roddenberry” model of time travel – which is more or less a meagre extension of the classical model of time travel. In all the of the above, you ALWAYS introduce contradictions by travelling backwards in time – and the “UNIVERSE” (the big-U, the almighty super-U, the U which includes all quantum states, all Hawking bubble-universes, all scales of matter big and small, through infinite space-time) ... that HUGE UNIVERSE really punishes heinous shit like “logical contradictions” and does not allow it. That's a problem ...

But worry not, you can go “backwards”, but you're really slipping laterally and backwards, like a zig-zag through time. You don't end up “back in your own 1930's” to kill Hitler – nope, if you kill Hitler, you're killing another universes Hitler (the other Hitler's story remains the same and cannot, by definition, change). This is not “determinism” as much as the recognition that all possible outcomes must be managed, period. Ergo: consciousness, human awareness, can sometimes “slip” into another quantum state – and our “consciousness” is the hidden variable in all true cosmology ... at least that's

1 “Universal Homeostasis” is how it “might” be possible for photons to leak from nearby universes into our own. This leakage would be almost undetectable. The other possible “leakage” or effect, according to Stephen Hawking, is gravitation – nearby universes (in his bubble universe multiverse) might exert a kind of force across the barrier and this might be detectable. However, Hawking's “bubble universes” are not really what we're talking about here ... cosmologically speaking. We are actually discussing the theory of the quantum multiverse – a theory that posits that for all combinations of all possible quantum states of all particles in the universe, there exists some actual “universe” and it exists parallel with our own. If you could have things moving between likely states, who knows what kinds of disruptive shit might occur. Therefore, the universe will do shit ... like allow “two Jack Vances” ... but some amount of equivalent mass/energy must balance out the equation (per reruns of that FOX show “Fringe”). I call it “universal homeostasis” - you can call it the “if I ever travel backwards to a time in the past, and then travel forward again, I will encounter THAT TIMELINE'S version of myself ... and it will suck ... cuz I can never get home. So I'm the doppelganger ...” ... that rule ... you fuck.

what the hobo at the mission says.

The Primitive Radio Gods were playing, something ... something old. And Jack, Jack-1, the Jack we know as “Jack” was confused, disturbed, in shock, and hypnotized by the stranger that had walked into “his” apartment, with “his” key and ... apparently ... this ass-hole doppelganger looked and acted, spoke (and mostly thought given the relation between probability and quantum actuality).

*“... A life is time, they teach you growing up  
The seconds ticking killed us all  
A million years before the fall ...”*

“Hey ... a ... I need to explain”, Jack-1 grabbed Jack-2's arm and told him what amounted to the weirdest tail that either Jack ... which given nearby universe convergence likelihoods is more or less the same-Jack (jack-Same being the quantum folding of Jack-1 and Jack-2 in terms of likely outcomes) ... well ... Jack-1 told a tale. It was a story he didn't completely understand or grasp yet, but he was smart and it was slowly creeping up on Jack ... our Jack ... Jack-1 ... that he was never going home again. That it was, in some sense, existentially impossible to go home. He could travel backwards in time, undo his (Jack-1's) work and introduce a Jack-3 ... which is totally fucked. But in going through all combinations of “Jack” the outcome would be the same – to irrevocably mutate the timeline, which really means (since timeline mutation is forbidden), irretrievably losing contact with the home universe (the universe in which Jack-1's consciousness arose). That's why changing the future is, by definition, impossible – the set of particles that represents any given moment in space-time is, logically, sacrosanct. The universe is conservative in this sense. It also means it takes a LOT of energy to get to unlikely universes – like universes where you run into copies of yourself, which can suck.

Jack was never going home ...

He didn't really save Nora's life ... because “that Nora” was Jack-2's universe's Nora (yes, confusing).

Nora, his “Nora”, was dead.

Jack-2's “Nora” - she had disappeared years ago ... nobody knew what had happened. Now Jack-2's “Nora” has been found ... and except for the freakishly young looking version of “Nora”, an “Nora” that had never aged ... well ... that was going to be hard to understand without some reference to time travel and other really messed up shit.

And this was the quandary these Riley Tower residents were considering ...

While strange mutant spiders roamed about (nearby universe, which means almost alike) ...

While young beautiful women were being turned into mutant-viral-spider-overlord-queens ...

While Indianapolis, Jack-2's and Jack-1's "Indianapolis", was descending into madness ...

Jack-1 could'nt stop thinking about this ...

And cats ...

And Nora to the (n)th power.

She was dead.

Nora was dead ...

Nora was alive ...

(goddamn Schrödinger ...)

(that Austrian fuck)

(nothing good comes from Austria)