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Understanding Entropy
by Barry N. Malzberg
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SO I GO TO MARTIN DONNER'S bedside in the room they have staked out for him in Florida, and I ask him the crucial question: If you had known? I say, if you had known that it would end this way, that you would be dying of a hundred wounds, of the tuberculosis, of the pneumocystitis, of the parasites and the kidney breakdown and the hepatitis, the jaundice, the venetium and the shattering of the pancreas, if you had known that five years after the positive diagnosis and three years after the first episode of the pneumonia you would be lying here, 82 pounds, filled with morphine which does not work anymore -- oh, nothing works but that isn't quite the point is it, they are trying -- with your lover and your daughters and your wife and the doctors circling in the outer room and coming in now and then to inspect your reeking corpus, some of them weeping, others taking your pulse and monitoring your breathing: if you had known this 15 years ago, Martin Donner, if you had known everything that would happen to you and that it would end this way, would you have left your wife and children to their lives and your history and gone out to Fire Island, Cherry Groves, the baths and the bathhouses and the quick and the scuffled, the long and the grievous affairs full time, no longer sneaking it around? Would you if you had known? Or would you have stayed in your marriage in the suburbs, Martin Donner, and played with your daughters and watched them grow and claimed your wife with closed eyes in the marriage bed and nothing more, nothing more because you would never know when the dogs truly came into the basement and snuffled up the stairs? Oh maybe once a year you might let some man tend to you with rubber gloves in a bank vault, but otherwise nothing, nothing, nothing at all? If you could have seen that it would have ended this way, Martin, what would you have done? Tell me the truth now. Do you know the truth? Is there any such thing as the truth? Because I need, I need, I need to know now, it affects my own situation.

He stares at me. He is relatively lucid now, it comes and it goes, in and out back and forth, the pounding on the chest has loosened the phlegm, the morphine has momentarily quelled the cough, he thinks that he can think, although this is not necessarily the issue, and he thinks, of course, that I am a hallucination. Hallucination is common in this late-life condition, although the dementia has not affected him as fully as it might in a few more hours or (if he lasts that long, he probably will not) days. I don't know, he says. His eyes are strangely lustrous, the only motion, the only thing in his face not quiescent, the rest is dead, bland, sunken, a canvas upon which has been embedded the full and perfect features of the dead, the valley of the dead, the shades and valleys and small tablelands upon which the

dead walk until at last they sleep. Yes, Martin Donner says, yes I do know. I can answer that. He thrashes weakly, the ganglia in his shattered nerves trying to pull into alignment. I wouldn't have done it he said. I would not have died this way. It is not worth it. I thought it was worth it, that it was worth any price to be what you are, to live expressly and fully but it is not. This is unbearable, I am sinking, I am sinking in disgrace, I wet myself, I humiliate myself, I see the with visions and dream of such inextinguishable horror... no, he says, no, and his voice is momentarily stronger, he screams in the room, no, he says, I would not have left them, I would have stayed there and I would have died, I would have died in a thousand ways but it is the difference between metaphor and truth, they are not the same, once I thought they were but no, no, no, no, no, no, he says uncontrollably, the word ratched uncontrollably, and he sinks into the steaming sheets, his eyes fluttering, closed and the coughing, the moaning, the turgid phlegm passes again through his desiccated and shattered cavities. No, he says, and no, I drink, his answer is no and momentarily there is a kind of settling; I can feel my own realignment and a sense of history colliding with imminence merging with the steaming and impenetrable future, but of course this fusion cannot last and I am in Martin Donner's bedroom 15 years earlier, the bedroom on the second floor of the suburban colonial in one of the nicest areas of a nicer suburb in the sets of anterooms to the city, and I have put the question again. I have put it to him calmly and without sinister intent and then have used my powers -- the powers granted me by the old and terrible antagonist who nonetheless, and this is undeniable, always plays fair, as fairly as Martin did not with his wife and daughters and friends and family through all of the years up to this point. I show him the bottles, the tubing, the arc and density of the room, the harsh and desperate light and it is uncommonly vivid, I have placed all my powers in the service of this adtunbration. Oh yes, Martin says, seeing it all, oh yes, I see now. Yes, he says, it is worth it. I would do this. I would not be deterred. It is worth it. It is worth anything to expressly enact what you are, what you must be, the full and alarming necessities of the soul. So I do not care, he says. I am going, I am going to leave, if this is my destiny. So be it. His features congeal with conviction, unlike his face in the room of his death, they recede and pulsate, project and flutter with light there is light all through him. Worth it he says, worth it to be what one is. How many years until this happens? he says. Not that it matters. But I want to know.

Seventeen, I say. Seventeen years and not all of them will be happy. Your daughters will weep and one of them will hate you, there will be many betrayals, also other illnesses, earlier illnesses, small and larger betrayals, a terrible bout with hepatitis. Disgraceful venereal conditions. I don't care, he says, 17 years is a good time. In 17 years here, lying here, sneaking around, pounding myself into myself, I will be dead, I will have lolled myself anyway. No, he says, there is no question there is no argument. I have made my choice. He closes his eyes, smiles, thinking evidently that he is dreaming. Such dialogues are common inside Martin in this crucial time; he thinks that he is constructing a worst case venue but is nonetheless being firm. Yes, he says, I will do this. His breathing, irregular, levels out. As I withdraw, he thinks that he is making passage into dreamless slumber. As he wedes he feels, I know, some kind of imminence, and perhaps it is my question, no less than anything else, which has led him to this resolution. Or perhaps not. It is difficult to work within such difficult and speculative borders without being overwhelmed by my own relative helplessness and stupor.

BUT OF COURSE THIS IS IN ONLY PARTIAL quest of verification. I move through the channels of recorded (and possible) time, asking Martin Donner this question at various places within the continuum. I discuss this with him at Cherry Grove in 1978 at a tea dance while he is hanging shyly against the walls, yes he says, of course it is worth it. I ask him this in 1986 when, thunderously, the implications of the positive diagnosis beg to come through to him and he closes his eyes as I make the forced pictures in his head showing him what it would be like: I don't know, he says, I don't know, I am in shock, I am in agony here, I can't give you a false or a real answer, can take no position, how can I tell? Maybe I shouldn't

have done it, I don't know, I don't know. Take the question to him in Chicago two years later, he is attending a class reunion with his lover, partial remission, he feels in control of himself, some benignity, perhaps illusory but the moment can be extended, he feels, as so many other moments have been extended I would have done it again, he says, knowing what I know, I would have wanted it this way still, I would not have treated it differently, I would not exchange these years for anything. Ask him and ask him, up and down the line, sometimes an enthusiastic, desperate yes, other times more tentative, a no at the end and tracking back from that no mostly for the six to eight months before this special, spectacular extended agony; his position then is not fixed any more than it might have been 20, 30 years ago when Martin refused to respond to the messages flicking like trap shots from the basement of his sensibility. Nothing is sure, nothing is firm. Mostly yes, an occasional no, more no as the end is approached, but even then at some of the moments in between the moments of the worst anguish, a soft insistent yes. It is not fixed, nothing is fixed, the human condition is not fixed. The price we will pay for fully expressing what we are does seem indeterminate then. It resonates, this confusion, against my own uncertainty, and I understand then, staring at and through all of this, that there can be no answers from Martin, none at all. If Martin is the voice and tensor of all possibility, then there is no possibility, no singularity.

Understanding it does not surprise me but fills me with a desperate and irreparable weakness; I would not have had it this way, I would have wanted surer answers. Everyone wants answers if not the answer, even I. I return to my old antagonist on the desert and hand him the helmet and the simulating device and the other armaments of our translation, our bargain, our possibility. I have wrestled and wrestled, I say, I have wrestled you through all the avenues of this life and I do not know, I am stunned and pinned, dislocated and shattered. Martin is not the answer, he can provide me with no firm basis at all.

Of course, my old antagonist says. His ruddy skin glows with sympathy or perhaps it is only health. Or vindication. You see, he says, you are left with it just as I said, you are left with all of this on your own. You must decide what price to pay and whether that is correct and no one can know. He backs away from me, horns a rapier, fine eyes glints of purpose in the night. Now, he says, now you must decide. You, not Martin Donner, who is only a paradox or a metaphor, you must make that decision. It is the 40th day, he says. Soon it will be the 40th night. You must now turn in the way you must and there will be no returning.

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