

## KNEW TOO MUCH

by Rome Reginelli

Dr. Studebaker was obsessed. He had been for longer than anyone remembered. As a child, he'd devoured books more voraciously than an English professor; he dismantled any machines he could get his hands on, to understand their inner workings. His parents could hardly answer all the questions he asked about all subjects. The young Wilhelm Studebaker was no simple bookworm: he was a man who craved knowledge above all else; and his persistence only grew through college and beyond.

It was no surprise, then, that Dr. Studebaker was drawn to the death-predicting machine, that problematic little box that took in a blood sample, just a small drop, and spit out a piece of paper telling you how you would die. When the machine first appeared, he was among the first to examine it. With twin doctorates in medical science and physical engineering, Dr. Studebaker was one of the few experts in the world qualified to reverse-engineer it. That process turned out to be easy; the mechanisms in the machine were not complex. The principles by which the device worked, however, were inscrutable. It seemed to Dr. Studebaker that a random sequence of letters should appear on the strip, that instead of saying "NATURAL CAUSES" a slip should say "GFAULGNSNRKH". The letters were, after all, just the final stages of the machine, like keys on a typewriter being pressed by invisible hands.

I encountered the good Doctor in his later years, at the point when his greatest accomplishments were behind him, and he was tinkering with his final, most ambitious project: a quest to do what everyone secretly wanted least among things they wanted most: the specifics. When would people die? Where? Could it be changed? *Could it change?*

His house was the house of a widower, an old-fashioned gentleman who had loved and lost, with only the ruins of a feminine presence left, the temple of an ancient civilization buried under years of overgrowth. Here an antique sewing machine with which the late Mrs. Studebaker had hemmed the curtains; a collection of screws and unclean glasses buried the machine. Those glasses, uniformly stained with Diet Pepsi, collected in the dozens amongst computers and printers of all ages and pieces of disassembled prediction machines that lay on every available surface. In the front room, an antique table bears a plague of parts under a nonfunctioning light fixture; what light enters the room forces its way through browning windows. I asked why the lights didn't work, and Studebaker explained that the bulb had gone out a while back and he simply didn't have the time or strength to clear the table and reach the socket.

He led me through a kitchen with scrawled, out-of-date sticky notes on the fridge and a card house of paper cups towering forth from the trash. The lab into which we finally emerged was a paradise of cleanliness by comparison. It was no sterile shell, but I could tell that this was where Dr. Studebaker truly lived and worked. To him, the two things were the same.

On the workbench were three prediction machines in different models. Dr. Studebaker showed me a stack of scraps that read alternatively, "KNEW TOO MUCH", its Spanish and German equivalents, and garbled nonsense. "This," he said, handing me one of the English ones, "is going to be the death of me."

"Knew too much?" I asked skeptically. "What kind of death is that?"

"I have asked myself the same thing many times," he mused. "Perhaps this is why I can't leave it be. I need to

know what it means. I'll tell you one thing, though: I've never doubted that it was mine."

I nodded silently.

I asked the doctor about his current work. He explained that his goal was to gain additional information about the death slips by researching the same phrases in multiple languages. The original prediction machine had output only English; but one of Dr. Studebaker's most lauded achievements had been a mechanism to automatically translate the output to other languages.

"That's where it gets sticky," Dr. Studebaker said. "I took precautions, but translation errors should be inevitable. Yet somehow, I've never heard of a single case." He went to point out that, if the translations were indeed always correct, then multiple translations of the same death slip would help clear up some of the ambiguities. "It's my own little way of cheating the system," or so he claimed.

"Have you found anything yet?"

He hadn't. "You see, I can't do more tests on people who are already dead, mostly. I mean, sometimes if I can get my hands on a blood donation I can coax the machine into spitting out their past fortune. But most of the time I have to deal with the living. And then I have to wait for my test subjects to die. It's very morbid." He laughed a big, unabashed laugh. Funny, for a man who had just admitted that it helps his research when his subjects die.

And then he asked me to volunteer. "All I need is a few blood samples," he said, already sterilizing the needle. I held out my finger, hesitantly. "There. Got it." I winced as the needle pierced my skin and a little red droplet appeared on my finger. The Doctor took a sample plate with the blood on it, and inserted it into the slot. The machine whirred up briefly, and then spit out another one of those

familiar slips of paper. Their resemblance to fortune cookies was unnerving.

“‘HEART FAILURE’, is it? You have a nice straightforward one,” Dr. Studebaker commented. “Have you ever pondered the creative possibilities of your death slip, Mr. Peterson?”

“Call me James, please,” I insisted. “But really, no, I haven’t. What more is there to heart failure than what it is?”

“Well, that’s just it. Supposing someone becomes totally numb to guilt for killing people, and he becomes a mass murderer. That would be a failure of the heart, would it not?”

“I suppose, in some sort of vague, metaphorical way, that could be.”

“Well, that’s the sort of thing I’m working on with my predictions. Suppose I take your fortune in a language whose culture doesn’t consider the anatomical heart to be the home of the soul. Then it matters whether your slip says the heart fails or something else. My goal is to eliminate the ambiguity.”

That was the extent of his research; the rest of my article would be fluff. Before I left, I asked a few more personal questions, off the record.

Dr. Studebaker had lived alone ever since his wife had died. His son Allen had moved out some time before that; apparently there was some bad blood between them, for which the Doctor felt passingly guilty. Otherwise, it was just him, his machines, and his mess. I found it so inexplicably fascinating that I before I realized it, I was volunteering to help with some housework in exchange for more information about his research.

“You *want* to clean up my house?” he asked incredulously.

“Well... in a way. I certainly wouldn’t mind, and if you don’t mind my honesty, I can tell you need it. I’d like to help your research in whatever way I can. I’m invested in it, now that I’m one of your subjects.”

He scrunched whitened eyebrows together, considering. “Can you cook, boy?” he asked.

“I spent two summers as an apprentice cook in a five-star restaurant,” I countered.

“You’re hired.”

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Less than a week, I was back. The first chore I tackled was the front room with the dead light bulb. It took a long time to coil and pile up the various parts of ancient computers: trackballs, CRT monitors, three-and-a-half inch floppy drives. As he took a break to watch in amusement, the Doctor explained that most of these were projects that had fallen by the wayside when the prediction machine took over his life. This led to the accusation that, despite his having taken a voluntary break, I was wasting his research time instead of saving it. I couldn’t tell if he was being surly or just playing with me.

“I think you’ll find that a cleaner house leads to a clearer mind,” I professed unconvincingly. He returned to his work, and I to mine; after a trip to the dump and Goodwill, there was – finally – space on the table so that I could reach the fixture. Getting the bulb out of the closet was another adventure entirely, but suffice to say that by the time the darkness was creeping over the hills of suburbia and I needed that light, it actually worked. I considered it a small miracle, having halfway expected the circuit to be dead from disuse.

The Doctor returned from his lab not long after.

“Spent all day and you only got this far?” he teased. “How many crazy reporters does it take to change a light bulb these days?”

“Just one,” I answered, “but I make no promises to timeliness.”

This managed a laugh out of the old man. “So, what’s for dinner?”

“Let’s see what you’ve got,” I said, starting for the fridge. I got a hunch from Doctor Studebaker’s crestfallen expression that there was nothing of worth in there. Sure enough:

Diet Pepsi, cans and cans of it; the man must drink a six-pack a day. A half-gallon of milk: okay, so he has something else with breakfast. A tub of margarine spread, a couple eggs, a jar of jelly, almost empty; and a bottle of salsa.

“Anything?” Dr. Studebaker hoped against hope.

“Take-out it is.”

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The next day I was back in the office. I arrived one minute past noon, which meant I was greeted with a shout of, “Dammit James, you’re late!” from the cigarette-wrinkled face of my editor. Eva “Darth Boss” Miller was the kind of editor who’d been at work for three hours by the time I came in, and would still be there hours after I left, running the paper with an iron fist. Rumor in the office was that she’d gotten “LUNG CANCER” as her death note and gone on smoking a pack a day. She was the kind of person I envied, who didn’t let the death prediction machine control her life. Where old man Studebaker did what he did because he needed to know, Eva did what she did because she knew and didn’t care.

I greeted Eva with a smile and accepted the extra work she threw my way: aside from the weekend obituaries, which I'd normally be handling, I was tasked with some sort of tech expo and a follow-up on the new airline sanctions for people with "PLANE CRASH" in their death slip. She asked me if my "housekeeping buddy" was going to yield any more stories.

"Doc Studebaker? We'll see."

"See what you can do. Your last one was pretty good, for old news."

And with that, she stalked off, doubtlessly to show some other writers the true meaning of the Force.

I took care of my own business in short order: the obituaries were routine, a bunch of moderately unimportant people who died just as their death slips described; the tech expo looked like it would make for a splashy photoshoot but not much else. The rate of airplane crashes hadn't really gone down since they started requiring a death slip check in the boarding pass. I chugged a heart-healthy V8 smoothie and made my way over to the cube of Lana Spiegel, our main Food and Wine writer. She glanced up from her desk with a characteristic smile.

"James! How rare to see you so early!" she said by way of greeting. "What's the boss got you up to today?"

"Not much. Airlines banning people superstitiously, engineers throwing robot fashion shows."

"Sounds like a hoot," Lana responded genuinely. Lana is always honest, earnest, so much it's almost funny. You'd think her parents never taught her the meaning of sarcasm, though she's good enough at reading it in other people.

"So, got anything special cooking?" I asked. Lana and I weren't really dating, but we had a sort of off-the-books agreement, where she tried out new recipes on me, and I gave her my honest opinion and then some. I hoped there

might be a good recipe to try on Doctor Studebaker, who was showing interest in new things after a successful foray into Thai take-out.

Lana did, in fact, have something special, some sort of Chinese-Mexican fusion soup she wanted a second opinion on, and she jumped at the idea of trying it with Dr. Studebaker, as long as she could invite her visiting niece along for the dinner. I called the Doctor and he was more than obliging to have company for dinner, so we called it a date and I headed out of the office in high spirits.

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Buying groceries for the soup fell to me, as Lana pulled the “Your house, your groceries” rule even though technically it was Dr. Studebaker’s. I sucked up and went, with the list she gave me: Beef roast? Check. Hoison sauce? Check. Bringing a coworker and her twelve-year-old niece to Dr. Studebaker’s place for dinner? Surprisingly, check.

Lana was dressed to impress when I picked her up. “How are you planning on cooking in that outfit?” I teased.

“You’re going to handle the hot stuff, Mr. Five Star Restaurant Employee. I’m just supervising.”

Problem was, she was (as always) completely serious. I countered with being less than serious as I exaggeratedly escorted her out like a knight. “I suppose I’ll have to handle you gently, hot stuff.” Her niece, Sierra, chuckled.

I drove them to Dr. Studebaker, who received them in – where else? – his lab. Greetings were exchanged and introductions made; Dr. Studebaker took quite well to Sierra, too: I wondered if maybe he felt she was the granddaughter he’d never had. He didn’t even jump immediately to the subject of the spices and vegetables I had so tantalizingly place on his counters and in his

refrigerator. Instead, he shook Lana's hand, saying, "So you're the chef from the paper. I hear you're an impressive writer."

Lana grinned shyly and searched my face for an explanation of the unexpected complement. "Well, Sierra," I delegated, "isn't she?"

"Yup! But she's an even better cook!"

That was as long as Dr. Studebaker's good behavior could last. "So, when are we fixing this delicious recipe I've heard about?" He'd been promised a gourmet dinner and there was no way he was going to forget. I was glad to have bought enough for several servings.

Lana was a little cautious, and more modest: "Well, I've only made it once, so I don't know for sure that you three will like it, but... we may as well start right away, if James is ready." She checked to confirm that I was prepared, not even teasing; it was unnecessary, but it was one of those nice gestures Lana makes, her best and worst qualities in one.

"As long as Sierra's not gonna be bored," I said.

"Maybe you want to play dominoes?" the Doctor suggested unexpectedly.

"Sure," said the bright-eyed niece, and the Doctor beamed. He was such a kid at heart. I hoped the owner of two PhDs wouldn't get too competitive with a mere twelve-year-old.

"Shall we, then?" suggested Lana while Doctor Studebaker went on an expedition to his closet in search of dominoes. I silently wished him luck and headed off to help - or well, to be directed by - Lana.

Cooking is an unusual business: a skill, an art, and a service all in one. Some people never try it, and others are professionals at it; but most people only dabble. "If I can read, I can cook," someone I knew once said, but I knew

that there were always ways to improve: new ways of slicing celery, substitutions for beef bullion in a pinch, the ability to recognize when the food was done and when it needed more salt. What made Lana a great writer in addition to a great cook is that she knew all this and wasn't afraid to share her wisdom. I learned more from her than I ever learned in the back of a supposedly famous restaurant boiling water and peeling carrots.

I did end up boiling water, peeling carrots, and more in the process of making this soup, though. Lana's direction guided me through it effortlessly, and before long the Doctor and the girl found their way into the kitchen, following the savory aroma wafting through the house. My own mouth was practically watering, especially after spending half the previous day cleaning up the age-old kitchen for use.

"How'd the domino game go?" I asked when I saw Sierra standing in the doorway, old man trudging up behind.

"I won," she announced. "Doctor Studebaker says I'm good at math."

"That she is," he confirmed, entering and sitting at the dining table. "I'm afraid I spent too much of my own time digging around the boneyard."

"Then Mr. Studebaker showed me a secret," Sierra added, with an all-too-smug face.

"A secret? What kind?"

"Can't tell! It's a secret!" She was being childish, even for a twelve-year-old, and enjoying it. But what sort of secret would Dr. Studebaker have for her?

"Just a little work," the doctor clarified, holding up an index finger. I quickly looked at Sierra and caught her trying to hide the tiny bandage over her fingertip. So he had talked her into being a subject of his research, too. The

man was relentless!

Lana was instantly upset. “Sierra! Your parents said they didn’t want you to get a death prediction until you were in high school!” She looked apologetically at Dr. Studebaker. “I should have warned you. Her parents didn’t want her to fixate on things like that so early in life.”

Sierra herself interjected, saving Dr. Studebaker the trouble of explaining, impossibly, that he did not understand how there were things some people would rather not know. The girl, on the other hand, wasn’t going to put up with it. “I don’t care what Mom says. It’s my death. I have a right to know.” She looked indignantly at Dr. Studebaker. “That’s why I said it had to be a secret.”

The Doctor’s helpless face almost made me burst out in laughter. “You’re the one who brought up the secret in the first place,” I pointed out. “But more importantly, is it worth dwelling over? Will your parents be right?” I was only trying to mitigate the problem. Of course it would be worth dwelling over. It was her *death!*

“Nah, it’s lame,” she dismissed.

“I’ll only tell you if you promise not to tell mom about it,” she demanded. The little sneak could drive a bargain after all. I glanced at Lana for permission. She shrugged and nodded as she turned off the burner for the pot of soup.

“Alright, I promise.”

For a couple moments the room was paused in anticipation. “Food poisoning,” Sierra finally declared.

My first thought was, “Actually, that *is* lame,” but I had missed a crucial point in drawing that conclusion. As Lana’s face drooped, I realized just how bad things could be. Lana was so sincere, so loving, that she could not help but take it the worst possible way. And try as I might, there would be no consoling her.

Dinner that night had been ruined. Lana refused to eat or cook anything; Sierra was really upset, but there was no way to keep her secret from her parents after the way it had affected Lana. Days passed. I went back to Dr. Studebaker's house, but we didn't talk much. If he felt guilty, he compensated by working harder. I made great progress in the dining room and the kitchen despite the dark cloud hanging over us.

At some point, I made my way into the Doctor's lab to check on his progress. He was furiously assembling another machine. He stopped when he noticed me. He seemed like he would greet me with his usual witty attitude, but the mood killed it. A silence passed between us instead.

"I talked to Lana this morning," I explained after it was unbearable. "She still hasn't recovered." I recalled the stumbling voice over the phone, still on the verge of tears. "I know, it could be anything," she had said. "I know, but I can't get it out of my head that Sierra is going to die because of me. It's going to be my cooking, my recipe that does it, I can feel somehow. I can't even touch the stove. Just making toast for myself feels like I'm trying to kill her."

I hated myself for being unable to console her. Dr. Studebaker had lived long enough that he, too, saw that nothing would help. Still, he did what he could. And the only thing he could do, as always, was work.

"I made a breakthrough," he said with no enthusiasm.

"What kind?"

He took a deep breath, to signal that he was going to start from the beginning. "People have wondered for a long

time if things are predetermined. If you think the world is governed by natural laws, then it makes sense. Dice aren't random – they fall, bounce, and spin according to well-known laws of physics. It's just that there are so many factors that are hard to measure, so you can't predict the outcome. If you think of things that way, then people's actions are predetermined, too, possibly – the cumulation of your genetics and your experiences since before birth total up to create a 'you' who, in any situation, wouldn't make any choice except the one you do. Of course, quantum physics throws everything off by having things that occur at random. But it could easily be that there are some rules we can't measure or understand that make quantum physics not random at all. If this is true, then every event that happens anywhere in the universe at any time is already decided. I always thought that if this were the case, then actually predicting those things would take a computational power equal to the universe itself – that the universe would be the only thing capable of calculating itself. But the death-predicting machine proved me wrong. It barely takes anything to do it – the most minuscule drop of blood contains enough information to predict the death of a person, and it's always perfect.”

Dr. Studebaker paused, adjusting his glasses. I stood, enthralled.

“At least, that's what I thought until now. I truly wanted Sierra's prediction to be wrong, for your friend's sake. I tried to imagine how that could be. Finally, it came to me: perhaps not just hers was wrong, but others had been wrong – and we hadn't even noticed, because we had assumed they were right. I realized that maybe, just maybe, every last one of those fortunes that seems obscure or abstract – maybe those weren't meant to be that way, but were flaws in the system! It couldn't be a problem with

individual machines or samples, because there has never been a report of differing predictions for the same person. It has to be the machine. The thing the machine calculates, of course, can't be the person's actual death – that would be too complicated. It calculates how to find the person's death and how to write it, which is why I've been trying to change these machines, to see if I could accidentally tap into something other than the death of a person. I thought, if there's some kind of metaphysical history of the universe this machine is tapping into, maybe I could get it to give me a random excerpt, a slice of... something. From there, I could develop a methodology of predicting *anything*. But as you can see..." he said, gesturing to a pile of crumpled strips with garbage text on them, "that didn't much work."

"So what did?" I asked.

"I started looking at all the records of deaths that didn't seem to match up to the actual thing, and tried to find a common factor or trend among them."

"...And?"

"Most of them, I couldn't find anything. But among the few cases where I had DNA information, I started to see a pattern. There was a characteristic in common, an inhibiting factor present in all the predictions, in different amounts for different people, that made the predictions go out of focus." I'm afraid I can't explain the details any more: it's dangerous that I've said as much already. Suffice to say, the Doctor was, at the moment I walked in, devising a way to eliminate the inhibiting character completely. He planned to get a more direct and accurate prediction than anyone ever had.

It was at that moment I made my decision. I regret only that I can do so little. I hope Lana will either understand or forget.

I think sometimes that the inventor of the death

prediction machine understood, too. Maybe the creator got “LYNCH MOB” on his slip and decided to play it safe. It was probably safer that the machine appeared anonymously, with no explanation beyond how to use it. Better not to be known as the progenitor of such a fundamentally flawed and dangerous creation.

That night at Dr. Studebaker’s house I was to cook tacos. I left him to his work for some time, and started sizzling the meat in the skillet, withdrawing a bag of tortillas and a Teflon non-stick pan to cook them in. I poured a small amount of vegetable oil into the pan, letting it sizzle, and heated up one tortilla. On another burner, a small pot sat with whole pinto beans, waiting to be cooked. I turned off the burner, placing the hot tortillas on a plate, when Dr. Studebaker emerged from his lab.

“Is it almost time?” he asked expectantly.

I fiddled absentmindedly with the knobs on the stove.

“Time? Yes, in fact, it almost is. Give it a few more minutes.” I allowed my tone to darken. “In fact, it has already been too long.”

Not getting it, he said, “It *has* been too long since I last ate, yes. Say, do you smell gas?”

“It’s nothing,” I assured him. “But, Doctor Wilhelm Studebaker, have you ever considered the possibility that that death machine doesn’t predict the future, it determines it?”

“Of course; it’s absurd.” He was feeling uncomfortable now.

“And what about people who believe in free choice? Who refuse to accept the machine no matter what?”

“Equally absurd – the machine has proven that free choice is an illusion.”

“That’s your problem, Doctor. You can’t seem to

comprehend other people at all. Even when they want to live without the agony of knowing an inevitable future, you continue trying to refine that future, to make it all the more concrete and inevitable. Think about how bad things are now with the uncertainty and the pain involved in knowing your own death. Think of all the people who can't swim without that nagging paranoia, just because their slip says "DROWNING". Think of the people who can't ride airplanes, because they're predicted to die in a crash, even though it's not helping the airlines. Think of all the opportunities that have been closed by fear of the predictions. But it could be worse. No matter how bad your death slip is, no matter how miserable your ultimate fate, you can always try to convince yourself that it's not what it seems, that there's some other, better way to go that only vaguely matches. People can, in time, learn to cope, because even though it's never wrong, it's never unambiguous. You like to pretend that more of the problem will be a cure. You're only going to make things worse."

The Doctor's face had slowly gone white. His eyes were blinking incessantly. "You don't mean to..." he began.

"I have to. You're already too close. I know you can't resist."

"Please, James, have mercy!" he suddenly begged, running to the nearest window. It was jammed shut, right as I had left it, and the Doctor couldn't get it to budge. "What about my son? What about you? This whole building will go down!"

"As it must, to take your research this way. I'm sorry it had to be this way. I'm sure your son will forgive you." I took a deep breath. "It's over, Doc."

"So that's what it means," he mumbled.

"'KNEW TOO MUCH?'" I asked.

"No; a failure of the heart."

I could only let out a faint, grim chuckle, as I turned the burner to “light”.