

Another Perfect Day by Steven Popkes

Poke around a bit at www.stevenpopkes.com and you'll find out that Mr. Popkes is originally from Southern California, has degrees in Zoology and Neurophysiology, is currently working for NASA on the Ares project, and has a side interest in hot air engines. What you won't find on the site is any indication of whether the life of Mr. Popkes has been influenced in the way Sam's life was changed in this work of fiction.

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Sam Prokofiev woke up with the sun. For a moment, he watched the light grow across the ceiling. Golden. He could imagine it shining first over the Atlantic, then up across the fine Florida sand to the old Hollywood Beach Hotel, lingering over the pink stucco and then flashing down Hollywood Boulevard into his window. The palm trees rustled, faintly. He could hear the gulls. It was too early for the cars.

Another perfect day in paradise.

He took a shower, shaved, walked past the small grand piano, drawing his fingers over the top, past the closed door of Lina's room, to the kitchen.

After breakfast he looked at today's entry in the date book. It was a habit Lina had instilled in him when they first met, back when she was still Joe's secretary. Lina had died three years ago, but after he had tracked gigs, practice sessions, dates with different girls, payment dates from managers, dates with one girl, payment dates to pawn shops, an engagement date, a marriage date, birthdays, vacations, anniversaries, doctor's appointments, prescription refills, medication schedules and finally funeral arrangements, he wasn't about to give it up. He had a drawer full of these little date books, each as neatly labeled as notes on a staff.

Cleaning the pistol was first. Then, it was gardening in the back yard and an afternoon of fishing. All things he liked. Damn. It was first of the month again. Penciled in at the bottom of the page was the single word "compose." Once a month, he stared at the keys to see if something would come to him. Just like he promised Lina.

He sighed and got up from the table, pulled out the pistol box from the sideboard and took his cup of coffee to the patio outside. He sat down and opened the box, pulled out the heavy .38, and set it in his lap. He pulled

out the other items from the box: cleaning solvent, wiping rags, the box of ammunition—

A huge, fat man jumped the fence and ran pounding across Sam's garden, screaming "Don't do it! Don't do it!" Before Sam could react, he yanked the pistol off his lap and stood, obese and wheezing, ten feet away.

Sam stared at him. The young man was grossly heavy—maybe three hundred pounds—pale, wearing shorts and a light shirt. Over the shirt he was wearing a harness with various boxes and meters. He tried to speak but couldn't catch his breath.

Sam brought over a chair and eased him down into it. The chair creaked ominously but didn't break.

"Are you all right?"

"I'll be—" He stopped to pant for a moment. "—okay in a minute. Asthma."

"I see." Sam sat back in the other chair. He felt a little nonplused. "What am I not supposed to do?"

"Shoot—yourself."

"Ah. Do you have a name?"

"Wilson." Wilson's breathing gradually came under control. "Wilson Taylor."

"Well, Wilson," began Sam. "I wasn't planning to shoot myself. I was cleaning the pistol. I do it every month."

"You were going to shoot yourself over the death of your wife." Wilson seemed able to breathe without difficulty now. "She died last year. I came to save you."

"Are you sure you have the right house?" asked Sam hopefully. "I'm Sam Prokofiev."

"You're Sergei Prokofiev. Born in the Ukraine in 1891. Spent a lot of time traveling and composing before settling in Moscow in 1929. Met and married Mira Mendelssohn. Favorite composer of Stalin until the guy died in 1942. Khrushchev didn't like you so you and Mira emigrated from Russia to

the United States in 1939, just before World War II. Mira contracted cancer in 1944 and died a year later. You killed yourself out of grief today, March 15, 1945.” Wilson looked at Sam with triumph. “Except you didn’t. I saved you.”

Sam stared at him. “World War ... Two?”

“Well, yeah. It’s not like you could have left Russia after the war started.”

“Of course,” Sam said, recovering himself. “Thank you.” The phone was inside. Maybe Sam could get to it without drawing attention to himself. “Would you like a glass of lemonade?”

Wilson frowned. “You said you weren’t going to kill yourself.”

“Maybe I was about to.”

“Maybe it was murder, then. Many conspiracy theorists have thought you were never the type to commit suicide. They insist you were assassinated by the MKVD.”

“My very thoughts.”

Wilson looked around the yard. “This isn’t Queens.”

“Are you sure?”

Wilson ignored him. “You don’t see palm trees in Queens.”

Sam gave up. “No, you don’t.”

Wilson thought for a moment. “I must have overshot. Quick, man. What’s the date? I could still reach him.”

“February 1, 1947.”

Wilson fell silent for a moment and stared at the ground. Sam stood up. “I’ll get some lemonade.”

“Where is this? California?”

“Hollywood, anyway. Hollywood, Florida.”

“He’s already dead. What am I going to do?” Wilson buried his head in his hands.

Sam patted his shoulder sympathetically and deftly snagged the gun as he went inside. He locked it in a drawer in the bedroom and then returned to the kitchen. He found Wilson frantically searching the room.

“I hid the gun,” Sam said softly.

“I need a pad of paper. And a pencil. It must have been the Uncertainty Principle.” Wilson stared up at him. “Do you think it was the Uncertainty Principle?”

“I’m certain of it.” Sam found a pad and pencil and gave it to Wilson.

Wilson sat at the table. “You said lemonade?”

Sam pulled the pitcher out of the refrigerator and poured for both of them. He looked at Wilson’s pudgy hands and unfocussed eyes. This boy wasn’t dangerous. Hell, when Sam and Strav were playing gigs up in New York they dealt with much worse than this.

Wilson looked up suddenly. “What were you doing in Florida with a gun in 1947?”

“Son, North Miami is three blocks south of here. Of course I’ve got a gun.”

“Was North Miami that bad in 1947?”

“It’s been bad ever since the Dominican Republic fell under the control of Haiti. Every refugee refused entry by Batista ends up here.”

Wilson seemed nonplused. “I guess I don’t know much Florida history.” He went back to scrabbling on the paper. He stopped again. “I didn’t know you were in Florida.”

Sam sat down across from him. “I was born in 1891. But everything else you said about me was wrong. I studied in the Saint Petersburg Conservatory until 1921 when the revolution closed it down. I composed and gave concerts until things went to hell after Trotsky followed Lenin. I fled first to Paris and then to America. I played jazz clubs and bet at the racetrack and bluffed at poker and met and married Carolina Codina—she sang under the name, Lina Llubera. This is the house I bought her. She

loved living somewhere warm all year long. Lina got sick five years ago and died three years ago. Now I live here by myself. So: I'm not who you think I am."

Wilson stared at him, his face heavy. He turned back to his pad of paper.

Sam leaned back. He could use another cup of coffee. Wilson made him feel tired.

"Okay, then," Wilson said, his lips pursed. He stared at the pad of paper. "I'm from the future. I invented a time machine to come back and save you from suicide. Except this isn't where I aimed and you aren't him."

"That's a time machine?" Sam pointed at the harness.

"Wormhole generator, anyway. You trigger the wormhole and it takes you back in time."

Sam could see now the dials. "Looks like date and time. Latitude and longitude?"

"Yeah," admitted Wilson. "But those aren't the controls I used. I used this part." He pointed at a slim device plugged into a socket on the side of the bigger box on his chest. "This finds you—Sergei Prokofiev—and determines your closest chronological point to me. Which I figured was when you died. That would be the latest point in your life and therefore closest to me. But, clearly it doesn't work." Wilson turned back to the pad and paper. "It's a proof of the many worlds hypothesis, anyway."

"It doesn't look complicated enough to be a time machine. It's just a set of numbers, a couple of dials and a big red button."

"Why make everything complicated? The computer does all the work. It figures out the best path, makes sure I don't end up inside a wall."

"Computer?"

Wilson shrugged. "Never mind."

"What's the big red button?"

"Automatic return. But it's only good for a few hours. Then, I have to dial in my return. Safety factor in case I got hurt." He returned to his figures.

“Was I famous where you come from?” Sam asked after a few moments.

“Absolutely.” Wilson looked up. “Everybody thinks about you the same way they think about Mozart: cut down in the prime of life. Who knows what you might have produced?”

“I would have been fifty-six. Hardly the prime of life.”

“You never know.” Wilson shrugged. “All right, I thought you were cut down in the prime of your life. The first piece of music I ever heard in my whole life that I actually liked was Suite for Three Oranges. And the scraps you left of Ode on the End of the War are really, really good. I wanted to hear the rest.”

“You’re a sweet boy.”

Wilson stared at the pad. “That’s not what most people say.”

“What do they say?”

“That I’m crazy.”

Sam looked over. Wilson was writing some kind of equations. Sam noticed the thickness of his arms. The strength in his fingers. Suddenly, he felt old and vulnerable.

“Care for another lemonade?”

“That would be great.”

Sam took his glass, filled it and set it down next to him. Wilson gulped it down, starting to sweat. “Is it always this hot?”

“It’s Florida.”

“I guess.” Wilson looked up at Sam. “I could have come using lat, longs and time. But I didn’t think that was precise enough. I could miss your death. You could be out shopping. Walking the dog.”

“I don’t have a dog.”

“Instead, I zeroed in on distance.”

“Distance?”

“It’s a complex function—I call it distance. I wanted to find the closest approximate chronological point from me, in the present, to you, in the past. Then, I’d be close to you near the moment of your death.” Wilson threw up his hands. “I have no idea how this happened. Instead of California, I get Florida. Instead of Prokofiev wracked with grief over the death of his beloved Mira, I get you, pretty much over the death of Lina.”

“Not completely over,” Sam commented dryly.

“And instead of 1945 I get 1947!”

“It’ll come to you.” Sam tried to sound soothing.

“I guess.” Then, Wilson held the pencil in the air and looked at it carefully. Then, he gently put it down on the table. He put his arms on the table next to it and slowly eased his great head down on them.

“Wilson?” called Sam. “Wil-son?”

Wilson didn’t move.

Sam nodded to himself. He stood up and returned to the kitchen. He replaced the bottle of chloral hydrate back in the cupboard. Sam wasn’t surprised it had taken two glasses. Wilson was a big man and Sam had been careful with the dosage.

Wilson began to snore. Sam patted his shoulder. He hadn’t lost his touch. This was the way he and Strav had rolled sailors and queers back when that was the only way to make a gig pay. Of course he had chloral hydrate.

Sam wrestled the harness off of Wilson so he could handle him. Wilson was too heavy to get to the floor—the safest place for an unconscious person. Sam made sure Wilson’s head was turned so that if the boy vomited in his sleep, it wouldn’t choke him to death. He never wanted to relive that moment again. Sam shivered.

Holding the harness, Sam picked up the phone to call the police. The phone in his hand, he held the harness up and scrutinized it. The controls were clearly visible and looked just as simple as Wilson had described them. Sam put down the phone. He stared at the harness a long time.

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Wilson snorted in his sleep and suddenly sat up. "It's the Pauli Exclusion Principle!"

Sam, sitting across from him, sipped his coffee. "Beg pardon?"

"The Pauli Exclusion Principle says that no two electrons in an atom can have the same quantum number." He shaped something vaguely spherical in the air with his hands. Sam presumed it was an atom. Or maybe it was a quantum number. Or both.

Wilson stared at him for a moment. "Forget about that. What happens if I go into the past and change it: I change my present—possibly enough to prevent me from going into the past in the first place. Therefore, my Prokofiev isn't the closest Prokofiev at all. It's the only Prokofiev that's, in fact, infinitely far away. I can never reach him. I can only find Prokofievs that can't paradox me."

His voice fell and he looked at the table. "Maybe 'nearness' can only be determined by the Prokofiev least similar to mine rather than the most similar." He shook his head. "There's no reason that the different realities have to be in any kind of lockstep with regard to time. Maybe I've got it all wrong and time travel isn't possible. Maybe there isn't any such thing as past at all—just alternate realities that are close enough to one another that one could resemble the past of another." He held up both his hands. "You can't have time travel. You can only have a simulation of time travel." Wilson looked at Sam desperately. "What do you think?"

"I think there's definitely such a thing as a past."

Wilson nodded absently. "Man, my head hurts." He sat up and looked around, shook his head. "My neck is stiff. And I'm really thirsty. How long was I asleep?"

"Almost twenty-four hours."

"Really?" Wilson rubbed his face. "I'm not hungry. Usually, I'm really hungry in the morning. Do you have any more lemonade?"

"Apple juice."

"That'll do."

Sam brought the bottle and glass and passed them over to Wilson.

“Wow,” Wilson said wonderingly. “Time—alternate world—travel really takes it out of you.”

Sam picked up an envelope he'd placed on the floor next to his chair. He passed it over the table to Wilson.

Wilson picked it up. “What's this?”

“A present. For not letting me kill myself.”

“Aw, man.” Wilson grinned at him. He opened the envelope and pulled out the paper. “This is music.” He squinted at the title. “This is Ode on the End of the War.” Slowly, he put it down. “You died before you could finish it.”

“I'm not dead, Wilson.”

“But you're not him.”

Sam traced the pattern of the wood in the table. His hands ached. They were still swollen from the night before. “I'm a composer, too. Maybe it will be close enough.”

“This is handwritten, man.” Wilson carefully slid the music back in the envelope. “Did you do it while I was asleep?”

“Yes. I thought you should have something for coming.”

Wilson held the envelope reverently. “Thanks. Thanks a lot, man.” He sipped his juice. “Man, I dreamed of this moment for years. When I could talk to Prokofiev face to face.” He laughed shortly. “But now that I'm here, I can't think of a thing to say.”

“I'm not your Prokofiev.”

“You're as close as I'm ever going to get.”

“Fair enough.” Sam watched the obsessed young man thoughtfully. “How about you tell me about who I am in your world and I'll tell you about who I am here while I cook breakfast. Do you like eggs?”

Wilson's expression grew serious. "Man, I love eggs."

It was late morning when Wilson leaned back from the table. He stood up and stretched. "I better be getting back." He picked up the harness from the sofa and put it on.

Sam stood up. "I'm glad you came, Wilson."

"Me, too." Wilson held out his hand to shake good-bye. Sam took it.

"Thanks, man," Wilson said. "Thanks for everything."

Wilson fastened the harness and started the machine.

"Don't forget to dial it in," Sam said. "You said the return button would only work for a few hours."

Wilson nodded. "Right." He adjusted the controls on the harness. The lights glowed and the dials jumped. The fans in the back whirred. "Stand back," he said.

Wilson waved as he flicked the switch.

His hair seemed to wave in the static electricity. There was the smell of ozone and a pop—he was gone.

Sam cleaned up the plates, the bottle of apple juice, and the glasses and put them in the sink. Then, he went to the closet and brought out a pile of books. Each one was labeled The Complete Works of Sergei Prokofiev, 1891-1953. There were twelve fat volumes of scores, commentary, and analysis.

Sam pulled out the volume containing the completed Ode and took it to the piano. He went through parts of it again. Just as it had the night before, playing this piece felt exactly like playing something he had composed but had never seen before. It wasn't quite what he would have written, but it was something he could have written. He could see ideas, variations—suggestions of different works.

He could milk just this collection for years, dribbling it out, publishing here, performing there. It could be a career in itself. But he didn't have to. As he had found last night while he was copying out Ode, this was like having an interesting conversation with somebody he knew very well: what was coming out was completely his, inspired by something he'd never

done. Sam wondered how many more of him were out there. All of them similar in one way or another—or maybe there was only one of him but with a thousand faces.

After an hour, his hands were finally too swollen and painful to hold even a pencil. He went to the sink and ran cold water over them until the pain lessened. He picked up the phone and called a familiar number.

“Joe?” he said into the phone. Listened for a moment. “Yeah, it’s me. Back from the grave and ready to party.” Pause. “Heart attacks are badges of honor in your business, aren’t they? You don’t have a Soviet Empire but agents have an empire all their own.”

“Never mind,” he said after a moment. “Just a joke.”

Sam looked at the clock. It was after noon. He poured himself a highball. “I’ve been working. Yeah. Three years’ worth. Want to start something up?” The first taste of a highball is the best, he thought. Like the first notes of a concerto. Like the first hints of a fresh start. Here’s to you, Lina, he thought. And to you, Wilson. You would have liked each other.

Of course Joe wanted in. They started bouncing ideas off of one another.

Sam leaned against the counter as he listened. The sun made all the bright colors of the flowers and the bees stand out. He could smell the fragrances as they drifted in.

Another perfect day in paradise.