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Dewey Smith and the meaning of All

Physics in action.

Robert Reed

A man named Dewey can't be taken seriously. Dewey should be a cartoon character or a scruffy little kid or a simple-minded giant who loves puppy dogs.

Dewey Smith wasn't much to look at in his own right — smallish, profoundly bald at 20, with bad skin and bad clothes and a big belly. If it weren't for the asymmetries in his very plain face, nothing about the man would strike the eye. And his voice was as unappealing as it was soft — sharp mumbles laced with long silences that pushed audiences into comas.

By rights, the preeminent mind of our times should be six foot three, blond and respectably handsome. And he would have a voice that could fill any room, proudly telling the world how it was that he and he alone had discerned the rules of the Universe. And he would have a worthy name too, like Vincent Starr.

Which is my name, as it happens.

I met Dewey at Stanford, and I was as close to him as any tall, good-looking 19-year-old could be with an introverted 15-year-old savant. The kid graduated before me, then lingered another two years. He was the strongest horse in a Nobel laureate's stable, which made it all the more spectacular when that squeaky little voice announced that string theory was a religion; M-theory was ridiculous; and modern physics was an embarrassing mess. Then he left campus, and for the next 20 years he existed as a sequence of rumours ranging from the peculiar to the out-and-out absurd.

Meanwhile, the old masters of our field died off, taking their obscure and unworkable ideas with them.

The Modified Brane Theory lasted long enough to destroy a few careers. Then the Inspiration Theory retrieved order from chaos, sustaining half-a-thousand professors for several lucrative years. The trick was to stop thinking about the Universe as our private possession, but see it as somebody else's. We didn't bring back the Grand Deity, but accepting the idea that a single creative force had shaped the Big Bang allowed ripe new predictions, plus easy tests that didn't laugh at us when we set them up in the lab.

Then I turned 45, and the lunar cyclotron went online, throwing dust into our clever machinations.

Despite a rich career and a new wife — a beautiful girl half my age — I suddenly faced the clawing, suffocating sense that my final two or three decades would bring nothing but a rain of manageable disappointments.

There are worse fates, I'll grant you.

And better.

Then one day, I unlocked my office door, and discovered a pudgy little bald man sitting behind my desk.

"Dewey?"

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His voice was unchanged. "Vince," he rasped. "Hope you don't mind the intrusion, and how are you?"

"I'm well," I managed, staring at the doorknob. "How are you, Dewey?"

He just smiled.

"You picked this lock?"

"I made the most of my jail time," he replied.

"In Oklahoma," I said. "Stolen funds of some kind, wasn't it?"

"Oh, you heard?" His smile hadn't changed with the years. Earnest, but perched on the brink of imbecilic. "Really, that prison in Nepal was much more productive."

"Why were you there?"

"To speak to a certain political prisoner."

I sat on the chair my students used — a symbolic moment, I might point out — and Dewey gave me a brief but thorough outline of his past 20-some years.

I'd heard about Oklahoma and the Brazilian commune and Cape Town. But not about living with wolves in Alaska or his lucrative stint as a carbon-broker. Then came Siberia and the Russian mathematician-nationalist. I knew about that incident and heard how he slipped back into California, hired and then fired by a prominent AI firm, and soon rehired again, all of which happened before a long stint inside a quality mental-health facility.

"Except I wasn't crazy," he concluded.

"Of course not."

He heard the doubt in my voice. "I needed to confer with a patient."

"Which patient?"

He preferred not to say. Instead he told me: "You and your colleagues made good progress, Vince. That Inspiration Theory, I mean. Except of course there's more than one hand behind the Universe."

"Oh yeah?" I said smugly. "How many hands?"

"Three very big ones, and countless little ones. But the point is that each hand had its own purpose, and our physical laws and constants are nothing more, or less, than a set of compromises. The residue of competing geniuses, if you will. And no amount of cleverness will ever reveal the underlying order in this magnificent chaos."

"That's what the madhouse taught you?"

He hesitated. "What I came to understand is that when there are no true rules governing every aspect of our lives, much is possible. Much more than we'd find in any strict law-abiding Universe."

"And that means?"

"Ask yourself, Vince. What if you were me? Ugly, creepy Dewey. And what if you found the means to manipulate the All?"

I gave that question a moment of honest consideration. Then I tried to stand.

Behind my eyes, a fire blossomed.

"One more god shaping a very messy pile," said a confident, booming voice.

And I found myself sitting behind my desk, and the man wearing my face and body rose from the students' chair. "You'll find keys in your pocket," he told me, "and two million in the Lexus beside the student union."

"This isn't fair," I complained with a soft, grating voice.

"What is?" he replied. "When does 'fair' show its head in any of our pretty equations?" ■

Robert Reed is the author of nearly 200 stories and a dozen novels. He won a Hugo in 2007 for his novella *A Billion Eves*.