

The Affinities

Be careful how you describe yourself.

Robert Charles Wilson

Of course I remember you. I want to clarify that point up front. Yes, Beth, of course I remember you — Montreal 2042 — and I'm flattered you think I can contribute to your project in even a modest way. As for your final query... well, we'll get to that. First let me address the professional questions.

How did you discover the Affinities, and when did you join?

I was at Columbia when Kleindeinst first achieved notoriety, and as an undergraduate psychology student I was aware of his work in epigenetic psychology and game theory. By that time he and his allies had already isolated some of the genes that we still call by their playful kleindeinstian names: *SKYDIVER*, *DARKROOM*, *SEXY* and so on; or *FEARFUL*, *COLLECTOR* and *GIMME* (all three of which had been correlated with obsessive-compulsive disorder). But I couldn't have guessed how influential his work would become, or the extremes to which it would be taken by earnest amateurs and clever entrepreneurs.

I became aware of the Affinities when the first purpose-built home sequencers came on the market. I knew K's work had progressed, that he had identified dozens of genes implicated in the development of personality. And I knew that he had sorted these into eight or ten clusters in which the genes interacted to suppress or promote one another — *DARKROOM* (associated with claustrophobia and agoraphobia) usually accompanied an active *COLLECTOR* (with its attention to detail and fear of disorder), for instance.

But how shocked poor Kleindeinst must have been when the first improvisational Affinity tribes, their names cobbled together from his whimsical genonyms, began to play the role astrology had once fulfilled for the general public. (*SEXY SKYDIVER FIREMAN* sounded better than Aquarius or Leo at the singles bar. And even if you considered yourself a *FEARFUL DARKROOM VOYEUR* you could seek out companionship in an Internet chatroom.)

The original Kleindeinst sequencer was introduced in 2038, with its venerable slogan "Know thyself", and the fad began in earnest. I bought mine later that year.

Were the Affinity years a positive or negative experience for you?

Much too big a question, Beth.

By 2040 I had established myself as a *GENTLE OPENMINDED COLLABORATOR*, the relevant subcodes (*VOYEUR* +, *VERBAL* + ...) enamelled on the Affinity badge I wore with no little pride. I chatted online with other *GOCs*, interacted preferentially with *GOCs* at work, and in autumn of that year I joined the local *GOC* community.

To encounter other souls so much like my own was like rediscovering a lost, beloved family. At Affinity gatherings there was much talk that

of recognition' even in a stranger's eyes.

To trust without fear. It was Edenic.

How could I not remember? You walked into the gilded lobby of the Hilton, your dark hair streaming with rain, and it was all inevitable from that point onward, as it had been inevitable a dozen times before, with dozens of other non-strangers. Our preferences were alike, our needs. Our deepest and most cherished desires. Ultimately, even, our mutual boredom.

Should the Affinities be revived?

Do you really need to ask?

They vanished for a reason, despite all the weeping. It wasn't just the conflicts predicted by game theory: the predatory Affinities like *DISHONEST MIMETIC PARASITE* that invaded *GOC* and stripped us of our fortunes and our easy mutual trust; it wasn't just the class-action suits accusing us of epigenetic favouritism. Those heartbreaks and betrayals were only the most public aspect of our terrible disappointment with, in the end, ourselves.

Lest nostalgia overwhelm us, recall that the last legal home sequencer was sold more than ten years ago; those that remain on the second-hand market are traded as quaint curiosities, like Victorian Ouija boards or phrenological models of the skull.

I wonder even at the wisdom of this research you're conducting. A book about the *GOC* Affinity? Really? Or just an excuse to renew old contacts?

Gnothi seauton, Beth. As the slogan says.

Do you remember me, and shall we meet for coffee or drinks to discuss the book?

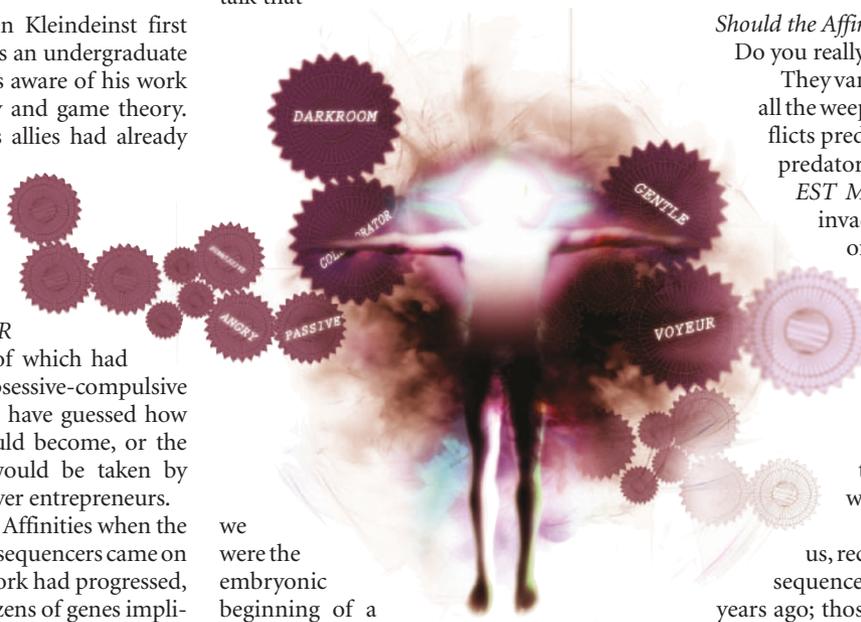
Of course I remember — but no, we won't meet.

I'm married now. My wife never belonged to an Affinity, even in the good years. She doesn't always laugh at my jokes, and our relationship is occasionally stormy.

But when I look into her eyes I do not see myself. And that dissonance, Beth — that impenetrable and always-surprising otherness — is, I have discovered, a blessing beyond price.

I'm sorry. But I can say without fear of contradiction that I know you'll understand. ■

Robert Charles Wilson has written several novels, including Hugo Award finalists Darwinia and The Chronoliths. His latest is Spin.



we were the embryonic beginning of a new speciation event — remember? The future, we thought, would be inhabited by wise *GOCs*, troll-like *AGGRESSIVE ANGRY DISSENTERS*, ethereal *PASSIVE SUBMISSIVE INNOCENTS*, and so on. What madness! And yet, how good it felt to flatter ourselves!

I booked a week off my medical practice to attend the 2042 *GOC* conclave in Montreal. We were in full flower then, weren't we, Beth? Because we were natural collaborators, we could interact without fear. We could make deals and hold ourselves to them without contracts; we could invest in businesses that weren't expected to be profitable for years, but which, when they did return a profit, made many of us independently wealthy. If we failed, we drew the appropriate lessons from our failures. We rarely argued, and we seldom even raised our voices.

And, need I say, we fell in love with one another. That was always the most delicious thing of all, wasn't it? To stroll down a hotel corridor full of people speaking dozens of languages and know for a fact that each one was a potential friend or lover: to see what literary scholars call 'the shock