

SABRINA TOM

## Life, Stupefying

I am not a scientist. But I feel a kinship with scientists. Doppelganger to writers, we share a common investment in human nature, a love affair with facts and, every so often, if we're inclined and lucky, a belief that what we do can change the world. In the creativity process, science and literature share a list of staggeringly mundane behaviors. These include (to borrow from Ian McEwan) tolerance of drudgery, luck, ambition, playfulness, and a kind of abandonment to a determined stupor.

My belief in the connectedness between scientists and writers is reinforced by the existence of my real life double. The discovery originated from an impulse, or what in the scientific method is known as *asking a question*. What gmail username to register? I had gone online and typed in the most self-reflective choice, only to find that it was taken. Derivations by punctuation—a dash, a period, even the unfashionable underscore—were also taken. The obvious conclusion would've been that someone else with the same name had beaten me to it, yet this seemed so implausible that I Googled myself fully expecting to expose some fourteen year old name squatter in Minnesota looking to make a quick buck. Then Occam's Razor asserted itself. There was another Sabrina Tom in this world.

To accept all of the conflicts my double created on the grid (other sites aggrieved: Yahoo, Skype, LinkedIn, Facebook) was to accept that my username would forever be complicated by *extra letters or numbers* (only if I ever ran for President, I swore). But once I got over that, a minor inconvenience morphed into a more haunting set of metaphysical questions.

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Who is Sabrina Tom? How were we similar? How were we the same?

I did my research. The first bit of information was straightforward enough: we were both Chinese. However, one of us was full Chinese, while the other was half. What did this asymmetry mean? If we met would I only recognize a part of her and vice versa? Did this imply that race was a far less sticky glue holding our beliefs and affinities together?

The next bit was also a mind bender. We were both the same age, not to the day, the month or even the year, but close enough to question our shared past (Did she listen to Wham!? Did she idolize Jake Ryan?), not to mention fate and mortality.

Finally, I looked to understand something about Sabrina Tom by her career choices. She was a cognitive neuroscientist studying the brain's response to taking risks. In one study, she and her team took brain scans while a group of volunteers played a gambling game in which the odds stayed the same but the wagers changed. They found that as the stakes increased, volunteers took fewer chances, and concluded that in general people weren't willing to take a risk unless the potential gain far outweighed the perceived losses. A real world implication might look something like this: you are a woman in a bad relationship. You are unlikely to leave unless you are certain that someone better—at least 200% better, to be exact—will come along.

What were the losses versus gains from the discovery of my double? As a writer, I make up entire realities for my characters, yet I was sure I didn't want to know *this story*, for the same reason why I choose fiction over non. Or why the woman in the bad relationship keeps a suitcase packed with lacy underwear and a wad of cash. It's about self-preservation, delighting in the unexpected. And here's where the connection between science and literature ruptures. Some mysteries are best unsolved. Writers seldom reach conclusions. Our inclination is to take something known and chip away its irrefutability. To add layers. To forsake real life for *lifelike*.

What if astronomers had landed on Jupiter instead of the moon? Or physicists never discovered nuclear fission? What if you could talk to angels? What of a world fashioned by the

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imagination of writers? As for my double, having left her an open ending, I hope that she is chasing a different outcome, creating her own narrative out of all of the stupefying possibilities.

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