

# DAY 5: Zippos in the Jungle Somewhere



We have arrived at the Great Decline, the leading edge of the Great Divide, beyond which is the Great Resurrection where Robo v2.0 either hums like a fine Swiss watch or reminds everybody of Windows Vista.

I am effectively stripped of my immune system at this point. The technical term is neutropenia. For the med tec(k)s among us, the details are: WBC<0.1; ANC=zero; Hemeacrit 33.7; and platelets at 19. This last number means that I will receive a platelet infusion over the next hour.

As my old pal Frankie told me about his chemo a few years back:

*Basically they have to get you as close to death as they can without actually, y'know, killing you.*

That is some hardcore torch-the-hamlet-in-order-to-save-it mentality right there.

As much as I resist, current conditions lend to metaphor. I am filled with a polyglot of chemicals and isotopes and re-jiggered stem cells and antibiotics and probiotics and stem colony growth factors. There is a system wide negotiation at play on multiple levels. Cells and mitochondria are at war. Molecular conflict is rampant. Organ functions are under close scrutiny to ensure no unexpected rebellion. System

interactions are unreliable: One minute fine, the next as weak as a kitten. Treason and treachery may be afoot.

To be honest, it feels as if I am just a bystander to the whole shooting match, kind of like when the swells in DC took a day tour to watch the Civil War get decided in an afternoon.

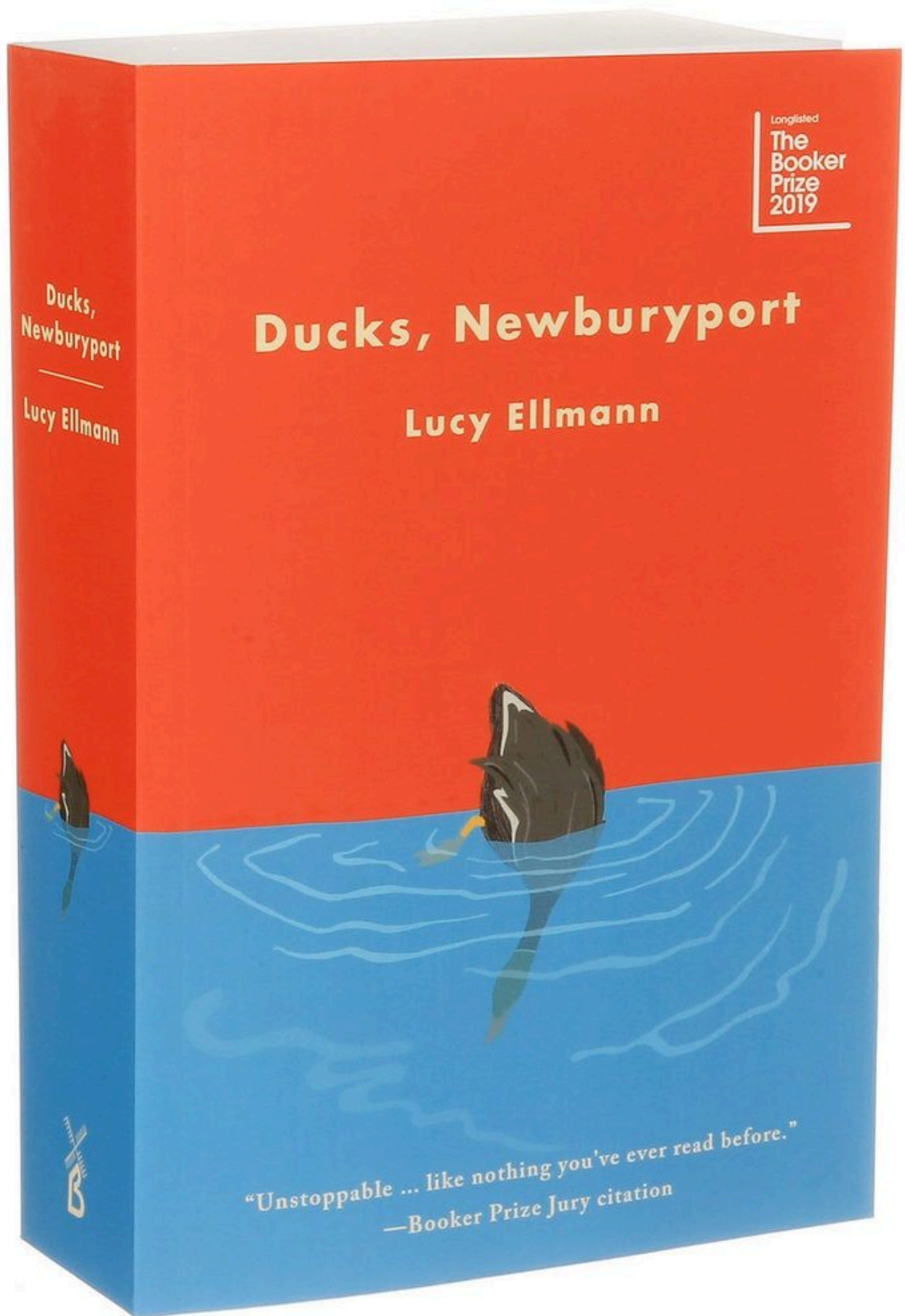
*“Oh, look there, Jedediah, those stem cells are skirmishing up the left flank.”*

*“And what ho, Sweet Nellie Constancy! Look at the way those cancer cells are on the rout! War shall be over by Christmas, most certainly.”*

Twas that it were true. Recovery will be a many months affair, no matter how soon I blow this chicken shack.

The calendar looks more or less like this: I will likely remain neutropenic for another 4-7 days. My system will slowly begin to recover over the following days until, the good Dog willing and the stem counts rise, I might get out of here as early 9/15. After that, it is the Cancer Halfway House for 1-3 weeks so the team can have me close at hand in case anything goes all spritzinpoppin. Best case for getting home to dogs is late September.

That’s aggressively optimistic, sure. But I just executed an act of purest optimism by ordering this book, described by NYT as “a 426,100-word sentence that stretches over 1,000 pages – occasionally interrupted by a more traditional story, albeit one from the point of view of a mountain lioness.”



Longlisted  
The  
Booker  
Prize  
2019

Ducks,  
Newburyport  
—  
Lucy Ellmann

# Ducks, Newburyport

Lucy Ellmann

“Unstoppable ... like nothing you've ever read before.”  
—Booker Prize Jury citation

Aside from *the fact that* this kind of thing is pure catnip to

me, I ordered this with the old Vaudeville joke in mind.

*I'm so old I won't even buy green bananas.*

The low down here is that I feel pretty bad, but not terrible. FWIW, the Great Tick Apocalypse of 2014 was far more physically grim. I am starting to develop the mouth and alimentary canal irritation that I was warned about. Nothing tastes or smells good. One sip of coffee this morning and I nearly wept at how bad it tastes. I am flat down zero on energy, and reading or typing for too long tends to make me woozy.

So here I sit, the boy in the bubble and the baby with the baboon heart, a prime demonstration of what the amazing minds of medical science can come up with. FWIW, that whole 'bubble boy' thing was a short-lived approach and is exceedingly rare these days. It turns out that while external agents can cause an infection or sepsis, it is far more likely that that which is already within me will serve as the source of aggravation. My usual biome may well loom as the greatest threat. Only time will tell.

These are the recited facts. Please do not feel bad for me at this time. There is way worse suffering out there than my own, and the fact is that I am damned near drowning in gratitude and love right now. It means so much to me to see that people are starting to visit this site regularly and spend some time with my witterings. If you know or are a writer, you know that kind of this means more than it might should. But no matter. Thank you all. If friends are wealth, I'm at Croesus level accumulation here.

Besides, I am indeed the world's luckiest boy. Stanwyck is by my side throughout, and while the circumstances are grim, we have enjoyed some of the deepest and most rewarding time in our 36 years together. We are starting to talk about plans for

after: Trips, activities, physical fitness.

This saga – perhaps the Greatest Story Ever Told – is ongoing and exceedingly rich. Something deserving of extended rumination and belletristic treatment.

I have begun each day here with Sister Mavis’s version of “Hard Times.” It is a solid reminder that our troubles may be plenty, but this too shall pass. And while we are at it, there are plenty of people around us who need compassion and a helping hand.

So you know what comes next, right?

## **LOVE EACH OTHER MOTHERFUCKERS!**

It matters a difference.

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## **Day Zero**



After six days of preparatory chemotherapy, I arrive at Day Zero. Today marks the system upgrade to Robo 2.0, download to commence shortly. It’s my New Birthday.

There are five bags of stem cells, harvested week before last from my own recalcitrant and glitchy old OS, now thawing in an Igor-esque laboratory down the hall. Around 3.3M stem cells, give or take, yessir yessir five bags full to be mixolydianed

in with my diminished strain.

The Days Minus-6 through Minus-one were largely uneventful, which is really the way you want things in a joint like this one. No drama. Decent sleep. A distinct lull before the storm, as it were. Dorian afoot, and not so minor as its name might suggest.

We are perched seven stories above ground in a building constructed to the strictest brick-shithouse code, a designated shelter for storm pummeled locals. We have an expansive view over Paynes Prairies to the south, where we trust the storm will travel after it blows Mar A Lago straight to where it belongs. A little concerned about the storm hitting our dedicated house/pet sitters, but whaddyagonnado?

Plenty of time to think and ponder, especially after the 4 a.m. vital signs visit from the attending. Time enough to arrive at this: I am in the best part of *It's a Wonderful Life*.



I'm alive, Bert! I'm ALIVE!

Yeah, it's one of my favorites. I'm a sap. Deal.

It is too bad it takes a brush with mortality for me to twig to the immensity of my own Wonderful Life. I know I've had it good: vis Stanwyck and the amazing kids. That alone is more riches than Ozymandias ever knew.

But also too: There have been notes, emails, missives of all sorts from people reminding me of kindnesses I have done over the years, small things that I might not remember or maybe did not even realize were actually happening at the time.

I cannot express how much this means to me.

We wander through our days, often, in a grey haze, not always careful in how we act towards each other. All too often, that leads to carelessness and, sometimes – like right now when my laptop will not behave properly – nasty bits of temper that lead to simple acts of unkindness or even cruelty.

Funny how those events tend to stick in memory. I've often wondered if my life has not been a string of accidental or intentional unkindnesses punctuated by the occasional accidental kindness.

But lately, the outpourings of thoughts from my many friends lead me to feel a little like George Bailey. A string of random events, perhaps, that actually add up to my having done something good in this world, that I have had a Wonderful Life.

And that maybe, just maybe, I deserve to live it some more, if only to try to make sure the kindnesses outweigh that other crap. What would Anubis say if he were to weigh my heart against his feather?

I'd like to wait a little longer to find out.

A few minutes ago, I received the first of the pre-meds that will support the stem cell transplant. Some of this is a considerable jolt of steroids, something with which I do not

well deal. Between that and this damn laptop, I better sign off before I send the blasted device a-sail across the prairie. I'll post again when I can. Meantime, all inquiries, hail thee wells, and get-over-it-bubs are welcome via whatever messenger route you choose.

Sincerely, thanks for all the very real and tangible support. We are grateful for our friends and family, grateful to have been a part of your lives and you part of ours, and full of hope that we will all look back on this over some frosty adult beverages and have a good laugh.

Til then, and as always:

**LOVE EACH OTHER, MOTHERFUCKERS.**

Time is shorter than you think. Get Cracking.

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## Let Us Pause



I'm enjoying a week between before and after, lots of dog time, music, reading, and writing. Aside from discovering that the dogs pulled apart some of the ductwork under the houseWTF, it's only money., it has been a lovely way to spend time before I surrender to the cruel intentions of a cabal of mad scientists. So while I have a minute here is what the next 4-8 weeks look like. For all you folks keeping score

Come Saturday the Igors and Redferns—Renfields (mea culpa) of the Bone Marrow Transplant unit will begin zapping me with a six-day chemo course called BEAM, a regimen designed to come as close as possible to eliminating all of my bone marrow, platelets, red and white blood cells, and pretty much anything that we more or less recognize as biological necessity for staying alive without actually putting me on the wrong side of the grass.

Once they have me at the edge of expiration, another crew will tag team in to give me back the 3.3 million stem cells they extracted from me last week. Transplant day is slated for August 30. My new birthday. The hoped for end game is a brand spanking new immune system, preferably one that has no trace of the lymphoma.

The first weeks after transplant are critical. With no immune system, the most benign bacteria or virus could be catastrophic. I do not use that word lightly. There are tight restrictions on what I can eat and drink, how (and how often) I brush my teeth and shower, and who can enter my room. I know of at least three people who made it through transplant with flying colors only to be felled by pneumonia. That shit does not play.

My digestive tract is apparently in for a doozie of a time. Chemo attacks the body's rapidly dividing cells, and pretty much all the cells after the teeth and down through the arsehole are the rapid division kind. Extreme weight loss is likely. I'll take that, though I'd recommend the latest Oprah/Dr Oz macroketotic fad over this approach.

My sense of taste and smell are apparently going to be altered exponentially and inversely: I will have no sense of taste, yet my olfactory acuity will make the mildest little whiff of anything smell like a well-ripened durian, or a sewage discharge line gone a-plugger.

They will track every calorie and ounce of liquid that goes in. They will track every ounce of liquid and scat that emerges from my various agonized orifi. They will track the differentials between these values.

They will also monitor all the various chemical and mineral levels in my bloodstream to ensure I do not drop too low on the essentials like calcium, magnesium, potassium, &c.

Because my platelets will be essentially zero, I have to be especially careful about nicks and cuts. No flossing, for example. And especially: No walking anywhere (even the potty) without a guide because, were I to fall and hit my head, I would likely pass beyond the mortal coil before they could get me into surgery.

Hey, if the thunder don't get ya then the lightning will.

Somewhere between 2-4 weeks after the new birthday they will discharge me to the Cancer Halfway House a few blocks from the hospital where several dozen of us malignancy malingerers will gather for conviviality and comparison of sufferings. For the following 2-3 weeks I will go in for blood and other tests to be sure I'm doing okay. If at any time I run a fever of  $100.2^{\circ}\text{f}$  or higher, I am to go directly to the ER for admission. Eventually they will send me home. They tell me to expect a good year to get back to whatever normal might look like.

Easy peasy. I could do it standing on my head if they allowed gymnastics on the ward.

In the meantime, I've been having a slurry of dreams of extreme ridiculousness. Impossible travel situations, missed connections, getting separated from traveling companions. Finding myself alone in a familiar city that looks nothing like anyplace I have ever been before. Getting lost. Getting accused of a crime I did not commit and chased like I'm Number Six. No big balloons following me. Yet.

Look, ya don't need to be Seigfried Shadyfreude to figure this stuff out. Clearly, lots of anxiety about my current situation bubbling up from the depths where Grindel's dang momma hangs out. This is new.

I have never really experienced this anxiety in my waking hours. Sure, I get worn down by the physical insults of treatment, but I'm mostly optimistic that the Dr. Caligaris on my case know what they are doing and that everything is gonna be alright. I haven't been afraid, not really. No fear of the great beyond or anything like that. And not even really sad about the whole shebang. It has just been a really intense endurance test and one hell of a learning experience.

Until this morning.

We have been getting up way early the past few days, just because we can. Next week, I can't. So a little extra time with the Stanwyck and the hounds, time to listen to a few more albums per day than normal. More time to read and write. Good damn stuff.

Today, Stanwyck was up ahead of me. I roused around 5.30 to the smell of strong coffee. I woke up, got out of bed, dragged a comb, &c. I walked down the hall distracted by a recent earworm that I cannot escape nor identify. I believe it is a scrap of some obscure comedy album from my tender years, maybe even some kind of church distributed Don't Do Drugs propaganda. The Google has been no help. But I digress. I walked into the kitchen ready to roll.

And then it hit me. I saw Stanwyck and the dogs, our little kitchen table waiting for me to join them. It was so beautiful. And all of a sudden I got really sad and scared about everything, about how when I leave here Friday there is a fair odds chance that I will not come back. That everything I have, and had, and might ever have might be lost forever.

Fuck me, mate. That was hard.

But it passed after lots of woman love, and dog love, and a few hours of really good music. And coffee, which cureth all things. But still: Slap me silly and call me Trump. I did not see that coming.

Later in the day I received access to the upcoming Ken Burns docu about country music for an article I'm writing. It is really, really good, and filled with the kinds of plaintive songs that can salve a troubled man's heart. It is also fucking superb.

Anyway, here's the point of all this, if there is one.

The opening music for episode two is Mavis Staples' version of the Stephen Foster classic "Hard Times". I had to rewind and watch the first five minutes again because Sister Mavis had taken me somewhere else. After the episode I listened to it again, and then to another half-dozen versions of the song ranging from a 1928 string band to Bill Frisell jamming on it with Elvin Jones and Dave Holland.

But none of them hit me like Mavis. I went back and listened to it a few more times. I'm downloading it to iPodious to take into hospital with me. (Correction: It is not available for download. YouTube it is.)

Tis the song, the sigh of the weary  
Hard times, hard times, come again no more  
Many days you have lingered around my cabin door  
Oh hard times come again no more  
I'll post again when I can. Stanwyck is keeping those who know  
and are known informed. Shout out to her if you want in on  
those updates. And as always...

LOVE EACH OTHER, MOTHERFUCKERS!

It matters a difference.

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# Trilliards



I'm nearly done with my second read through of Alan Moore's epic 2018 novel *Jerusalem*. At 1262 pages, reading this book once is quite the commitment. Reading it a second time (while also listening to the audio version, brilliantly delivered by Simon Vance) is most likely a sign of some sort of obsessive disorder. And yet, I persist.

This book stands alongside *Ulysses*, *Underworld*, *Les Miserables*, *The Divine Comedy*, Milton's mislaid Paradises, and the great Russkie epics as towering constructions of sustained genius. (Among many! Tell me your favorite.)

I don't toss the word genius lightly, especially *sustained* genius. Most of you know that *Infinite Jest* is my favorite novel. But I can't quite characterize it's brilliance as *sustained*. For all its glory, it has evident flaws, passages that make you puzzle just how DFW hornswoggled the editor into letting them pass.

But *Jerusalem* hits the mark. There's not an ounce of flab in its dozen-hundred pages. The voices across a cast of what seems like thousands are each distinct and alive, even – or especially – the ghosts. The detailed attention to history, the digressions on time, theology, free will...all of it rings like brass bells from one sentence to the next. And the architecture of the thing – a labyrinthine structure that is

every bit as awesome as the multilayered cosmology of the Universe it purports to explain – is breathtaking.

It took Moore, renowned for his graphic novel masterworks like *V For Vendetta* and *The Watchmen*, ten years to complete *Jerusalem*. One chapter is rendered in the style of Samuel Beckett. Another unfolds in the style of *Finnegan's Wake* to give voice to the mental illness of James Joyce's daughter Lucia; that one took him a full year of working on nothing else.

I know 1200-plus pages seems ridiculous. Who has the time, and can't he just get to the point? The answers are, "You do" and "Getting there (the point) is half the fun." So get cracking.

One of the central plot pegs concerns the four Master Builders, powerful Archangel types responsible for the shape and sustenance of the Universal order. While they go about their work of building the Past, Present, and Future, these characters simultaneously engage in an ongoing game of cosmic billiards, played out on a table so vast, and with so many balls – each of which represents a human soul (living, dead, and as yet unborn) – that it is called Trilliards to denote its universe-encompassing scale.

It appears that the Master Builders' shots are the force that directs each person's life and death. God may not play dice with the universe, but these guys are damn sure fiddling at snooker.

That's all I'll say about it for now, though I expect to come back to this work again and again. There is just so much to chew on, especially if you find yourself agonizing over the apparently deranged randomness of the universe that is the curse of the brooding class. Like me.

But that is not the point of this post. Or maybe it is.

I was glum on the way home yesterday from yet another week of

hospital treatment for the dreaded C-word. Damnable random universe, etc. We were late leaving. We were hungry, but since the weather was bearing down on us we did not want to stop and get caught in the storm that was chasing us.

After much dithering we pulled off at the Live Oak exit on I-10 to get snacks at the Busy Bee. Busy Bee is a glorified, Walmart-sized truck stop where people fill shopping buggies with various chips, pecan rolls, trucker hats, and tacky Florida souvenirs. The place has its own Facebook account, ffs. The Bee was swarmed with a line of cars waiting to turn in and some scary looking parking lot jockeying underway. But we were off the highway and hungry, so we turned away from the Bee towards fast food hell.

But lo and behold! There amidst the burger joints and the hate chicken shack was a Moe's, purveyors of better-than-decent burritos. A sign!

Standing in line, I noticed a scruffian just ahead of me who looked familiar, but really and come on, who the hell am I likely to run into in some rando Moe's on I-10?



The best 1-2 guitar combo you never heard.

Yup. My brother in guitaristic arms, Chris Griffin. We've been playing together since 2003 in Bongo Wrench. Over the past 20 years, Bongo Wrench has performed live four times (a grueling pace, I know) and recorded well over 200 CDs. Fully improvised and often quite stunning. Our Motto: We Can't Repeat That. Our other motto is: We Never Play the Same Thing Once. Damn, I miss those guys.

Anyway, other than running into him at a Crim show, I've not seen since Chris in a couple of years, him always on the road with Drivin and Cryin and running his recording and mastering studio in ATL, me in the Panhandle trying to string a few words together. Standing in line at Moe's, he was the farthest thing from my mind.

And then I realized. Called his name. He gawped at me for about ten seconds.

“Chrissie! Don’t ya know me?”

“Robbie!”

And then it was all hugs and holy shits and what the fuck are you doing here you’re supposed to be in the hospital or something. We sat and ate and caught up. Turns out we have a Bongo Wrench YouTube channel now to go along with our 200-CD box set.

We Can’t Repeat This

I was fair and true gobsnacked for the rest of the ride home, one of the coolest things to happen to me in quite a while. We could have left on time. We could have eaten earlier. The Busy Bee could have been less crowded. The Taco Bell – his first choice of destination – was slammed, so they ended up at Moe’s. The slightest variation in any of these utterly unrelated details would have had us just missing one another.

Out of all the bean joints in all the towns in all the world, we walked into this one.

And then it struck me.

## **Trilliards.**

I’ll just be damned. That was one helluva bank shot.