

Doppelgängers

by J. Brandon Barnes

It was just another lazy summer day in the small town of Greenville. Sun-bleached sheets hung from backyard clotheslines, children cast fleeting shadows across green lawns, and the occasional dog found its way into a neighbor's garden. High in a cloudless sky, the sun traced its daily arc above the steeple of First Community Church.

Inside the stately building, Pastor Stark sat reading—not from the volumes of dusty commentaries that lined the walls of his comfortable office, but from the latest electronic issue of *Field & Stream*. He had started with an article about secluded river lodges, and then played the on-line *Name that Bass* game. Later he fired off e-mail to some idiot who had written a letter to the editor saying spinning rods caught more trout than fly rods. *Sacrilege*.

Just as his eyes were beginning to tire, the church secretary knocked at the door and opened it slowly.

"Yes, Kathy, what is it?" he asked.

"Is there anything you need me to do before I leave?"

"If you and Bob are still headed up to Taylor Lake this weekend, you could take me with you. I'm sure I've used up this summer's supply of rain by now."

"Oh, I was really sorry to hear about your trip. It must have been pretty bad to keep even you shut up in the cabin all weekend."

"I can fish in the cold or the rain, but thunder and lightning is a different story."

"I suppose getting another weekend off is out of the question, huh?"

Stark nearly came out of his chair. "Do you know what it took to get four weekends off this summer?"

If I went to the board and asked for a fifth, they'd have my head. I'll get no sympathy from those old buzzards."

"Honestly, your wife is right," Kathy exclaimed. "She always says fishing was your true calling. Jokingly, of course."

"Sister Stark never jokes."

"Well, if there's nothing else you need—"

"Now that I think of it, check with the church supply about getting some new hymnals. I've asked the deacons to rotate the ones we've got, but thanks to old Brother Cohen, I'd imagine most of them have broken spines and bent corners by now."

"Poor thing, his arthritis is so bad. I'll bet he drops one after nearly every song service. If he didn't have his daughter to take care of him, I don't know what he'd do."

"Just let me know how much money we're talking about. And have somebody check Sister Portly's pew—"

"Sister Porter," Kathy corrected in a reprimanding tone.

"Okay, okay" Stark chuckled, "just have someone look into replacing that seat cushion. It's gotten pretty threadbare under the load, and we're trying to run a first class operation here. I don't want anyone mistaking us for the mission down the road."

"You've got it."

Kathy shut the door, leaving him alone again with his thoughts. It was still an hour before he could leave, and he wished he had remembered to bring his spare fly reel so he could clean and reline it.

A patch of bright sunlight had taunted him all day as it made its way across the bookcase, down along the floor, and now up onto his cluttered desk. He noted how the newspaper it rested on glowed with a warm, golden hue, and his unsuspecting eyes fell across the words "Virtual Vacations." Intrigued, he picked up the paper and discovered an ad:

Virtual Vacations: Your passport to any place you'd rather be. Our state-of-the-art technology lets you fulfill your obligations to work while enjoying the benefits of play. Confidentiality guaranteed. Why settle for Virtual Reality when you can have Virtual Duality™? "Now you really can be in two places at once!"

Call Doppelgänger Technologies at:
DopTech.dallas.tx.usa.

Skepticism was no stranger to Stark. He wasn't easily conned, and refused to be hoodwinked by companies whose marketing departments were always a few pages ahead of their development teams.

Years before, he had eagerly tried “Virtual Reality.” The idea of donning a V.R. headset and thrill-seeking had fascinated him, but he was soon disappointed. He skied the black slopes in “Virtual Vale,” but his hands never got cold. He rode Harleys with Hell’s Angels, but felt no wind in his face. When he bungee jumped from the Golden Gate Bridge, he never felt the cord as it caught him 50 feet above the ray-traced boats below. Like the prophet Daniel said of King Belshazzar, V.R. was “weighed in the balances and found wanting.”

He tried to dismiss the ad from his mind, but found himself inescapably drawn to the tantalizing idea. What if he *actually could* be in two places at once? He imagined the scene: racing to the lake on a sunny Sunday morning while his other self supplied the pulpit.

Then a sense of irritation surfaced. Who were these people to make such impossible promises? Childhood memories returned, images of comic book ads for 99¢ robots and \$1.⁵⁰ flying saucers. Paper route money exchanged for broken promises. He decided to call the company and demand an explanation.

Pastor Stark entered the company’s address into his desktop terminal and placed the video call. The word “connecting” flashed on the screen, and a small inset window briefly appeared so he could center himself in the camera’s view. He noted his typically gruff countenance and quickly practiced a passing smile.

“Thank you for calling Doppelgänger Technologies. How may I direct your call?” The voice dripped with geniality. The screen displayed a computer-generated female operator designed to route calls to the proper departments. A list of options such as “Solution Opportunities” and “Client Care” lined the bottom of the screen. He preferred the good old days when unambiguous terms like “sales” and “service” were employed.

“Information,” he said, hoping that was in her vocabulary.

“I’m so very sorry, sir. I’m afraid I don’t recognize that option.” A thousand lines of code engaged to wrinkle her brow with helpful concern. “Please refer to the friendly client-focused aids at the bottom of your screen and try again.”

This was interesting, he thought. The operator knew he was a sir. Had it detected the pitch of his voice, or the bare spot on top of his head? Did it know it was a ma’am?

“How about a kiss?” he asked.

“I’m so very sorry, sir. I’m afraid I don’t recognize that option. Please refer to the friendly client-focused aids at the bottom of your screen and try again.”

Unimpressed with her parsing skills, he decided it was best to look for something that resembled *information*. “Friendly introductions,” he ventured.

“Thank you *so* much.” Her smile was broad and perfectly symmetrical. “I’ll transfer you to someone in our family of helpful agents now.”

Thirty seconds passed while Stark was placed on hold. The company’s logo spun on multiple axes atop a flying star field and a throbbing nebula. As his slim stock of patience drained dangerously low, his index finger aimed for the disconnect key.

But before it made contact, the vertiginous scene gave way to a real person. She looked about 30 years old, her light brown hair was in slight disarray, and her mildly attractive face wore a harried expression. Her brusque manner contrasted with her predecessor’s.

“This is Jenna.”

“My name is”—he paused a moment, deciding to omit his pastoral title and the obligation of courtesy it carried—“*Richard* Stark. I just wanted to say that I saw an ad for your duality product and I don’t believe a word of it. It would take a lot of convincing for me to spend my money on whatever it is you offer.”

Jenna’s eyes narrowed. “Okay, sir, I’ll put you down as a confirmed skeptic. Thanks for sharing your opinion. Goodbye.”

“Wait!” Stark’s hand shot out toward the screen, nearly overturning a cup of cold, black coffee. An unaccepted challenge was always a disappointment. “You’re not interested in even *trying* to make a sale? I thought you people operated on a commission.”

Her lips drew tight. “The sales staff does, but I work for R&D and *we’re salaried*. Now, if you’d like the phone number of our competition’s development team so you can waste their time, I’d be glad to give it to you. Otherwise, I’ve got work to do.”

A cautious smile crept across the unfamiliar terrain of Pastor Stark’s craggy features. He eyed her approvingly for a moment, then laughed aloud. “I like you, Jenna; you’ve got spunk. I’m afraid I must

apologize. My abrupt manner borders on rudeness sometimes. Forgive me?”

Jenna considered this for a moment, and appeared to drop her defenses. “Well, it’s a vice I’ve been accused of having myself. We’ve been inundated with calls today and the phone staff can’t keep up. I don’t like playing operator, especially when I’ve got work to do, so my attitude probably contributed. Maybe we should start over.”

She paused briefly as she adjusted a few errant strands of hair and straightened in her chair. “Now then, how may I help you today, Mr. Stark?”

He began again, this time without the challenging tone. “As I started to say, your ad sounded good. Too good, in fact. I’d be a fool to pass up an offer like that if it were true, but I’d be a bigger fool to believe it without an explanation. How could I appear in two places at once?”

“Holographics.” She stated this plainly, as if it were self-evident. As someone might answer that it’s *gravity* that makes a dish fall to the kitchen floor.

“Holographics,” he repeated, as the word vainly searched his brain for a familiar place to lodge. “I didn’t know that was possible. I suppose I don’t keep up with technology as well as I should.”

“That’s okay. I’m afraid I don’t keep up with theology as well as I should,” Jenna admitted. “Maybe an information exchange could be arranged sometime.”

Stark was momentarily stunned. How had she known he was a minister? He managed to mumble “Yes, perhaps,” as he regrouped his thoughts. He recalled several recent video calls in which his indomitable temper had broken free. Perhaps those people, too, had known he was a man of the cloth. The thought was accompanied by a sharp pang of conviction for some of his careless words.

A puzzled expression crossed his face. “Jenna, how did you know—”

She interrupted with a quick laugh. “Lots of men have bookshelves behind their desks, but *yours* have communion trays on them.”

He felt both relieved not to hear that he simply *looked like a preacher*, and foolish for overlooking the obvious. “You’re plainly too sharp for this old horse,” he said, “so I’ll discard the pretenses.

“I’m a frustrated old pastor of a medium-sized church in a small town. I’ve lost the fire I once had, and the patience to deal with my monotonous job. What I need most is more time away, time at the lake to clear my thoughts. Please convince me that a company full of smart people like you has the solution I need.”

She nodded gratefully in receipt of his compliment. “Our company started out in the Virtual Reality market. Simulations, games, that sort of thing. After a few years, we realized that most of our techniques—object modeling, ray-tracing, and so on—could be applied to holographics. To produce good V.R., you have to create true 3-D objects, so we were already halfway there. But instead of placing a real person into a world of created objects, we had to place created objects into the real world.”

“Like a movie projector,” Stark offered.

“That’s right. So instead of exploring the Grand Canyon inside a V.R. headset, you can go enjoy the real thing. What remains in your place is a projection, a hologram.”

“Of what?”

“You, of course. You leave behind your *doppelgänger*—your double—to do all the mundane things you’re trying to get away from.”

Stark pondered this for a moment. “So, what would prevent you from making the hologram do something illegal or immoral?”

Jenna smiled. “The technology isn’t that far along. We can’t make a hologram do anything we want; we can only replay recorded actions. For example, one of our clients works in a glass-enclosed office. We holographed her typing, organizing a file cabinet, and making phone calls. She’s been taking extended lunches once a week for nearly a year now.”

“You’d think someone would notice that she wears the same outfit once a week.”

“Not really. She just wore a simple skirt and blouse. We produced several holograms, each with different colored clothes. It’s just like colorizing an old black-and-white movie. Of course, she’s an ideal candidate; we can’t help receptionists, judges, or cab drivers. Naturally, we have policies against aiding lifeguards, child care attendants, or airline pilots. But many people find their work perfectly suited: college professors, janitors, public speakers.”

The last one caught Stark's attention. He leaned forward, planting his elbows on the desk. "Public speakers, you say?"

"Oh sure, they're easy. We've worked with lots of famous ones." Her voice lowered as she moved in closer to the screen. "The truth is that when you attend a motivational seminar—in Dallas maybe—the speaker might also be in Boston and San Diego at the *same time*."

With a faraway look in his eyes, Stark rubbed his chin as he considered this for a moment. Then he met her eyes again. "So you might be able to handle my case, too?"

She nodded. "Sure, I think so. The sermon would be simple, but we would have some trouble working around a song service."

He shook his head. "One of my associate pastors"—he searched for the right word—"presents me in time for the sermon. It gives the impression, you see, that I've been diligently preparing the message until the last moment."

In a reassuring voice, he continued. "You see, Jenna, people don't respect a pastor who floats around aimlessly each morning, talking about nonsense with the congregation. They need a more elevated figure, someone who inspires confidence."

"I see." There was a slight hesitation in Jenna's voice, and Stark hoped his candid admission had not unsettled her. "That should make things easier," she said. "The only other problem I see is how to handle the end of the service. I assume you shake hands at the door as people leave?"

Stark cleared his throat uncomfortably as he unconsciously loosened his tie. "Actually, you see—well, I *do* have a staff of associates. They usually handle that end of things. You know, the busy pastor thing and all."

"Sure, I understand completely," Jenna lied smoothly. "That would simplify everything. You're probably looking at a pre-production discount too, since you could provide the platform dimensions in advance."

"Speaking of costs, could you give me an idea?"

"Length of sermon?"

"About thirty-five minutes."

She looked down for a moment and quickly typed some keys at her terminal. Stark somewhat nervously ran a pencil's eraser in uneven

circles along the desk. In a moment, a figure appeared in neat white numbers along the bottom of his screen.

"I don't see a problem with that, Jenna."

"That's just an estimate, but a close one. I'm also assuming your sanctuary has a PVM-compliant projection unit."

"Of course. We use it for song lyrics and sermon notes."

"Great. We'll just need a temporary password so we can log in and make some firmware changes. Also, our booking agent will need to contact your secretary to schedule your appointment. If you like, she could pose as a psychologist wanting to discuss counseling referrals."

Stark smiled approvingly. He admired thoroughness. "That would be perfect. She knows I don't do that sort of thing myself, anyway." A few quick keystrokes sent the information streaming to Jenna's screen.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" she asked.

"No, thank you. You've been very helpful, and I've enjoyed talking to you."

Jenna smiled warmly and closed their connection.

A wide grin stretched across Richard Stark's face, its corners lifting heavy, flaccid cheeks as they made their way earward. He leaned far back in his deep leather chair, considering the possibilities.

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Small bits of lettuce and cheese fell from Dave's sandwich onto the control board as he ate a hasty lunch and checked his maintenance logs. As an assistant technician in DopTech's Plano studios, he was responsible for equipment repairs and holographing up to ten clients a day. Postproduction work was usually handled by more experienced staff, but he managed to edit a few finished takes when their schedules were full.

The heavy steel door to the darkened control room opened reluctantly as his partner, Brian, returned with an amended afternoon schedule.

"Hey Dave, you done cleaning the tape decks?"

Dave looked up and groaned as he spotted the papers in Brian's hand. "Yeah, why? Don't tell me they've changed the schedule on us *again*."

Brian stepped onto the raised floor and walked across the room. He slapped the stack of stapled forms onto the console in front of Dave. The sudden rush of air blew crumbs into the recessed tracks in which the audio faders slid.

Dave shot him a dirty look. “Hey, I just vacuumed this thing. Watch it, will you?”

Brian pursed his lips and posed with his arms akimbo like a school teacher. “Honest to goodness, Dave, you’re such a slob. Why anyone would hire you to *clean* equipment rather than muck it up is quite beyond me.”

The remainder of Dave’s sandwich connected with Brian’s forehead just above the right eye. The projectile exploded into half a dozen pieces of whole wheat bread clinging to moist clumps of tuna. Brian stared at Dave in disbelief for a long moment as he regained his bearings. Then both of them simultaneously erupted into raucous laughter.

Fortunately for Dave, there was no payback. Brian usually knew when he had been riding Dave’s nerves too long. In the air of restored camaraderie, Brian even felt charitable enough to clean up the mess. “Okay, I know I’ve been a pest today. I had it coming.”

Glancing down at the new agenda, Dave regained his earlier train of thought. “So, what’s this all about? I thought we were going to have a slow Friday for once.”

“Not today, we’re not.” Brian tossed the last of the sandwich into a trash bin in the corner. “They added two more shoots. A banker and a *something else*—don’t remember what. A rush job, though.”

“On a Friday afternoon?” Dave flipped through the papers in front of him, searching for client profiles. “What this time? Another lazy manager? A potbellied track coach? Hey, remember that boss and secretary who both got holos so they—”

“There it is,” Brian interrupted, his finger on the page. “A preacher.”

“*Oh, great.* You monitor the audio, then. With headphones.”

“You know, Dave, it wouldn’t hurt you for once to hear—”

Dave aimed a steady finger at Brian, a sure sign the discussion would end right there.

“Okay, okay, forget I said anything.” Brian backpedaled toward the door and out of firing range. “In any case, try not to get today’s sessions mixed up. We can’t afford any more mistakes like *last time*.”

Dave grimaced, reminded of the blunder he had made in cross-labeling two shoots the prior month. Both parties involved had wanted his head, and he had quickly earned an undeserved reputation for sloppy work. “You know, Brian, I could get a lot more done around here, *and more accurately*, if you would cut me some slack once in a while.”

“Then you’d better get started now. The preacher will be here in half an hour.” Brian winked as he tugged the door shut behind him.

• • •

If Richard Stark was anything, he was punctual. One o’clock found him neatly rapping on the glass pane between himself and DopTech’s receptionist. She greeted him warmly, explained the holographing process, and asked him to sign the customary paperwork. A few minutes later, she swiftly escorted him down a narrow hallway to Studio B.

As she opened the studio’s massive door, a draft of cool air escaped, and Stark got his first look at the room in which he would spawn his double. Inside the darkened room, a large steel lighting grid loomed 25’ above the smooth concrete floor. As they entered, her voice, which had echoed pleasantly as they passed through the hall, was eagerly swallowed up by the carpeted walls and baffled ceiling. She asked him to stand by as she walked to the control room door on the far side of the cavernous studio.

He took note of what appeared to be the stage. Well-lit from above in the otherwise dark room, it consisted of a blue circular platform, about 20’ in diameter, with some type of coordinate system marked in lines of a lighter shade. Around it stood an annular metal framework that held hundreds of cameras. Arranged at evenly spaced intervals and varying heights, they all pointed inward toward the platform.

The receptionist soon returned with a man from the control room in tow, the energetic clicking of her heels contrasting with the dull shuffling of his heavy shoes.

“Reverend, this is David Perkins. He’ll be your host throughout the holographing process. It will be his greatest pleasure to ensure that both your visit with us and the final product meet with your complete satisfaction. He’ll also be glad to answer any questions you have, so don’t hesitate to rely on him fully.”

Stark couldn’t help but notice the similarity between her and the operator who had first answered his phone call. He wondered if one was patterned after the other and, if so, which was the original. He turned toward the man she had fetched, and noticed his look of irritation, as if he were expecting her to next offer Stark the keys to his car or his condo.

“Hello, Reverend.” He stepped forward slightly, edging the receptionist out of the picture. “Since we’re sort of on a tight timeline, how about we get started? I understand you want this by *Sunday*?”

Stark nodded, suspecting Dave would try to slide back the timeline. “Yes, I was told that would be no problem since my case is simple. Thirty-five minutes, unrehearsed. One take with no cutting.”

“*Editing*,” Dave corrected.

“Not needed. I just walk out, do my thing, and exit. Been doing that every week for more than 20 years. I figure if I can’t do it without a big mistake by now, I’m in the wrong business.”

Dave smiled politely and began looking over the client profile as the receptionist said goodbye to Stark and left the studio.

Finally he looked up. “Says here, ‘enter stage left, lecture behind podium, exit stage left.’ We’ve already got the platform dimensions and layout, so my assistant can set up the stage when he gets back. If all goes well, your holo should be ready by Saturday night at the latest.”

Stark employed his most suspicious stare. “Well now, it sounded like you said ‘should be.’”

Dave breathed a deep sigh and acquiesced. “Did I? I meant *will be*. Come this way. We’d better get started. I can see it’s going to be a late night for me.”

• • •

The first task was the construction of a computerized Stark *object*. Stark was led to a modeling room where he changed into tightfitting garb and stepped into what looked like a vertical CAT scanner. After the scan, he emerged to find a wireframe model of himself on a screen in front of Dave.

Next, Dave passed the material from each piece of Stark’s clothing under equipment designed to catalog its color and texture. His glasses, belt buckle, and shoes were scanned inside a 3-D scanner, which resembled a microwave with a clear plastic shelf inside. Once he recovered his clothing and dressed, he joined Dave in examining the finished 3-D Stark model on a large monitor. Stark watched his fully-clothed likeness rotate on-screen like a slowly-spinning top.

“Our holographic process is two-fold, Reverend. The first is purely optical. You’re recorded from 256 key angles, providing the bulk of what we need to reproduce your sermon. The remaining angles are interpolated and rendered from this model of you we’ve just built.”

Stark’s eyes were still fastened on the screen. “Can you make it—I mean *me*—move?”

“Yes and no.” Dave quickly typed a few strokes on a keyboard. The computerized Stark sprang into motion with a stiff, mechanical stride. “We’ve got a lot of stock algorithms for movement. Would you like to see yourself dance, for instance?”

Stark quickly declined.

Dave continued, “But we can’t make him move *like you* unless we match your mannerisms. It’s not hard to do, but it takes a lot of time and raw footage for the computer to analyze movements.

“In general, your performance is just replayed like a movie, once the missing angles are supplied. We can’t just *cut out* mistakes, though. We have to fill the gaps with connecting action. Since that part is totally computer-generated, it’s time-consuming to create and pretty expensive. But we won’t have to worry about mistakes, right?”

“Right,” Stark agreed. He readjusted the knot in his tie and combed his hair as Dave led him out the door and into the hallway.

On returning to Studio B, they found that Brian had already set up the stage. What had looked like painted gridlines to Stark, turned out to be a system of tiny lights embedded in the stage, like pixels on a computer screen. They were now redrawn to mark the dimensions of

the church's platform, complete with outlines of the podium, doorways, benches, and even the potted plants.

After a quick sound-check, they were ready to roll. Stark found himself standing in the dark just offstage, watching Dave and Brian through the control room window. Brian's voice over the intercom began a countdown which ended in a call for "action."

Stark stepped on-stage, passing through the thick line marking the exit from his study, and walked to the podium. In his mind, he heard the swell of the organ, and imagined the choir members quietly filing offstage down the steps to his right. He briefly wondered if he should greet the associate ministers seated on the bench behind him, but decided against it.

The hot lights shone brightly in his eyes, but he could see nothing except the faintest trace of the camera grid just beyond the stage. He paused as the imaginary organ subsided. He took a deep breath and then began his address.

He had prepared for the darkness, but the room's acoustics posed a greater challenge. Without the support of a sound system, his voice seemed frail and brittle. In the absence of even the slightest echo, every word was sucked from his mouth and absorbed by the thickly-carpeted walls. Aside from the psychological penalty, it made his mouth feel dry, like it was stuffed with old cotton. To compensate, he focused on cool flowing rivers full of splashing trout.

He struggled for the first few minutes, but years of repetition soon came to his aid as he slipped into his old comfortable stride. His speech became autonomic, leaving his mind free to roam. Like an adept drummer who starts a bass/snare rhythm, and maintains it involuntarily as he plays cymbals and toms.

The darkness became more comfortable and, in some ways, preferable to the timeworn panorama of unchanging faces. No teenage girls chewing gum, or sleepy fathers fighting the nods. No Johnson boy with his constant squirming, or his mother who couldn't hold him still long enough to comb the straight blond hair out of his face. No more Miller girl mindlessly scribbling on church bulletins and offering envelopes. (They were expensive, after all.)

His thoughts eventually passed to more pleasant scenes of the sun's golden rays across the shimmering surface of a placid lake. The

delicate placement of the fly on the water's crest, the strike of a fish, the ensuing fight leading to eventual capture, and the release which starts the cycle again.

Before long, one of his subsystems flashed a warning message, signaling that his lecturing unit was winding down for a close. He concluded his message, gave the benediction, and left the stage in his usual stately manner.

In the control room, Brian removed his headphones and told Dave the shoot was over. A whirl of activity commenced as Dave shut down the recording equipment and removed the 2" digital tape cartridges. Brian switched on the intercom and asked Stark to stand by until he could be escorted outside. As he was leaving the control room, he turned to Dave with a mock-serious expression. "Now be sure to label those tapes right. I'd hate to see a lawyer end up in the pulpit this weekend."

Dave glowered in return.

Within fifteen minutes, Stark was beating his way through the rainy parking lot toward his truck. Once inside, he paused to reflect on what he had just done. He had found the solution he was looking for, and he knew his life was about to take a dramatic turn.

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Sunday morning, 7 a.m.. The troops were lined in neat rows and prepared for battle. Their hooks were sharpened to a razor's edge, and each was arrayed in the finest display of exotic feathers, rich yarns, and multicolored threads. Richard Stark was an excellent flytier, and the wilds had never produced a bug he couldn't duplicate on the shank of a fly hook.

While he loved the complex patterns of woolybuggers and royal humpies, his true gift was in duplicating the humble damselfly—a favorite of the prized rainbow trout. As he packed his arsenal for the day ahead, he noted that the weapons of his warfare were truly carnal, and mighty for the pulling up of strong fish.

It had been a long and restless night. Anxiety over his absence from the service ahead had robbed him of sound sleep. Stark knew that a hundred things could go wrong and place him in a tight spot when he

returned. What would be the penalty for such an act? He willed himself to avoid the thought. He simply *had* to get away. In the remote chance that anything went wrong, he would face the consequences.

He stole out of the kitchen and down the hall toward the back door, careful not to wake his wife. A note on the kitchen table announced his early departure. The morning air proved brisk, and the sun peered down through wispy clouds to the dew-wet terrain below. It was going to be a beautiful day. The mission was still on.

Stark launched his brown 4x4 down the street and aimed for the highway, setting his course for Miller's Lake on the outskirts of town. By the time he reached the onramp, his hands were already trembling. He always got *the shakes* just before fishing.

Halfway out of town, he passed the immense sign for "Believers' Fellowship, God's Haven of Hope." A fairly new church in town, its rapid growth had already embarrassed many pastors of the more established churches. Its pastor was young—in his early thirties—and displayed a penchant for door-knocking and tract-passing. Stark always considered him a closet Jehovah's Witness.

Worse yet, he couldn't use his standard argument that new churches just siphon off members from the rest. Apparently, the young pastor had already heard the joke: Baptists convert the lost, Charismatics convert the Baptists. He had begun nearly a dozen outreaches to shut-ins, addicts, and the homeless. His college ministry sponsored lively debates with agnostics. His television program on the local access channel targeted critics and doubters.

Located on a heavily-traveled road, the church displayed a new verse on its huge sign every day. That day it boldly proclaimed: "Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart."

Stark popped a Charlie Daniels gospel album into the cassette deck and hit the gas. He sped ahead as the sign became no more than a tiny annoyance in his rearview mirror.

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By 10:45, he had spent two full hours fishing the back side of the lake. The action had been slow, and his form was lacking. As 11:00 approached, his nerves grew even more shaky. His hands shook, too, but not with excitement this time. He knew it was far too late to return for the morning service. Whatever happened now was out of his control.

After ten minutes of increasingly poor casts, he trudged back to the truck for a snack. He downed a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, but still felt empty. He sat alone, imagining everything that could go wrong, and decided it had been a mistake to come that day. He should have stayed in his office. He could have picked up the pieces if something had gone wrong, perhaps explain it all away as a sermon illustration. If there were no problems after a few attempts, *then* he could have left the holosystem on its own.

Now all he could do was sit helplessly 25 miles away and—he bolted upright as the thought occurred to him. *He could watch the service.* The church maintained a link to its sanctuary cameras for members who were sick or vacationing. He couldn't change anything, but at least he could use his mobile phone to see what was happening.

He jammed his key into the ignition and mashed a button that opened a small panel on the dash, revealing a viewscreen. Now, if he could only remember the address.

A few failed attempts left him flummoxed until he remembered a crumpled church bulletin under the seat. Luckily, it listed the address on the back and he quickly dialed in.

After a brief welcome message, the scene cut to a view from the back of the church. It included the choir loft, platform, and the first few pews. The music minister was leading the choir in a medley which was just making its segue from "Down at the Cross" to "Count Your Blessings."

A tense quarter-hour followed, and when it came time for the message, Stark had broken into a nervous sweat. His white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel strengthened as he heard the music minister say, "And now, the morning sermon from our pastor."

The organ swelled. His heart raced. The curtain opened, and a portly figure stepped onto the stage. Stark released the breath he had

been holding as he saw his own image approach the podium. It had worked.

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply in relief, allowing the nervous tension in his body to subside at the welcome sound of his own voice. It was rich and warm, well-practiced after many years of public oration. The opening words carried a message of peace and tranquillity, which he readily accepted as from a close friend.

Slam! At the sudden noise, Stark's eyes shot open. They quickly scanned the center section, second pew, in time to see old Brother Cohen's daughter bend down to pick up his fumbled hymnal. Stark's irritation gave way to hearty laughter as he realized that this continual nuisance could now be escaped on demand. He felt free.

He leaned back in the seat for several minutes, analyzing what he saw on the screen. He decided that—aside from slouching a bit—his form was crisp, his expressions animated, and his voice smooth. *He was good.*

Finally the fishing itch got to him. Assured of his double's success in the pulpit, Stark decided to scratch the itch. He closed the phone connection, gathered his equipment, and bounded from the truck. He followed the path toward the lake, whistling triumphantly.

On reaching a fork in the path, he decided to fish the front side of the lake. It was much more crowded, and he would have to cross the popular picnic area, but it offered several nice holes he was eager to try. He would just have to be inconspicuous. He donned his polarized sunglasses, pulled his old worn fishing cap far down on his brow, and flipped up his flannel collar.

The picnic area was especially crowded. He managed to circumnavigate most of the dense clusters, but was hardpressed to avoid the frolicking children who raced across the grounds in every direction. A collision seemed inevitable, and when it finally occurred, it came in the form of a young boy who plowed into him while chasing a Frisbee.

"Sorry Mister," the boy shouted as he regained his bearings and tore off after the disc that was now rolling along the ground. Stark stood quietly for a moment as he tried to place the boy. The gears in his mind steadily churned, then it came to him: it was the Johnson boy

from church, *but bigger*. He had to be three or four inches taller, and a burr cut replaced the long hair that had always hung in his face.

A creeping nausea confirmed what Stark suspected—something was terribly wrong. His eyes followed the boy who scampered off to a group of picnic tables a stone's throw away.

Pastor Stark's tackle box completed two full turns in air as it tumbled from his hand and smashed open on the ground below, spraying lead shot, leaders, and flyhooks into the deep grass. He stood motionless at the sight of the Johnsons and the Walkers talking and laughing at the table in front of him. To the right, old Brother Cohen dropped a hot dog under his lawn chair and his daughter rushed to retrieve it. Nearby, the Garcias and the Taylors tended a barbecue, while Anne Franklin—her hair longer than Stark had ever seen it—helped her son off with his jacket. The boy spun around, his tee-shirt boasting a familiar logo atop a star field and a nebula.

The sun passed behind the clouds and, for the first time in 20 years, Richard Stark wept.