

John Gould

Many Worlds

It's the older guy in the jean jacket, the lady in the floral blouse, the Frida Kahlo lookalike, then you. Grab a *Newsweek* from the pile on the coffee table and pretend to pore over it. How lipstick saved lives at Bergen-Belsen. Climate change passes point of no return. Keep looking at the magazine but think about something else. Think about how hard it is not to think about something you don't want to think about. Think about the bizarre song you heard on the way over, Pink Floyd but with the Bee Gees in there too, somehow. Strange. Remember back to when strange was good. Remember back to when strange was fun because normal was always there when you needed it.

The lady in the floral blouse is up – the nurse, or maybe she's a receptionist, is guiding her into the doctor's office. Now it's just the older guy in the jean jacket, the Frida Kahlo lookalike, then you. Frida Kahlo in her mid-thirties, about the time of that self-portrait with the third eye that turns out to be a skull. Or a little later, the self-portrait as a deer shot full of arrows – Frida Kahlo at your age. Think positive, or rather think negative since that's what you need to hear, is negative. Is there something you can still do, some prayer or incantation that might still change the outcome of a test that's already been completed? The world is odd, remember. World, or worlds. Remember your physics. Remember you don't have any physics, but remember shooting the shit with the physics guys in the grad lounge, Sylas and Anoop. You quoting your Kierkegaard, them scribbling their math on beery napkins. "It is a lingering death, to be trampled to death by geese." Is this really the best bit of Kierkegaard you can conjure up? The point was that the equations only worked if there was more than one world, in fact if there were all possible worlds, if everything that can happen does happen. There's a world in which you remember a better bit of Kierkegaard. There's a world in which you remember that pithy bit about the absurd as the object of faith, in fact there's a world in which you not only remember that bit but recite it to the howled approval of the others here in the waiting room, including the receptionist who in many worlds has hair the colour of a smoggy sunset.

There goes the older guy in the jean jacket. Now it's just the Frida Kahlo lookalike, then you. She shrug-grimaces at you. Shrug-grimace back. Remember that in most worlds you don't exist, never have. Remember that in many of the worlds in which you do exist Allyson's here with you, since you didn't leave her just before your first symptom, if that's what that spell of weakness was. In countless worlds you met the Frida Kahlo lookalike at a previous appointment, and went out afterwards for Mexican food – your clever idea – though she turned out to be Chilean. In some of those worlds you were suave yet authentic, yourself but somehow more than yourself, and the Frida Kahlo lookalike, long dark hair loosed from its braid, smiled as Frida Kahlo never did in any of her paintings, smiled as though the grief in her had been transformed into exaltation.

Hm. Some sort of mix-up here – the receptionist has called you first, ahead of the Frida Kahlo lookalike. Fine. Stroll, or better yet stride across the waiting room. En route, catch the eye of the Frida Kahlo lookalike. Determine to ask her her name when you come out. Paula? Sofia? Valentina? She bears all these names, and all others. All possibilities are realities, the thinkable ones and the unthinkable.