

## Twenty-Third Century Delusions ©

By Richard L. Cohen 2024

Jesse Morton was sitting in front of his video screen watching an old Star Trek episode – again. That makes 12 hours of viewing in 16 hours of waking activity. He was a full-fledged 23 year old adult now so no parent could tell him what to do. Sure, most people his age would have a real job out in society. But in 23<sup>rd</sup> Century San Antonio he had no need to do so. His trust had kicked in, so he did not need the money.

He also didn't need Glenda. Their on and off again relationship had ended badly. The only thing he enjoyed in life anymore was burying himself in three-hundred-year-old television shows and movies of Star Trek. He envisioned himself as Captain James Tiberius Kirk battling the Klingons and Romulans and second guessing his decisions. Four hours later he fantasized himself on the bridge of Captain Picard's Enterprise as his communications officer. An unhealthy dinner in his apartment later and he was at Quark's bar on Deep Space Nine having drinks with a Bajoran.

It wasn't always like this. Jesse had a normal childhood in San Antonio. He had friends and was an above average student. He had ambitions. He wanted to go to flight school so he could pilot the Mars shuttle. It could be an interesting bridge to another planet that would allow him to spend time on this fast-growing Earth colony.

His ambition was derailed by his parents' medical discovery. Working together in the lab, they discovered a cure for dementia that was one hundred percent effective. Government approvals were swift and within a few years the family went from a modest three-bedroom home to a mansion in the suburbs. Life was easy, far too easy for Jesse. His grades started to slip, and he began binging television shows from the previous three hundred years. What caught his attention more than anything else were the original Star Trek television shows and related movies, and the successors Next Generation series and related movies, not to mention Deep Space Nine as well as the prequel, Enterprise. Other Star Trek themed shows did not register with him.

His behavior made his parents distraught. They were at their wit's end regarding what to do with their son. They did not want him to waste his life in front of a screen. Finally, in a conversation with their lawyer they decided on a plan of action. They would modify the trust to take away their son's money unless he got a job for at least 20 hours a week. That, they figured, would allow him to join the real world and hopefully he would like it enough to want to embrace the outside world.

Jesse passively agreed to this demand. In his heart of hearts, he knew that the lifestyle he was leading was not a healthy one. Having an external push was just the right medicine he needed. What could he do with only a high school education?

His parents suggested that the local grocery store would be a great place for him to work. They knew that he would meet many people—coworkers and customers—that could broaden his life. It also helped that they knew the manager.

Dressing for his first day of work, Jesse reluctantly left his Star Trek pin off his shirt. He knew his parents wanted him to make a clean break with that stuff, so he obeyed. He was dismayed that the first job the manager wanted him to do was bagging groceries for customers. He thought he could do so much more; but he complied with the expectation that he would move up the ladder quicker.

Boring. Boring. Boring. Two hours into his shift he fantasized that he was on Deep Space Nine doing important things.

“Stop, don’t put the cleaning fluid in the same bag as the milk,” one customer said to him, bringing him back to Earth.

“Okay, sorry,” he said.

“Sorry for what,” said Dr. Bashir. “You handled that patient just fine while I was gone.”

Jesse apologized and said he misspoke. Gathering himself quickly he thanked Dr. Bashir for the chance to help out in his absence. His internship supervisor would be pleased that he successfully completed a rotation in sickbay. Several weeks earlier he had finished his engineering rotation and was now looking forward to working in communications. After that he could shadow the captain and maybe, just maybe, be chosen for an off-station mission. In a year he would return to Earth to finish up his studies at Starfleet Academy.

He decided to go to Quark’s bar to unwind. He began walking toward the corridor and suddenly found himself walking alongside the San Antonio River. Clearing his head he realized that the grocery store could work out if he applied himself. “Yes, I’m going to be the best bagger they ever had and in three years I’m going to manage that store,” he thought. “I’m going to show my parents that I can do it.”

Over the next few weeks, he worked hard, following all the directions his supervisor told him about the best way to bag groceries, to be friendly with customers and always ask them how their day was going. His slide was slow, but steady. One day he showed up with a Star Trek button and the next day added a Mr. Spock button. Within a week he was wearing a Star Trek Next Generation hat.

Friday was not a good day for Jesse. He had forgotten that he was to wear only regular clothes to work. He showed up with a gold Star Trek shirt and pants and, when he saw his supervisor, saluted him as Captain.

“Yes, I understand you’ve done well in your rotations,” said Commanding Officer Benjamin Sisko. “You’ve got a promising career in Starfleet. Your last task here will be shadowing me for the next two weeks.”

With that was a jolt and the power was out. Sisko called out to engineering because the back-up power supply wasn’t kicking in. It might be sabotage, the Chief Engineer replied. He told Sisko that he’s on it. Sisko told Jesse to go down to engineering and assist.

“This storm may go for a while, so I don’t know when we’ll get power back,” his supervisor said. “We’ve got to tell the customers to leave now. “We can’t do anything—can’t check anyone out—until we get power back. You need to go through the aisles and tell people.”

Jesse did as he was told. He went from aisle to aisle informing people that they needed to leave – they could not take anything in their carts with them. Store staff would handle putting everything back. When he was done, he went to his supervisor and said that he was reporting to engineering as ordered.

For the next hour he assisted by handing Chief the tools that he wanted to bring the backup generator on. It was clear that someone had come in and snipped key wires. It was up to Chief to put it all back together. The Security Office for the station would be investigating who did this—most likely someone connected with an outside group that caused the initial power outage.

“Cardassians, I’ll bet,” Jesse said. “They are trying to retake the station.”

“Retake what?” said Jesse’s mother. “We have power. Do you need to go back to work?”

Jesse’s brain was in a fog. At that exact minute he did not know if he should return to the grocery store or go back to shadowing Commander Sisko now that power had been restored.

He chose neither. He went up to his bedroom and shut the door. To try to understand his situation he put on the Star Trek Next Generation episode where counselor Troi wakes up in a strange bed and looks at herself in a mirror and recoils in horror at her appearance as a Romulan. Surely, he could relate to what counselor Troi was experiencing at that moment. He truly did not know if he was an ordinary human working in a grocery store or a cadet at Star Fleet Academy finishing up his rotation on Deep Space Nine.

As he watched the episode he nervously waited to see if his environment would change around him. It didn’t as he nodded off for a nap.

“Wake up,” said the electronic monitor. “We’re approaching Earth. You are expected to be at Starfleet Academy for class in an hour.”

Jesse's class that day was on First Contact. Undoubtedly, he would be on missions that established the first contact aliens had with Earth. This was one of the most challenging of all starship missions as there were so many possibilities and danger points that could happen during these interactions. The instructor had been on a dozen of these missions and stressed to the class the importance of keeping an open mind during these discussions. Aliens who seemed hostile might in fact be friendly and conversely some worlds were inhabited by aliens who seemed friendly but secretly schemed to steal Starfleet technology.

The doctor from the inpatient psych ward talked to Jesse's daughter and explained the diagnosis. He's had a psychotic break, the doctor told her. Sometimes Jesse appears in his mind to be in a grocery store. It looks like he is bagging groceries but in the therapy room he is just grasping at air. Then other times Jesse acts like a student intern on a space station. Sometimes he shouts engineering or medical instructions, mimicking his "boss" who is telling him what to do.

Skylar loved her father dearly. Growing up she spent a lot of time at her father's office and for a time worked in the organization as a marketing specialist before striking out to form her own marketing firm. She reminded the doctor that her sixty-three-year-old father is a most important person, the founder and principal stockholder in the largest chain of grocery stores on the planet. Indeed, as a teenager Jesse had worked in a grocery store and had attended a number of Star Trek conventions. But now, forty-five years removed from all that what is the doctor going to do? After all, the daughter said, the company is now public and there is a legal responsibility to the shareholders to report on his health.

The doctor said that his course of treatment should begin to work over the next two weeks. If the daughter was patient she should see progress the next time she visits. The daughter replied that it would be three months until she could visit again, just before the annual stockholder's meeting. He must be fully improved or something will have to be said at the meeting, she told the doctor.

She left the hospital and later that day caught the shuttle that would take her back to Earth. "So long to Mars, the red planet until we meet again," she said to herself.