

“Life on Pause”

So much depends on a gray hair. Ace rummages around the bathroom drawer for tweezers, feels their sharp pinchers on his forefinger, and plucks it out before his girlfriend Emilia, waking up in the bedroom, can see it. It was the third one this month, the first three of his life. It dawns on him, as he washes the rogue hair down the drain, that maybe he’s going to get old after all.

“What do you want to do for your birthday?” Emilia asks innocent enough as she eats her oatmeal over the steel kitchen island, distracted by her email. She doesn’t know about the gray hair, she just wants to know if it’s a small dinner or a large dinner or a party this year.

“Nothing big. Maybe just dinner, you and me.”

“The big three-oh,” Emilia glances up and smirks. Ace struggles against the creeping resentment he feels for Emilia and her ripe age of twenty-six.

After breakfast, Emilia leaves for work at the small production studio where she spends her days pitching indie projects she believes in. Most of the time she seems fulfilled. Again, resentment toys with Ace’s mind as he weighs the contrast between her fulfillment and his lack of it.

Depressed by his insignificance, Ace sucks down a cigarette outside his apartment and watches the morning spread out around him. City-goers rush by with the same existential urgency, only it seems they’re actually going somewhere. What has Ace done that will leave its imprint on history? How will he achieve immortality? All he does is freelance advertising work, and he’s OK at that, he makes a decent living, but he has more to offer the world and he’s afraid of wasting his life. He was supposed to be a photographer, and he barely knows how to operate a camera. There are too many settings. He lacks the experience.

*I wish time would stop.*

Ace watches as a leaf, previously drifting down from the slender branch of a familiar tree, stops in midair. It’s a Tuesday morning, and the people who were out and about on the street doing their daily activities are frozen unnaturally, as if the pause button has been hit on a television screen.

Ace thinks he’s hallucinating. He walks over to the leaf and stares up at it, its dark green veins visible under the fixed sunlight. He rushes upstairs to check the news

and ends up in the uncanny silence of his apartment. For once in this city there's no noise pollution. What beautiful noise silence can be. There are no news reports, no Internet updates of any kind. Ace texts Emilia, but the text won't go through. It's as if the world has ceased to operate completely. Outside, everyone and everything remains stationary.

The three possibilities that run through Ace's mind in no particular order: aliens, God, apocalypse. He's not convinced of any of these, as strange as this whole thing is.

He decides to do an experiment. In his kitchen, he takes a pink apple with pale flesh out of the fruit bowl and slices it open. To ease his mind, Ace leaves the apple on the cutting board and sits down in the living room to work on some ad copy due tomorrow. Three hours later, he estimates, because the clocks seem to have frozen along with everything else, he checks the apple. It still hasn't turned brown. Like a still life painting painted when everything was still fresh. No flies, no rot.

He retraces back to the moment just before he looked up and the downtown street was a surreal still, like something out of his favorite sci-fi film. *I wish time would stop*. He arrives at a new hypothesis, an overpowering intuition: Maybe, he's somehow found a way to control time. Not a solution to the mortality problem, he can't wrap his head around the logic of that yet, but at least an elegant stall.

Now that Ace is convinced he's willed this into being, the possibilities of how to spend this newfound time seem endless, and even the more eccentric items on his bucket list begin to sound plausible. He can learn a Slavic language. He can finally teach himself that theoretical physics class he wishes he took in college. He can cook every recipe from that Persian cookbook Emilia bought for him in hope they would cook more together this past summer, which never happened. He can surprise her with a perfect sour cherry polow when she gets home from work. He can finally teach himself photography, maybe even become an expert. How many hours does it take to master something? He read the number somewhere, but has forgotten it. Something around a year's worth.

For some reason unknown to Ace, the electricity still works even though the clocks are perpetually stuck at the exact number he stopped time. Though he doesn't need the lights, this comes in handy for the television. The eternal daylight messes with Ace's circadian rhythm, so at first it's hard to fall asleep, but soon he gets the hang of it

with bedroom shades and a sleeping eye mask and chalky melatonin tablets flavored mint-chocolate. He doesn't know how many days go by, not too many he figures, he hasn't crossed that much off his list yet, just a couple of books and a couple of shows and half a frustrating video game, but he decides to try unpausing the world. He misses Emilia, and it seems unfair that she's been stuck at work these past few days, physically at least. He doesn't know where she really is, but that's a slippery slope. Where are any of these people if not here? Ace closes his eyes. There are other planes of existence. Isn't that what string theory was about? Maybe that's where these people are, another plane somewhere unreachable.

*I wish time would start again.*

Ace waits five seconds and then opens his eyes and goes to the window. The people are moving on the street and the cars are honking and a bird flies by. The sun's beams rush through the window, shattering the static light. The dangerous thought crosses Ace's mind that he may have just had a psychotic break, maybe none of this really even happened. He's not so much afraid of the psychotic break than the idea of not being able to do it again. Not wanting to test either theory yet, he waits to try.

It's a bizarre thing after a period of uninterrupted freedom, figuring out how to live with everyone else on the clock again. For a few hours he stands by the window and watches people laughing and yelling and walking and dining, but dread builds progressively in his chest until finally he recoils from the window and sinks into his couch and begins to read instead. He has freelance work to do but he can't bring himself to do it just yet. Anticipating Emilia, his insides contort in a mildly unpleasant way.

When Emilia finally comes home from work, her face looks different. Ace had forgotten how a dapple of sweat forms below her hairline when she rushes home from work, off the subway and up to their fifth floor walk up, and when he kisses her first on her mouth and then her forehead, he prefers the lightly salty taste of the latter, an unassuming tiny piece of her insides made accessible to him. He forgot that her eyes are more brown than green and pore into him without trying. He forgot that her fingers are small and nubby and fingernails always unpainted. He had imagined them red. He forgot that she's always buzzed on caffeine for an hour after work, and she needs to decompress by talking about her day, or sometimes reading and not talking at all. But today she talks to him.

Emilia tells Ace a story about her day, but Ace finds it impossible to pay attention. The details seem inconsequential and the point pointless. Emilia doesn't know his day lasted a week, if not a lifetime.

There are always things we don't know, even Ace. He doesn't know I'm watching him.

That night as they're getting ready for bed, Ace realizes his and Emilia's sleep schedules are completely out of sync. For Ace, night had ceased to exist, so he'd been sleeping whenever he felt compelled to, mostly out of lifelong routine and not necessity. He doesn't want to tell Emilia about his discovery, not yet at least, so he pretends he's tired after they have sex and he curls up with his legs tight around her leg and his arms secure around his pillow.

The sheer amount of things he needs to do begins to overwhelm him. He lists them off all night and soon it's morning. When Emilia is about to leave for work, Ace takes her face between his hands and kisses her properly with a little bit of tongue, which surprises her.

*I wish time would stop.*

This time, Ace decides to explore. He goes to the park expecting strangeness but is unprepared for the anxiety. All those people frozen in their morning runs and errands and park games, like the endless wax sculptures he saw at a museum a long time ago. The happy expressions sadden him in their unawareness, their interrupted happiness almost cruel. The sad expressions, particularly a couple in the midst of a fight, wreck him. The streets that once fascinated him from the window of his apartment just make him feel unnerved. The still bodies taunt him, his freedom unjust. Why should Ace have this power when no one else does? A white noise pervades everything, one he hasn't noticed before. It emanates from the bodies of these city-walkers on such a low frequency he might just be imagining it.

Eventually Ace stops exploring the parks and the streets and the grocery stores, where cantaloupes and pineapples and waxy red peppers have taken on a nightmarish effect, a Hollywood studio with plastic produce and mannequins haunting the aisles. Oh, the horror... He retreats into the solitude of his apartment, where things feel safe and normal, if not a little too silent. Who knew silence could be such torture? Ace turns on music when he wants some external noise, and this seems to do the trick.

Time slips away, though Ace can only estimate how much. Now that he's decided to stay indoors, he feels less anxious. Without intending to, he stops taking the backup Xanax in his bedroom drawer. When he's lonely, he masturbates to porn, the kind he thinks Emilia doesn't like. But soon he misses Emilia, and moreover, he misses the warm flesh, the pumping blood, of another human body. By now, he's perfected the sour cherry polow recipe. Though the air won't spoil food, the forceful heat of the oven still seems to change it from one form to another. Ace likes this. The appearance of some normalcy.

*I wish time would start again.*

Today Emilia brings Ace home a note, on which she's scrawled Carl Sagan's book dedication to his wife, *In the vastness of space and the immensity of time, it is my joy to share a planet and an epoch with Annie*. When he opens up the slip of paper, he cries a little, silently. This confuses Emilia. She knows she's triggered some emotional response in him, but she doesn't know where it came from. Ordinarily, he would have folded it up and placed it in the box by the bed, where all her other quotes to him rest.

They fuck briefly and passionately against the kitchen counter and it's the best sex they've had all year, for either of them.

Ace decides that now is the perfect time to present his mastery. He pulls the sour cherry polow out from the oven where it's been hidden and quickly checks for Emilia's reaction. Ace has a newfound aversion of her eyes, they're too difficult to read, so he studies her mouth instead. Her mouth twitches and then flattens. Instead of happy, she looks skeptical. She inspects the dish closer.

"That's sweet of you, but why?" She asks after too long a silence.

"What?" Ace begins to panic.

"You know I hate cherry anything. I hate cherries."

His idiocy devastates him, dark and suffocating, hot eyelids holding back body fluid for the second time tonight. He'd neglected this stupidly important fact. Not neglected, he had forgotten. Could Emilia be lying to him, testing him? Does she know, somehow, of his power? If she does, she feigns ignorance.

Emilia knows Ace has changed, but she doesn't know why, or how it happened so quickly. To her, he kissed her goodbye to work this morning, a little too loving for Ace but nothing totally abnormal, and when she returned nine hours later, he was

someone else completely. But there are pros and cons to this different person, the good fuck yet the forgetful cherry thing. It's not bad different or good different. She's just confused. She makes a joke about the cherry polow that pacifies Ace's anxiety. The rest of the night Emilia puts on the appearance of normalcy, instead internalizing this new Ace as she's prone to do.

Ace sleeps like a baby while Emilia's thoughts keep her awake, and she takes down an extra cup of coffee before she leaves for work, drowsy and annoyed at nothing in particular.

*I wish time would stop.*

Ace walks into a camera store and finds the one he's looking for, expensive and full of complicated settings. He makes sure it's charged, then takes it from the store and sits down on a street bench and reads the manual, back to front, twice. He moves slowly through the city taking pictures of its frozen denizens. His favorite ones are the contortionists stuck in impossible positions, and the falling objects defying gravity: the leaves, the wad of paper, the coin. It's difficult in a city as saturated as this to take pictures of the landscape with no one in them, so whether intentional or not, every frame captures a frozen person somewhere in it.

After many pictures, Ace walks to the production studio where Emilia works and finds her near the coffee machine holding a cup of half-drunk coffee and in the middle of a lighthearted conversation with another employee, a handsome guy. Her body leans against the counter and her mouth is open, teeth exposed behind bare lips. She holds a paper in her other hand that lists "good recent horror," research for a project she must be working on. Ace holds his camera up and takes a picture.

*I wish time would start again.*

Ace is silent when Emilia comes home from work, huddled in the corner of their apartment on a chair studying his photographs.

"When did you take all these?" Emilia asks, surprised, leaning over him. Ace shuffles the picture of Emilia to the bottom of the stack.

"I've been taking them for awhile," Ace responds, annoyed by her ignorance. She doesn't know what makes him tick anymore, what turns him on. She doesn't know that he's spent the last who knows how long mastering photography. She has become irrelevant.

“I cooked polow, no cherries. It’s in the oven,” these are the last words Ace speaks all evening. He regrets starting time again so soon.

Emilia sits down at the kitchen island and eats the cold polow in silence. No recipe perfected could prepare Emilia for this loneliness in Ace’s company. He’s let her down in more profound ways than sour cherry polow. She feels guilty that she isn’t happy he’s found a new hobby he’s passionate about, but why has he never mentioned it to her? She feels rejected, suddenly irrelevant.

Does Ace know, intuitively, what’s going on through Emilia’s head? Does he know because she’s someone he used to love, and he’s someone she used to too? According to my data, he does not. I have an urge to tell him, an urge to alter the course of his life in some meaningful way, but I don’t. There’s no moral reason for this. I’m bound by contract, truthfully.

*I would time would stop.*

Ace studies Emilia’s still body in the even stiller moonlight. She looks spectral, unalive. He has an urge to destroy something, a craving to annihilate. He goes to the kitchen and this time he slices open a Bartlett pear, clean and surgical and perfectly green, its blackish seeds glimmering. Its possible infinite lushness provokes him. He cuts it into tiny pieces, scrapes these pieces into an unused marble mortar made for grinding herbs. He smashes it until the marble mortar holds a thick sweet light green paste, its seedpods cracked open, exhibiting brown innards. This pleases Ace because it gives off the illusion of change without the false heat of the oven.

I entertain a thought too silly to be true. That maybe there’s a cosmic link between us, me and Ace. A reason why I was assigned this simulation of his life and not another. A poetic undertone to the ways I can’t or shouldn’t alter his life’s trajectory, yet am tragically prone to it anyway.

Eventually there comes a time when Ace can’t bear Emilia’s still body lying in bed.

*I wish time would start again.*

In the morning, Ace and Emilia don’t speak. Last night, Emilia dreamed the deepest she’s dreamed in ages, and waking up was like coming out of a dark haze. She decides to eat toast instead of oatmeal today, something small to break out of the mundane. She doesn’t finish it, and takes her coffee to the small balcony attached to the

fire escape that looks out onto the city. If she were not trying to rationalize her emotions, which to her have taken on unjustifiable proportions, with how little time has passed from good to this, this blankness between her and Ace, if she were aware of how much has really changed, if she trusted the feeling she felt this morning when she looked into the eyes of a stranger, she would leave him.

Ace can't read Emilia's mind, but he feels a similar pain, the pain of losing someone you love even if they're right in front of you. His threshold for other peoples' tragedies and desires, for the energies radiating from their bodies, has lowered to only circumscribe himself. He stays in the kitchen, as far away from her as he can be, where he fumbles with utensils he doesn't plan to use.

She recedes, she internalizes. *The problem with introspection is that it has no end* Emilia read somewhere, and her mind recalls these words for her appropriately as she looks off the balcony and spirals ever deeper into thought. The early morning sky holds its blue steady, a vast solid blue. And this moment of introspection, for her, it never ends.