

A Night At Memoren Diner

My college professor Shocavsky once said that time was comprised of multiple passages. Passages of not just the past, present, and future but also a conglomeration of numerous variables that people call “alternate universes.” Professor Shocavsky theorized a station in the universe where all these points converged, meeting with one another with no awareness.

Since then, I’ve always kept a scrap of packing paper with that writing. I stow it in my wallet for safekeeping.

Does this concept ever apply to my everyday habits in life? Fuck no. I wish. I am, in fact, a brand designer on a business trip to Wisconsin. The muddy skies and grey dirt surrounding this small state do not support the rhetoric for “Yay, can’t wait to visit Wisconsin again!”

A pothole, of all things. For now, I wait for my mechanic to arrive.

The name, in yellow neon signs accented with red, read “MEMOREN DINER.” I walked in to find a pristine white interior. To my left, a marble counter with stainless steel stools. All padded by a lush violet leather. And on the far end, a black jukebox with blue neon rods, and a clock mounted on the wall above it. The time was 10:15.

Coffee. I need coffee. I sat by a counter, where immediately a waitress approached me with a violet-glossed half-smirk.

“Hi, traveler,” she said in a soft pitch, “How are you today?”

“I could be better,” I said. From the corner of my eye, the second hand of the clock ran backward. But I’m more gravitated towards this conversation. “Sorry, that introduction’s a bit rude of me.”

“Hey, you didn’t insult me.”

“Yeah, but not like my temperament is making you enjoy your shift.”

She chuckled, rolled her eyes to the side, and beamed them back to me. “You’re overreacting. Come on, no need to be so stiff,” she leaned onto the surface of the counter, arms crossed. “What would you like?”

“A coffee would be nice. With a splash of almond milk.”

“Sure.”

I'm surprised a diner actually uses almond milk. The waitress walked away, moving over to the coffee pot. At that moment, the door rang open. A man, his face visibly aged from oversaturated wrinkles, limped inside, wearing thoroughly drenched jeans and a leather jacket of the same mishap. Outside, there was not a single sign of it having rained.

"Here's your coffee," the waitress said.

"Thank you," I replied. I didn't even catch the waitresses' name. She had a name tag, I'm sure of that. "How long have you worked here?" I asked in a way to urge her to turn back around and come back here.

"Oh god, that century-old question. 5 years?" She replied, her back turned against me. At this point, her legs were the only thing in my line of sight.

"Is it interesting? Having to work here?" The door rang open again. I ignored it that time.

"The job has its moments," she said.

"Well...who's the craziest person you met?"

The waitress turned back, looking past my glare. Her eyes directed to the elderly man behind me, sitting in one of the booths. His head was still lowered.

That's odd. So, I mouthed to her, "What'd he do?"

Dol sighed, "He killed a cop."

"How the hell is he still sitting here?!"

"Well...this all only happened a few days ago. I have him in the freezer."

"You don't think talking to me would make him suspicious?"

"I'll say you're my boyfriend."

Back at the clock, the second hand was now spinning back wildly, while the minute and hour followed right behind it. But I was too bewildered by the old man behind me, stoic in his motion. I needed a plan.

I remembered I had a badge. A police badge. The badge was scuffed from scratches since I carried it around with me for years now as a keepsake.

Back in my college years, I had gotten into some...scuffles with some delinquent friends. We had ambushed a cop and beat the shit out of him. His face became swollen to a pulp, and then my dumbass cohort grabbed the gun out of the officer's holster, shooting him directly in the head, creating a red Pollock painting on my face. The whiteness left his eyes, initially shaking like a bobble head. I think.

I explained to Dol, showing her the badge, "Listen... I'm an undercover cop. You take my phone and shoot a picture of the officer. I'll distract him."

"But... you're a brand designer."

Wait. Something isn't adding up. "How did you know that?"

"You told me, Freddy."

"Freddy's not my name," I replied. Is it Freddy? How the fuck am I having such a rough time remembering my name.

A sudden bang boomed from the left, near the jukebox. A door, as white as the walls, emerged out of thin air. Had that door always been existing, and I simply didn't notice?

From the corner of my eye, Dol beamed sharply- no, coldly- not at the door, but my face.

My heart stopped. My hands are frigid, unlike the warmth of the coffee, as I stare into the darkness. I can't process the spinning the of the clock. Time, in my essence of horror over the unknown, struck frozen.

The diner's light shined into the void, revealing a ghastly grey jaw. Spotted with dark yellow and microscopic strands of hair. A thin black line with multiple cracks just above the chin. There was also bare patches of flesh and bone. What is it? Is Dol hiding something else? The jaw clenched, and the black line opened to unveil a yellowed, ill-refined smile. The door immediately shut.

"What...what was?" I asked, speechless.

"What did you see?" Dol asked. Her voice raised to a pitch so unsettling I nearly jumped from my seat. Once again, it was hard to place on what I should do in this predicament, or what to say. "What did you see?!" She screamed at me. I jumped, and quickly my aggression kicked in. I refused to be cornered like prey.

“You have someone in there, don’t you?!” I yelled, walking toward the door.

“DON’T open that door, Rick.”

I continued my pursuit.

“Please...you have no idea what you’re opening,” she said. Her sincere words were foreign, leaving me starry-eyed in what exactly she meant. But my heart pushed for the door. The door would provide me with the truth, not this waitress I just met. I open the door and stepped through the darkness.

My college professor Shocavsky once said that time was comprised of multiple passages. Not merely the past, present, and future but also a conglomeration of various variables that people call “alternate universes.” I kept that thought handwritten on a small piece of packing paper.

That’s what first came to my mind as I entered this diner and watched the clock’s second hand moving backward. 10:15. I pulled the scrap out of my coat pocket, entranced to my former professor’s theory.

My wife is going to kill me. I have been running hours late, and I promised I would take her out on a long overdue date. Her silk skin is enough to hypnotize me into having good dreams in my sleep. Her smirk is this nanosecond spark of energy that fills me with life. I wanted to remind her all of that tonight and so much more. But fate compels me differently.

I fucking hate technology.

“Where did you buy that jacket?” an elder sitting in one of the nearby booths asked. He turned his face, the light reflecting off a single foggy eye, the other a light brown. His cheeks sagged, and his face bloated around his jawline. I felt like I’d seen him before, but perhaps my fatigue was beginning to play tricks on me.

“Oh. From a retail store. I can’t quite recall which one.”

“Is it Ross? I love Ross.”

“God, no. I mean, no offense.”

“None taken. But you should re-consider your thoughts. It saves so much money for other things.”

“Eh. You pay for the quality,” I moved on to my seat, thinking that was the end of my spontaneous conversation.

“Why don’t you take a seat here? I’m a bit lonely, sorry. I’ve not the slightest clue when I’ll be leaving this place.”

“Well, a night at the Memoren diner is always a long, unforgettable night,” I chuckled.

How did I know this was the Memoren diner? I don’t recall ever taking a look at the sign outside. Did I?

I went back to the old man to shake my paranoia off, and continued, “And you don’t have to apologize about that. Frankly, I’m bored too. Only this diner is around while I wait for a mechanic.”

“Oh, what car is it you need fixed?”

“Honda.”

“I had a friend who once traveled all the way from Florida to Tennessee in a 2002 Honda Accord. 2002!” He laughed, “I wish I could be that active and reliable in my old age.”

“You’re telling me. I’m 36, and I feel like I’m such a hindrance to my wife at times.”

The elder scoffed, “Women. There are only gems that’ll make you useful,” the elder scoffed. He took a sip out of a vanilla shake, colored in a gradient of white to brown to a light brown. Bubbling fizz at the top emitted the fresh, acidic smell of cola, “Oh, do you want some?”

“Oh, of course,” I sipped the drink out of the same straw. From a stranger that I met 10 seconds ago. I’m still thinking about the disgust to that, but I can’t help but not give a shit and continue drinking.

“I’m Rod, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you, Rod. You’re married, too, aren’t you?” I pointed out the band on his ring finger.

“Ah, well, I’m a widow.”

“Oh, goodness. I’m so sorry.”

“That’s fine, I completely understand the conception. Just feels wrong to take it off.”

My eyes watered up a bit hearing that. “It sounds as though you had a beautiful love life.”

Rod faced to the window, simultaneously rubbing the steel band with his opposite thumb and middle finger. “I think about...midway through the marriage felt more like a financial reliance than true love.

“I regret saying that. And I regret thinking that way too. Watching the love of your life’s eyes fade before you. It can’t be helped that a part of you fades with it. Next comes the ‘I should’ve done this better, I should’ve done that.’ I stayed with her, right?” Rod wiped his eyes. “Sorry, I’m spewing a tirade-”

“Y’kno, y’kno, y’kno, at least you were together until the end, right? Tonight, I was supposed to have a date with my wife. Now it’s completely blown out the window.”

“Well, won’t she understand?”

“Oh, of course, she would. She would nod her head and put up the role of the wife as ‘yes baby, yes, I totally understand,” In the middle of my speech, the phone in the diner began ringing. But I continued talking over it, “But in the back of her head, she would be irate. Thinking, ‘This fucking man can’t even have his car fixed before our only date within this whole year, the WHOLE year.’ I couldn’t even request time off for our anniversary.”

“Don’t you think you’re over-reading.”

“Y’kno, I am, but then I’m left with the fear that if I’m *too* honest, we propel ourselves into this unnecessary fight. You ever fear that your wife would leave you because you’re not hot enough?” Suddenly, my mind derails into this train ride that I cannot stop. Even if I bit my tongue now, I wouldn’t be able to stop.

“Well, my wife is dead, so...”

“And what if I can’t get it hard for *one* night? What then? Do I lose my big dick energy that these kids won’t shut up about?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Like in the whole world of man and masculinity, discussing our feelings is considered taboo. That if we reveal our insecurities, no woman would be with us, all our past demonstrations of confidence go out the window, and they end up turning lesbian. LESB”-

“SHUT UP,” the old man banged his hands onto the table. And instantly, my speech halted like an emergency brake.

My lips grimaced into a frown. I don’t know what came over me. I replied, “I’m so sor”-

Rod cut me off again, “Shut. Up.”

I leaned back into the seat. The phone ringing was the only ambiance, becoming increasingly louder. And then I shift over to Dol, the waitress, her back facing to me. “Dol! Can I get a water, please?”

She turned back, and replied with a raised brow, “Sure,” and marched back into the kitchen area. ‘When did I catch her name tag?’ I thought. Why did these bits of memories keep impulsively being shoved into my lexicon? I couldn’t understand why, and from where.

I turned back to Rod, who was staring at his silver wedding band with more noticeable bits of rust, dark brown and jagged from its former circular shape. Bits of blood dripped from his thumb. “Hey,” I said, “You should be careful with that rust.”

“Oh. Right,” Rod wiped his thumb across the table, leaving a streak of blood. “You have a wonderful name, by the way.”

“My...My name?”

“Yes, your name.”

“When did I say my name?”

“Just now.”

A drill began caving into my head. When the fuck did I say my name? What is my name? Is it Fred? Rick? I think my name is Rick, but it could be Erik, or Mick, or Dick. I wrapped my hands around my head as the phone ringing penetrated my eardrums. They’re nearly about to pop. “FUCK!” I screamed, jumping out of my seat, “Can no

one answer the damn phone?!?!” I stampeded to the phone and picked it up.

“HELLO?!”

“I only have one request, one thing to save us from this misery, finding this one truth from tonight. The question is which tonight,” Static suddenly overcame the voice mid-speech, returning to say, “Outside. Origin,” a flat-line dial tone followed.

In that instant, I ran. I ran and ran back into my car. But the farther I ran, the farther I sprinted from the light, the darker my vision went. I eventually lost my path.

“Excuse me,” I shouted out, “Does anyone know a mechanic? My car broke down, I have no phone and am in dire need of help.”

The old man turned away. The waitress, however, replied, “I can help. Let me check the yellow pages for this one guy. He’s reliable, definitely not greedy like a lot of them.”

“Thank you so much,” I said, bowing out of grace.

“Let me walk around back real quick.”

“Sure, I’ll take a seat here,” I sat on the barstool. What a wonder all the hundreds of miles I’ve driven that car to still be in one piece. But, a 1969 vintage Mustang is a beauty to take care of. The commute from home to work is awful, though--my work as a gravedigger. Wait, no, as a Brand Designer...no, no, no, no, no, no. Brand design doesn’t involve equations, does it?

“Hm?” The waitress re-emerged to my vision, sounding something at me.

“What?”

“Did you say something?”

“Um...no, nothing,” My gaze lowered to her pale hands. Blue veins extended from a black ring to around her forearm. “Your...”

“Fuck, I gotta make sure I stop hearing random things. My roommate always gives me that shit,” she laughed. “What’s your name, honey?”

“I’m Derrick. Yours?”

“Dol.”

“Thanks again for your help, Dol. Not often I come across a kind soul.”

“Plenty of kind folk out in the world,” Dol shrugged with a smirk, “I’m only one out of a billion of them. More or less. What do I know, right? I work at a diner.”

“I’m sure you have plenty of crazy diner stories.”

“What about you? To be this far out in the middle of nowhere. Usually, people that stop here are on a trip or a journey of some kind.”

Sounds like I was a rare case. I’ve been alone for so long. Isolated. At work, I’m the only one in my department, so the most interactions I get are 2 or 3-minute talks with people before a supervisor’s glares at us to report back to our desks. I don’t have the pleasure to go home early to see my family.

All I have left is my brain and my imagination. To play stories in my head of another world. Where I could be freed of the 9 to 5 and live my life. I’m sure if I told a free spirit about this, they would say I’m just giving myself excuses because I want to be this way, or that I’m too scared to be free.

I’m neither of those things. Who wants to be caged and alone? I’d rather watch myself slowly fade to ash for 30 days, waiting to take my last breath. I don’t want to be alone, either. I chuckled, “Right.”

“Come on, share some with me.”

I wanted to find a memory from anything in the past, but I couldn’t all of a sudden. I thought I knew about myself. And I was not the type of person to be this forgetful about my own things.

All I could remember was a photo. A photo of my mother holding me. In my hand was a souvenir I got from one of those carnival games. It was the size of my palm but bright red, enough to aggravate a bull. The grooves of the figurine sometimes went out of line, creating these makeshift scars on the figure. I loved it, more so now because it was my mom that got it for me after I bawled and bawled for her to keep trying. It took her 22 tries to win that figure.

Scratching my head left no trigger for a flash of nostalgia to be unearthed. The gears of the clock began sounding louder. I lied, saying, “I’m sorry, but that clock is very infuriating right now.”

“Ah? Oh my,” Dol replied, “Weird. I’ve never noticed.”

“I couldn’t even be working in the same place if I were you, with that damn contraption,” I chuckled, “Y’kno, it reminds me of something my college professor once said to me about time.”

“I love learning new things, but please tell me this isn’t a 40-minute lecture. My brain CANNOT handle it, or it’ll overload from sleep deprivation.”

“Oh, don’t worry at all,” I pulled out the folded paper my pocket, “It’s all right here in fairly big handwriting.”

As I unfolded it, my eyes widened. On the paper, it read:

My college professor Shocavsky once said scrawled repeatedly. Until the end sentence, different and prominently bled in compared to the rest. ***find the origin.***
Beware the Grey.

The Grey. The Grey! That damn thing has been following me for so long, torturing me intensely. Keep calm, keep calm, uh...um...what’s my name. What’s my FUCKING name?! I want to scream right now. This timing is as frustrating as walking into the kitchen of your house, and you forget why you were even there in the first place.

Dol won’t stop me. I moved over to the storage door, and with the gentlest twist of the knob, opened it. My way out had to be there.

I entered the void, with no source of light to guide me. Nothing to reveal the length and corners of my escape route. Time’s running out. I know if I’m here for too long, then this marks the end of me. The resets have been a way to keep me fucking oblivious to everything like the rest of these people. With my arms reached out, I kept moving, feeling for any walls and objects to adjust my movements accordingly.

And then, glass shattered beneath my left foot. Instantaneously, a red light turned on, from the corner of my blindsight. When I turned, in front of me were now afterimages of...myself. Each afterimage turned into a frame, moving in a specific line. There was panic in my eyes, my face turning left and right as I continued gliding along the path.

I couldn't break free. My body moved, and then halfway through, I saw what was at the end of the path. It was The Grey, with its arms branched open, asymmetrical like its smile. A mannerism of welcoming me back home.

Its head twitched faster the closer I moved towards it.

My body continued moving inch by inch to the Grey. So close, it began wrapping its arms around my body. No, no, no, no, no, no, NO, NO, NO.

There...there has to be a way out of this. While I try to imagine a scenic way out, a plan, a loophole, my vision fixated on the face of this monstrosity. Past the wounds, the rotting flesh, the open areas revealing bone and infected decay, my mind wandered to the shape of its eyes. Its cheeks slightly sunken, masking a sharp chiseled jawline.

The only live eye, tinted with an odd mix of grey and hazel, something that I've only seen in my own reflection.

My face sunk into the Grey's chest, cold and barren, yet fragile. So fragile that I accidentally broke open the skin to reveal a nest of spiders that crawled over my face. But I'm too shocked. The Grey's nails dug into my back, bringing a new millisecond sensation of pain and-

It's snowing. Each flake floated down to the canvas precisely, yet delicately. I wonder if I can catch one with my tongue without it dissolving.

My eyes are heavy. My body sways like an uneven pendulum. I can fall asleep for a whole day, maybe. I'll dream about something warm and pleasant. The diner called out to me. I can sleep there for as long as I want.

Before I entered the diner, a tiny dot sat out in the distance. I walked over closer, curious. The closer I approached, the dot defined itself as a woman.

I now stood a foot away from her, ankles deep in snow, where she continued looking at the sky. She was wearing a uniform that seemed to coincide with the palette of the diner.

"Just a little longer," A gravelly voice from behind me said. I turned back and found no one.

"Did you say something?" the woman asked.

I shook my head and replied, “No, nothing, I just...I’m so sorry for creeping up on you, I wanted to make sure you were alright.”

“Yeah. I guess. I work at that diner. And it sucks.”

“That bad to sit in the cold?”

“Unless they want chump change they’ll never happily spend, no sane person wants to be working this late at night of their own free will.”

“I think I understand,” I don’t at the moment. And I should be grateful, although I don’t know for what reason. To be alive, I suppose.

I smiled, wiping away some sudden, unexpected tears, “Sorry. I’m gonna head inside. You take care of yourself, and I wish all the best for your family.”

“How kind of you. Your mom raised you well.”

What was that? The sudden change in temperature caused my knees to nearly buckle down. I slipped on the first step up to the diner entrance, oblivious to the black ice.

I needed to hurry. The entrance door iced shut. Frost painted over the glass surface, spreading like an infection. I turned to an elderly man sitting in a booth.

I’ve...I’ve seen this man before. No, more than that. We’ve met several times in this diner. His name is Rod. I stepped over to the man, trying to catch a good look at his face. He remained stoic; his eyes locked to the table. “Excuse me,” I called to him, “Can you find me the time please?”

The man looked up. “It’s 10:15.”

A shock relayed to the synapses of my brain, connecting the dots. His name was Rod. At times I called myself Rick. Rod...Rick. I sat down at the booth. “Roderick.”

The elder gasped but quickly regained his composure. “It’s...always 10:15 here, isn’t it?”

“Roderick...we’re”-

The elder pulled out a photo. A photo I had lost so many years ago. Of...my mother and myself. Me, holding the bright red figure that she won for me at the carnival game. “I went through so much to bring this photo back. I needed to see her again.”

“This...this is inconceivable. How did you...?”

My elder self pulled out another item from his pocket. A piece of brown folded paper.

Unfolding it, it read: “In Time, that is where I can find it. She was gone too soon. I can’t bring back her body, but a photo. That photo is all I need.”

“Roderick...” my elder self replied, “Shocavsky.”

“Roderick Shocavsky,” we said in synchronization. I continued, “We’re professors in quantum physics. You found a way...didn’t you?”

Elder Roderick nodded. “My memory of her was getting so fuzzy. I was alone after having a family?” he scratched his head, “Was it that? But I needed this. This photo.”

“But we got more than that. Trapped in our own station, is that correct?”

“But she’s here. Some loops, she’s friendly. Others, she thinks I’m a freak. But at least I get to be with her alive.”

“You understand,” I replied, “You understand that we cannot be in here forever. *We* will die. *We* will lose our lives here.”

The elder Rod gritted his teeth. The window beside us cracked into a jagged Y-shaped line. “I tried so hard to remember her.”

I’m in this booth where the cushion is beginning to soften like the marshmallow plushness of a fine cotton mattress. And my clothes, like warm comforters as a cold breeze overcame me. “You feel it too, right? This heavy sleepiness.”

Flashes of the Grey shocked me fully awake again. 3 separate frames, all chronologically showing it entering through the door and sliding through. I snatched the photo from elder Rod.

“NO!” he screamed, “I TRIED TOO HARD FOR THAT PHOTO.”

Before I could reach my other arm to tear the photo, my body is instantly restrained to the seat, binding deeper into the cushion material. All my movement in my upper torso halted. Even my head was firmly locked in place.

What I could see as I struggled to look down were multiple arms of The Grey protruding out of the seats wrapped around me. Their nails continue to embed their way into my flesh, cracking open new wounds. I screamed, in shrill terror. Elder Rod

continued staring at me, not uttering a word. His brow is lowered, his gaze sharp like a brand-new arrowhead. I'm trying to save him, to save us, but he utterly despises me.

I need to make a bluff. "Rod! If you let me die, you won't exist. Do you really want that?!"

The Elder Rod stared for a minute, eyes blank like a deer. Then he cackled, throwing himself back into the air. "You think you can fool me with that? ME?!" Elder Rod shuffled through his pocket. And out came a lighter. Ordinary, plastic, black. He held it straight in front of me. "I thought I've made funny jokes. I guess that's still true."

"What...Rod. Roderick, no, NO." He snatched the photo back and took it in his breast pocket. Then, he flicked the lighter and extended the flame towards me.

"I'll start slow."

The Grey's face emerged to my left, flashing the same decrepit smile. The flames branched out across my skin. I shrieked in pain. Fuck, FUCK, FUCK! Each spark was multiple molten lava needles poking into my skin and then burrowing down until it broke my face apart into mush.

I'm going to die. I can't move, and my entire body is numbing to the pain. My consciousness is fading. The flames are reaching to my eye.

My legs. My legs are still free. I jolted my lower body, rocking the table from underneath. Elder Rod screamed, losing his grip of the lighter. In a split second, the flame, still alit, landed onto Elder Rod's chest. Somehow, like magic, the fire combusted, enveloping Elder Rod's body into a maelstrom of fire.

The fabrics of his clothing melded onto the table. The flesh of his body began melting downward, like wet paint losing its entire composition. When it reached to the bones, the whiteness caramelized to brown, then to brittle black.

In an instant, I'm sitting on a wooden chair in a daylit room. Freed by my restraints. In front of me, my computer. To the side, reports that I have to grade. The first quantum physics test of the semester, if I'm not mistaken.

At the moment I landed back onto my chair, all the memories returned. Blank photo frames stacked by the doorway, each with some stock photos. I had gotten these frames

for the day I would start a family, but that was the thing. I was wrong back in the bubble. I didn't have a family.

It could be deduced that my memories melded into an alternate version of myself. But that didn't matter. At this point, I was alone. Back then, in the past, my mother was the one that kept me company. Friends came and went, as did former lovers. Up until I left, she was there to support me. My only family, gone.

My mind lingered back to the photo. That photo I carelessly lost years ago, before even her terminal diagnosis was an unsure possibility. If I could turn it all back. Maybe...maybe I can do right what my other future couldn't accomplish.