

# Making Time

by J. E. Cammon

Sleep left him like a fragmenting illusion. Suddenly, he was awake, like something pressing but fleeting had awoken him. Once awake, though, all he had was silence and stillness. His pulse quickened, his eyes opened, and memories shuffled into sensible order. He groaned. Today was the one day of all days Oliver couldn't go back to sleep.

"Shall I start your day, sir?" a gentle, androgynous voice at pre-set volume, spoke. Circuits and scripts were responding to his physiological indicators of wakefulness and lucidity.

"Sure," Oliver replied. "Why not?"

"Also, you have messages," his bedroom replied. "Shall I play them?" Oliver sat up forcefully, glancing just the once at the other side of the bed, still vacant.

"Go." There were a great many speakers in the room, but there were even more eyes, little black gems used to record and display. Most people forgot they were there, but if one looked, they could be found almost everywhere. Six such, some in the ceiling, some in the floor, swiveled and projected soft light. It all coalesced into a holographic image of a small girl in pigtails at the foot of Oliver's bed, holding up a congratulatory sign. She was wearing a yellow sun dress and toothy grin.

"This is Marley Jansen from Kenneth Meade Elementary," the little girl said, her eyes reading cue cards Oliver couldn't see. "Wishing Captain Oliver Butler a safe and successful test flight," and then she giggled awkwardly.

"Pause," Oliver interrupted, and likewise the image froze. "How many like these are there?"

"Hundreds." Oliver's eye twitched in searching before he realized he wasn't wearing his lenses. Intuitively, his home

replied to his unasked question. "The time is 0746."

"Thanks," Oliver said, rising from the covers. With a dismissive gesture, he sent the image of the little girl's production back from whence it came. Today was the one day of all days Oliver couldn't be late.

He washed lazily and rinsed liberally. By the time he got around to putting his lenses in, settling the little discs on his eyeballs, another hundred messages had come through. The dynamic interface was laid out at the edges of his vision, reacting to his focus. While preparing his breakfast, he sorted through the long list of correspondences while listening to an audio feed.

"We'll be providing you today with partly cloudy skies for those cool breaks from the scorching summer sun. Some of you may even be lucky enough to see Captain Butler on his trip around the Ring. Good luck, Captain, from all of us here at Meteorologics, where we make weather... for you."

Oliver went through the list of messages twice, the second time expanding it onto a data pad while he ate. It had all the nutrition he'd need for hours, and tasted like French toast.

"There are no new messages from Ms. Hill," his house said to him. Oliver paused, then the thought occurred to him that it was the wrong day to be angry with technology. He glanced up at his ceiling as if he could see through it, past his bedroom, his neighbors' apartments, past the sky.

"Play the feed from last night," Oliver said, sitting the pad down. Before his eye was displayed the black and green imaging of a lightless scanning of his bedroom. "Adjust to v-light." The shades within the image changed, introducing different pigments and color textures. Suddenly, it was as if he were watching himself sleep during the day. He witnessed another restless night of tossing and turning, mumbling unintelligible phrases, and clutching at unused pillows. "Send it to Mission, let them decide what to give the Network," he

said. He stood up with a mind to dress.

“Sir, your food.” Oliver turned and mechanically shoveled the remainder into his mouth and chewed while walking. He didn't put any great thought into his wardrobe, imagining how many times he was going to change clothes later. He ended up in something casual, as if he might run, but sandals, as if he wouldn't. His black box he fetched from the charger near the front door. Flipping the device open, he checked his messages once again, set the timer for the alarm activation of his apartment, took note of the local temperature, and doubled-checked the time. Everything seemed set.

When he stepped out of his front door, the car from Mission was already pulling up. Invisible hands opened the passenger side for him and closed it back once he was seated.

“Morning, Captain,” a voice said through the car's speakers. Instantly, Oliver put a face to the voice.

“Morning, Dot,” he replied.

“Glad to see you're appearing in better spirits,” Doris said. He couldn't see her, but he could hear in her voice that her medical technician hat was on tight this morning. He imagined her sitting behind a desk at Mission, looking at charts detailing his blood pressure and bowel movements. “How are you feeling?”

“Good enough for today,” he said. “I was thinking I'd do the bit for the Net on the way there, maybe show the kids what the inside of a car looks like,” he changed the subject. The car pulled away from the curb and smoothly rolled toward the launch pad.

“Okay then,” Doris said. “We'll keep monitoring you from here. And if there's any change,”

“I'll be sure to let you know,” he interrupted her. He looked from one small, black eye on the car's dashboard to one just inside the doorway. Oliver cleared his throat and rehearsed the girl's smile from the elementary school. “Hello,

**my name is Captain Oliver Butler and today I'm going on a journey. You might have already heard though, from your parents, children, teachers, and co-workers. I won't be going far, but I will be going fast," he said. He went through the talking points at a practiced pace, aiming for enough to inform but not so much to bore. The purpose of the coverage of the event, the scrutiny of his life, was to garner publicity, which was to say popularity. Science could not advance if the lay man did not crave the benefits to be reaped, someone had said of the newest century. It only made sense that certain sacrifices had to be made.**

**"That was good," Doris said when he was done. "We'll take it and edit it down so it will be viewable along with the primary launch."**

**"How's everyone there?" Oliver asked.**

**"Anxious, nervous," she replied honestly. She didn't have to say how much was riding on their attempt. "How about yourself, Captain? I saw your sleep footage,"**

**"No more anxious or nervous than the next guy, except there really isn't a next guy," he said, slouching down in his chair. "See you in a bit," and manually closed transmissions from the car. "ETA to destination?" he asked the vehicle.**

**"Forty-six minutes," it replied in a higher, slightly louder voice to match the one from his apartment.**

**"Alert me ten minutes before arrival," he said, and leaned his head back.**

**Thirty six minutes later he was being alerted both by his personal communications and those of the car at the same time. Oliver jerked awake, staring into the indicator of an incoming call.**

**"We are ten minutes from our destination," the car said.**

**"Thanks," he replied, reaching into a pocket to tap acceptance of the other communication into his box. The slim black device overrode the car's systems, then an image of his**

**mother sitting on a beach filled his vision. "Hey, Mom."**

**"Oliver, I'm sorry I didn't call earlier," she said. "The time difference, you know."**

**"It's okay. You caught me before I had to hand over my box, so it's fine. How are you?" He waved his hand experimentally. She wasn't blind, just unused to the dual interface.**

**"I'm fine. I just wanted to say I'm proud of you. And so is your father, looking down."**

**"Right. Thanks, Mom," he said. He was sure she didn't have her visual display activated, but he still kept his face neutral and his head from shaking.**

**"I still don't see what the reason for all this is, though," she said, her voice dropping.**

**"I told you. I was one of the chief engineers, so when they decided to advance to live piloting, I was picked from a short list. It's an honor." He was repeating himself.**

**"Why couldn't they just use a monkey, then?"**

**"Isn't that what I just said?" he joked. Oliver watched his mother screw up her face just like she would for his father.**

**"Oliver," her voice warned. Then it dropped again in volume. "You know all this Reality business is why she left."**

**"It was really good to hear from you, Mom," Oliver said. "I'm getting close, though, so I have to go. I love you," he said. He severed the connection, and went to listening to the wheels roll smoothly down the road. The cement paths were rare, reserved for military traffic and emergency vehicles. The scant few that remained weaved around and under the populated places like mid-air rivers. Every now and then, he could see the launch pad and the shuttle between glass spires, but they were still minutes away. He couldn't decide if he wanted the car to go faster or turn completely around.**

**Soon enough though his mind was lulled into**

**inactivity by routine. After exiting the car there were the checkpoints, where he surrendered his belongings and signed his life away for the last time. After that was the undressing and redressing into the shielded clothing he would wear while they filled his body full of data-recording material and then tested the little machines they pumped into his blood. He was scanned from head to toe, inside and out. After that he undressed and redressed into the suit he would wear while in the shuttle. The little black eyes were a constant, as were the speakers asking him questions. He heard the word nominal several dozen times, saw green lights. Doors were opened that led to tight hallways. Yellow and black stripes told him where to go.**

**Sitting in the cockpit alone, Oliver considered taking another nap. Beyond the plastic of his helmet was the polymer of the windshield. At that height he could clearly make out the Ring. He had never seen Saturn's rings up close, but was told Earth's manmade one looked something like them. After going there and studying the asteroid belts, it was decided to test faster and faster space flight in earnest. The faster they could go, the farther they could go, was the thought. It all made sense on study boards. None of those numbers and variables ever included people, though.**

**Oliver could remember old footage of space launches when he was a kid, all the thunder and smoke. That math had been as much of a rush as the event itself for him. The push and pull between how much energy was needed to escape the atmosphere versus the weight of the fuel to create the energy and the containers to hold it. In those terms, he could understand how some people found ballet interesting. Oliver was sitting on approximately the same amount of mass, but very little of it accounted for fuel, he knew. The vast majority of it was parts needed for maintenance on the ring. The rest was a very special shuttle pod, and him.**

**Someone in his ear called out contact. A low hum**

started in Oliver's ears and when it descended in frequency until it couldn't be heard, he felt the weightlessness of the anti-gravity field subsume him and the entire ship. To either side of the vessel, rows and rows of powerful magnets set into the launch towers rotated into view, glowing with electrical charge.

“Like an egg in a sling-shot,” Oliver mumbled, gripping the armrests of his chair. He'd seen newer footage of the modern space launches, too, while he had completed his advanced programs. Contrary to the ones of the previous century, the newer ones appeared a bit crude, like a giant throwing a plastic airplane into space. He remembered the protests, the reaction people had based on sight alone. It had all made sense on the board. The math was even uploaded so the public could view it. It had occurred to Oliver even back then that sometimes there was just no accounting for people's feelings.

Oliver focused on the ring, how against the blue morning sky it appeared like sparkling jewelry submerged in ocean water, and then, after liftoff, in a manner of moments the blue turned dark but the ring became more and more visible, like the ocean floor turned out to be pitch black sand filled with diamonds.

“Mission Command, this is the Ring, we have the package in sight,” a familiar voice said. Oliver smiled, finally releasing his grip on the arm rests.

“Roger that, Earth Ring. Mission Command out. Good luck, Captain Butler.”

Oliver's speed slowed as the world tried pulling him back. The ship crossed the invisible barrier with just enough speed to coast, like being delivered into cautious hands. Likewise, the operation shifted into its second phase.

“Hard to believe people are still saying that, isn't it?” the familiar voice asked. “I've always been partial to 'good math,' personally. So you ready to get scrambled?” Oliver had

known Diana for so long they had arguments about who got their sense of humor from whom.

“Good morning to you, too,” Oliver said.

The docking was smooth, if tedious. Oliver floated from his chair to the door that would lead him out of the ship and onto his home away from home. Thankfully, someone was already on the other side twisting the mechanism open. Diana was the first face he saw, and was glad for it. She had procured functional second place in the guinea pig contest, which meant she was running the show for the final phase. For the publicity of the event, she hadn't quite gone make-up and hair-bun, but there was eyeliner and a ponytail. She smiled when she saw him, reaching a hand out to shake his own, then yanked him through the doorway. Like old times, they floated and talked.

“Is everything ready?” Oliver asked. Diana looked over at him and frowned.

“Would you be here if it wasn't?” she asked. “Who's in charge up here, anyway?”

“You would be, sir. Ma'am. Madame,” Oliver said, laughing.

“I think the voting was rigged, just so you know,” she quipped. Then she puffed up her face and dropped her voice like she was imitating someone. “The very first human individual to travel faster than light must have a penis,” she said.

“Well that doesn't make any sense,” Oliver retorted, “if that was the case you would've certainly been picked over me.” Diana did not reply, though she did smile. At a four-way intersection, they paused before parting.

“Welcome aboard, Captain Butler, glad to have you,” she said, resuming an official tone.

“Just glad to be had, ma'am,” he said. Both of them rigidly saluted each other and then chuckled. Diana floated forward and Oliver turned right. It only took ten minutes to

**get the suit off, but another twenty were consumed in tests. Some were the same before the Earth launch, and others were new. Oliver was poked and prodded and lathered again. Undressed and redressed. During the months of planning, he had been given the choice as to whether all of the phases and procedures would happen on the same day, or if he wanted to spend some time between steps. He had voted to get it all done as quickly as possible then, and he was starting to regret it now.**

**What he wore to the pod was the least cumbersome but most restrictive suit yet. It was stiff and unyielding because of protective bits sewn beneath shielding textiles.**

**Fortunately, little walking needed to be affected. After being both zipped and sealed, he was more or less thrown like an arrow into the pod boarding area from the dressing room. Everything, including the pod itself, was lab coat white from the floor to the paneling to the consoles. This was a room he had only seen in passing. Oliver became more familiar as he had little to do but wait while the tiny, ovoid vessel was prepped. He did turn his head slightly to look at the sliding doorway that led out into the ring proper. He was intimately familiar with that area, the 45,000 kilometer tube circling the exosphere of the planet. It had been constructed in stages over two decades, the 11th wonder of the world. Oliver was proud to have had a part in it. Engines fit onto space ships had been built and tested in the ring, and he was about to be strapped to the latest model in the hopes of breaking yet more barriers.**

**With every step of the process everything became that much more final. Once he was seated, there was no getting up, wedged in place as he was. Once the cockpit was sealed closed around him, there was no leaving the pod. Additional safety precautions were magnetically sealed into place once the pod canopy was closed. Oliver replied to all the thumbs up in kind, but his mind was on other things.**

**“Testing, testing,” hearing Diana's voice calmed him down some.**

**“Hey,” he said, his voice sounding strange in his ears.**

**“I'm going to need you to calm down, buddy, your heart rate is a little high.”**

**“I cannot imagine that happening.”**

**“Well, if you don't, then I can't read you this message I got from your dead father.”**

**“What?” Oliver heard himself say.**

**“Wow, I totally got you,” she said, chuckling.**

**“Wouldn't be too far-fetched though, would it? What used to be science fiction, now is just science,” she said. Oliver frowned at her words. He couldn't have imagined it, but he had calmed down. Admittedly, he did wonder a bit at what his father might have said. As he wondered, he realized the nervous feelings were still there, but instead, it was as if he were beside them, rather than sitting in them. “Last chance to abort, Olly,” Diana said. There was something in her voice he couldn't quite place.**

**“I came all the way here,” he replied in his bravest tone. “Might as well ride the ride.”**

**Diana said nothing, like an official mission command operator would. She was an engineer, like he was. Asking him if he wanted to back out was a courtesy. In reality, he was a monkey, the guinea pig. The people doing the real work were rooms away, making sure the systems were working and the instruments were performing. At its barest, the experiment was going to take a team to implement. In its simplest terms, Oliver's part of the plan was to sit in a chair and stay conscious.**

**A smooth mechanism slid his pod out of the room through the opening doors. The tube beyond resembled an archaic subway tunnel. The tracks were on the outermost edge, and sitting on them was the new engine. Oliver couldn't see all of it, but the antique locomotive metaphors kept**

occurring to him. Stripped of its smooth housing, the inner workings of the giant machine were exposed. His pod was fit snugly to the front of the engine trolley by huge, automated arms.

"Pod, this is the Ring, t-minus one minute to count down," Diana said.

"Roger that," he said. He wanted to say more, to joke, but found his voice dry. Oliver closed his eyes, figuring there wouldn't be anything to see, even after the minute. He concentrated on his breathing, deeply and evenly.

"10," Diana said. Oliver opened his eyes forcefully, listening to each of the numbers. There wouldn't be anything to see, but no one knew that for sure. Oliver thought that maybe that was the part of the point.

When she got to 1, the engine fired and Oliver shot off through the ring. The initial speed, he knew, was only very, very fast. They had all felt it made the most sense to start at a slower speed, then to creep up. A thousand things suddenly occurred to Oliver, like why there were no little black eyes in the pod. People entertained themselves by watching each other. Most of the world had spent months watching him live his life, day in, day out. The life and times of Oliver Butler. But no one could see him now. Right then, he wanted them all to see him.

He had no instrumentation of his own to read. He was just the guinea pig, but he could feel the engine propelling him accelerate. Faster, and faster, and faster. Oliver wracked his brain about what Einstein had said, and what the people who had disproved him had said. He was expecting a bright light. He suddenly realized, as he repeatedly circumnavigated the world, he was expecting to die.

It took him opening his eyes to realize that they were closed in the first place. He thought that maybe he was still in the pod, but it was difficult to confirm. He couldn't hear anything, or feel anything, and all he could see was darkness.

Oliver imagined that what he was seeing was space, even though there were no stars. His mind conjured up scenarios of the speed causing the engine trolley to create enough friction to burrow a hole in the ring. He imagined himself in a million pieces hurtling in diverse vectors in the general direction of Mars. He imagined all the things he never got to do, and desperately craved to experience. The peace of the nothingness was overwhelmed by the anxiety of an infinite prison. Oliver cried out for confirmation of life.

Then someone slapped him.

"Olly," someone yelled. He tried putting a hand up to defend himself groggily. "Oliver. Captain Butler can you hear me?"

"Di?" his eyes were open but his vision was blurry. Everything was swimming.

"Yeah, buddy. Okay, he's alive," she said, and the fuzzy image of her leaned back. He thought she maybe wiped her face. "Get him out of that thing. The Captain has earned himself some proper rest." Oliver nodded, or maybe just slumped. Hands were on him, lifting him up and carrying him away. He tried to move his legs but couldn't feel them. He was being led down a blurry hallway of bright light. Oliver felt like he hadn't slept in days. He had the vague impression of being washed, sparsely clothed, and placed in a bed. Sometime during all of it, the numbness was replaced by a disturbing tingle all throughout his body, but he was unconscious again before he could puzzle any of it out.

Sleep left him like a fragmenting illusion. Oliver was painfully sore and stiff.

"Good evening," Diana said.

Oliver groaned in reply.

"Yeah, and you look that bad, too," she added. "Here, I have something for you to drink. Warm and tasty." He felt a straw being pushed at his lips. He parted for it and then suckled. The warm soup hitting his stomach made him realize

how empty it was. "No need to flatter the cook," Diana said. Oliver swallowed and then cleared his throat. He opened his eyes to find his vision working again. Diana's dirty blonde hair was down, and floating around her face. She was also wearing sleeping clothes. He felt drained. It seemed to require almost all of his energy just to speak.

"How're the numbers?" he mumbled. Diana chuckled and then shrugged, looking down at her feet. She pushed gently against the ceiling to keep herself in place.

"They're numbers," she said quietly. Oliver stirred himself, and when he moved his limbs he found that he was in a restraining hammock.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"If you're looking for bearings, you need to ask about the day," she said. Oliver paused to let that process. "You were out for a week, hence the broth," she said and shook the container. "Mission would like you down planet-side as soon as you're able. They've been asking about the data, and would prefer a face to face. The med-techs say you should be fine to fly."

"Right," he said, feeling more active and aware by the moment. "Gimme the rest of that," he said. She didn't surrender the soup, but she did feed it to him. He felt a little ridiculous drinking like a baby. That thought made him frown. "Did I crap myself?" Diana rolled her eyes like she was doing some math.

"In the pod, yes, but since getting you out, things have been... slow," she said. Oliver searched her face. It didn't sound like one of her typical jokes. "Yeah, now imagine how curious everyone else is." She shook her head. "You thought you were getting grilled before. Glad I'm not you," she said and reached forward to pat him on the shoulder. She looked into his face. "But I am glad that you're back." She leaned forward even further and Oliver feared the worst. Feared that Sara had been right all along. Diana's lips landed on his

forehead, though, and quickly after that she was floating to the exit. Oliver watched her go, silent.

Even after a day of thinking, he still had nothing when he met up with her to head back to the world. Her hair was tied back into a pony tail again and his limbs were all working normally. The return shuttle was quiet, though, until Diana spoke.

"Try not to stink this one up," she said half-heartedly, and Oliver had no comeback. Neither of them were engaged in the present moment.

Re-entry took minutes and the trip to Command not much more than that. Within the hour they were sitting in front of the powers that were. People who had paid money and people who had spent money. And really, only he was sitting. Diana presented the findings. Oliver watched, as much a spectator as the grim-faced board of officious people. He had thought so in the beginning, but their faces confirmed that something had gone wrong.

"At two minutes, thirty-seven seconds of the trial, while Captain Butler was passing through the Georgia segment of the Ring, we lost contact," Diana said, which made Oliver raise his head. "Seventeen seconds later, when communication with Captain Butler appeared ineffective we stopped the trial, reducing output of the drive to zero, and applying braking." Oliver stared from Diana to the data she was presenting, a large projection filled with numbers. The first and only line of query after the presentation was over concerned those seventeen seconds. Unfortunately, Diana did not have the answer. Oliver realized why everyone had wanted them back at Mission. That's when every face in the room turned to him.

"I-I don't know," he stammered, then more quietly, "I thought I was dead." Over the next hour, they pulled answers out of him, vague, incomplete, confusing answers. Over the hour following that, he was tested again, in the same way that

he had been before leaving Earth. Much like on Diana's end, the monitoring equipment he had been injected with had transmitted from the ring to Earth every heartbeat and inhalation he had experienced except for those same seventeen seconds. Protocol being what it was, if contact with the subject was lost, it only made sense to shut the experiment down, but it hadn't been so simple. So far as everyone's data was concerned, Oliver Butler hadn't existed for that span. His heart hadn't stopped beating. For the duration, he hadn't a heart at all. What's more, every other piece of machinery that had reporting technology attached had performed nominally. The speed of the engine, the pressure of the fuel, the temperature of the tubing. There were numbers to read for that handful of time from everywhere except from him. Oliver was bounced around the massive facility at Mission Command until someone told him to go home, and he was a glad for it.

Two things were likely to happen. The first was that the project would be scrapped. He had been gone for only a moment, but on a larger scale, ships couldn't be retrofit with technology that would kill people, or worse. The second was that the little data they did have would be studied and hypothesized on for years. Either way, it was over for Oliver Butler, who had failed without ever knowing what success even looked like. It was time to go back, to what, he had no idea.

He didn't sleep in the car, not because he wasn't tired but because he had apparently slept for an entire week, and possibly an additional seventeen seconds. He felt like he had already lost enough time. Halfway home, the car itself alerted him.

"Incoming connection from Sara Hill," it said. Oliver looked at the dashboard, watched the steering wheel turn back and forth for a moment.

"Put it through," he blurted. He fumbled with his

things, remembering at the last minute he hadn't put his lenses back in or even turned on his box. An image was projected into the space above his knees. "Sara,"

"What happened, Oliver?" she asked. "I've been reaching out since Tuesday and no one would tell me anything. Updates weren't on any of the feeds, and I," she paused.

"You look great," he said. He couldn't say if he was trying to stall or not.

"What?" she wiped her face with the back of her hand. He glimpsed the sparkle of a familiar crystal. Oliver frowned.

"You know, it's just been so long. Where are you?" he asked.

"Honey," she said, staring intently. "I'm at home. Oliver, are you okay?" He could see the furniture of his kitchen behind her, the color of the cabinets and the level of the lighting. All easy to change, custom to choose. She was in his apartment, their apartment. "When will you be home?" she asked.

"Soon," he said, leaning forward. "I'll be there soon. Will you stay?" he asked.

"Of course, Oliver. I'll see you when you get here. I love you," she said. Sara kissed her fingers, like always, and held the hand up in the air.

"I love you, too," Oliver said, and kissed her hand. After the communication was terminated, Oliver leaned back in his chair. Once, he had been at a guest lecture from one of the most brilliant scientists in the entire world. She had covered the stupidity of intelligence, and vice versa, the ideas that it took a foolish person to believe they had come to the end of any kind of understanding, and wisdom was the recognition that there was still much more to learn. Oliver only devoted a few minutes concentration on that, and spent the rest of his time drafting apologetic missives in his mind.

His reaction to the car pulling to a stop and the door

swinging open was physical to match the previous moments of introspection. He vaulted the stairs and threw the door open. He jogged down the front hallway, his head turning. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs when he saw her coming down and stopped halfway. She had a smile on her face with her hands behind her back.

“Sara,” he said, and started walking up slowly.

“I've got a surprise for you,” she said melodically.

“Well, actually two surprises, but you have to pick one.” There was more to her explanation but he didn't care. He kissed her softly at first, like easing into a dream, then seized her in his arms. It felt like right then he could make up for lost time.

“I'm so sorry all of this happened,” he said.

“Volunteering for the experiment, putting our lives on display, and I just want you to know that nothing ever happened between me and Di,” he explained.

“What're you talking about?” Sara asked. “I agreed, remember?” It was like his ears weren't working.

“What?” he said. Sara put her wrists behind his neck to pull his face in.

“We talked about it, and we decided that if it was that important to you, we'd go for it, no matter what,” she said, the smile creeping back onto her face, “and then after,” and she showed him her hands. On the palm of one was a splash of yellow color and on the other was a lime green. “I know some parents like pink and blue, but I was just reading that gender neutral is chic again.” Oliver stared into her face. “Do you not like them? Is something wrong?” she asked. Oliver shook his head, slowly, very slowly, but only at first.

“No,” he said. “No, not at all. I was just turned around, a little confused.” He looked at her hands, held her wrists and pushed her palms to his face. Metal against his stubble made Oliver pause. He used his eyes for confirmation, turning her hand over to look at the ring. He knew it, its colors and qualities, just like he knew where he had left it a week ago, in

**the same place it had been since she left sixteen months previous.**

**"A little confused," Sara prompted. Oliver had thought of a dozen different ways in the past hour for how to make up for lost time. Over the past months he had wondered about if it were possible or not to rewind time to rectify past mistakes. He'd spent his life questioning, defining what was possible and what wasn't.**

**"Yeah," he said, looking into her face. She was blurring, but he wasn't going to let go of her so he could wipe his tears.**

**"But a little confusion is alright, though."**

