

The Time Traveler

by Todd Maupin

I am a time traveler. Stop right there. I know what you are thinking. It's not that. Nope. I don't mean to disappoint you, especially when life already does so much of that. My work is not that sexy and glamorous kind of time travel that you see in the movies with Deloreans and phone booths. And have you ever seen a Delorean that was not fitted with a flux capacitor? Ugly is too kind a word.

My work is simpler, but very precise and intentional. I travel for the sake of time, to change time. My friends have accused me of sensationalizing my profession, and maybe I do that. You are still reading, though, so, forgive my flair for the dramatic.

Here it is without a filter. I set clocks. Analog clocks, digital clocks, watches, clocks on microwaves, ovens, and VCRs - for those 6 people on the planet who still have and use a VCR....

Hang on. Someone is calling me. I'll be right back.

Okay, where was I? Oh yes. For those 5 people on the planet who still have and use a VCR. That was Mrs. Weatherby calling me just now to tell me she got rid of her VCR. You will probably question the continuity of this anecdote later, and that's okay. No one is perfect. Not even you.

The list goes on.... Clocks in cars, boats, and any sort of vehicle. I tend to steer clear of atomic clocks, especially since I started to lose my hair up top and down in the crucial area for the nuclear family.

Digital clocks shook my industry, my profession, but we persisted. This was before my time - ha ha ha - but I heard about it. Thankfully, manufacturers all but guaranteed our livelihood by including convoluted instructions for the purpose of maneuvering labyrinthian

settings to stop that infernal 12:00 from flashing and blinking mockingly. And no battery backup meant repeat business. A lot of it.

Computers. Meh. They self-regulate, correct their own clocks. That's fine. The system tray is a hub of a litany of other problems. I don't need that in my life. Life is too short. Time waits for no one. Not even those it needs.

Mobile phones were another hurdle. 3G, 4G, 5G... Gee whiz. Even before they were smart, mobile phones of all types always just knew what time it was. People depend on them for everything else. Why not time too?

Through all of these challenges and obstacles, we persevered. Time, in some capacity, even without a flux capacitor, needed to be set, corrected, navigated. and regulated. Business was not exactly booming, but it was steady. You are waiting for the "but," aren't you? Things are about to change. I can feel it.

When they finally repealed daylight savings time, my livelihood was more than threatened: it toppled precariously. No longer was it necessary for me and my colleagues to travel around the country - except for Arizona, Hawaii, and parts of Indiana. Our services and expertise for the average clock-watching tax-paying (or not) world citizen became an afterthought.

Even a broken clock is correct twice each day. Even a working clock had to be reset twice each year. But not anymore. There's your "but." Was it all that you hoped, seeing my hopes dashed like this?

Of course, our services had never been used by everyone. Our clientele represented more of a niche market, and this was constantly shrinking. Abolishing the time change was the final nail in the metaphor. Our camel's back was to the wall. The last straw.

As for my profession, we never had a guild, a union, or some official organization with a treasurer or annual dues. However, we were fairly close-knit. If there had been a newsletter, I probably would have subscribed to it. I believe that most of us would have. Maybe there would have even been an article warning all of us about the impending legislation. "Is Everyone Clocking What World Leaders Are Planning?" This would have been my title for it, but no one asked me for the writing on the wall.

My financial situation is dismal. The others in my profession may be more or less fortunate. If I had to label my status, I would call it "marginally destitute." Some weeks are lean. Other weeks are leaner. My income is less than inconsistent. Certainly not something you could set your watch by... although this is my job, not yours.

At the height of my livelihood, the number you used to call to learn the time used to call me - now everything is streamlined and it just calls to taunt me. "It is now." And then it tells me the weather. Like I care about that. I just look at my phone for this like everyone else. The animated snowfall is mesmerizing, I do admit.

So there I was in my ramshackle apartment. I was also shivering because it was cold in there due to my skimping on the heat. Luckily, something happened that would spare you further exposition. Forgive me if I have not adequately set the scene so far. My specialty is setting, well, you know.

I let them knock twice at the door before I shuffled over to answer it. Describing it now, I may seem non-plussed about it, but it was startling when I opened the door. It was me. Two more of me to be exact. One of me was younger, while the other me was older.

I let us in. I was not paying to heat the entire hallway. I was barely paying to heat my own place. Also, I figured that more of me in the apartment would generate more heat.

“Dustin, I am here from the future,” the older me announced. The younger me nodded.

“And I suppose you must be from the past?” I asked, glancing at the younger me.

“No, I am from the future too,” the younger me revealed. We will call him Dusty just to simplify matters.

“Of course you are,” I replied. Of course, I did not believe any of this. Time travel was impossible. Stephen Hawking or that other guy with the crazy hair who invented lightbulbs taught us all that.

The older me stepped forward. We will call him Dustbin to keep the narrative tidier. “Dustin, we know that all of this must be difficult to accept. I remember in fact how I felt in your shoes in this very moment.” He looked down. “I remember those shoes too.”

I looked at Dusty. “What about you? Do you remember this too?” I asked him.

He shrugged. “Sort of, but not really,” he said in a voice that sounded like mine used to sound.

“Isn't this creating some sort of time paradox?” I asked, almost fearing that vocalizing it would cause the fabric of time to tear.

“No, that would only happen if we change something we are not supposed to change,” Dustbin explained. He seemed to be losing patience with me. My patience had been wearing thin so I could only imagine this continued as I aged. I was more dismayed about his (my!) thinning hair.

“But are we supposed to change anything?” I probed. The space time continuum did not gauge matters subjectively, so far as I knew.

“Well, no. This has already happened. We are just circling back to complete the loop,” Dusty replied. He and Dustbin were alternating lines, like they were good cop, bad cop. Or time cop, time cop. Splitting lines painfully: Van Damme style.

“Come with us if you want to live,” Dustbin stated, the gravity of his words an apparent attempt to terminate my hesitation. T2, Brutus?

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, fine. Let's roll. Let me just grab my jacket. I left some chicken out to defrost. Should I put that back in the fridge or is my apartment going to be destroyed anyway?”

Dusty and Dustbin looked at each other. They really looked like each other when they did this. And like me. “Is it a chicken breast?” Dusty wanted to know.

Before I could comment on the philosophical ridiculousness of his question, Dustbin waved me off. Both of me. “We have to go now. They are expecting us.”

I had my reservations about this whole thing, but apparently, we had reservations to be somewhere too.

We filed out of the apartment in order of seniority. Jacket in hand, I locked the door behind us. While we waited for the elevator, there was an awkward silence. Each of me was wrapped up in my own thoughts, knowing what the others were thinking. At least this was what I thought at the time.

The elevator ride down to the lobby and exit from it happened as these journeys always do without anything notable to recall. Outside the building, I continued looking over my shoulder at the building as

we walked away from it, led by Dustbin and Dusty walking side by side in front and me in the rear.

One of me, maybe both finally noticed what I was doing. "Oh. I want to see if an asteroid hits the building, or a jet engine, a burned up satellite, or it is stormed by armed men, or maybe just spontaneously explodes," I volunteered an explanation, gesturing back at the building.

"No, nothing like that. Don't worry," Dusty reassured me. Dustbin glared at him sternly.

Once my building was out of sight, I settled into the walk and followed my other selves to wherever we were headed. I had thought that maybe we would all pile into a cargo van, but these other versions of me seemed to be living on a budget too. We arrived at the Monroe Square metro stop and filed through the turnstiles. It was fortunate that I had my jacket and metro card because I had to pay for myself. Well, for my selves, I mean.

It was only a few stops and the train was not very crowded. There were not too many random crazy people. Just the normal amount. When we exited the Fox Cardington Station, we were immersed in the industrial zone of the city. As pickup lines go, no, I did not come here often. But maybe I would?

527 Station Avenue. This was the building we entered. It was a storage warehouse like many of the others. There is probably some drab formula they use to build them.

Dustbin opened the door and entered. Dusty stood back, waiting for me to proceed. I did and heard his voice softly behind me amidst some rustling.

“I am sorry about this,” he said. This came right before the impact on the back of my head. I was sorry about it too.

That was all I remembered for an indeterminate amount of time until I regained consciousness. My first thought when I came to was to wonder if Dusty and Dustbin had that same gap in their memory. In my memory. I supposed that they would and that I would find out some day. I was still confused as to why I did not remember any of this as Dusty, but I just went with it. Picking at logic holes in science fiction will make one's brain bleed. I already had throbbing pain on the surface of my skull. That was enough.

Regaining consciousness, I found myself strapped to a hospital bed. It was just me finding myself there. Dustbin and Dusty were nowhere to be seen. Some of my friends had found themselves in college. I had found myself in a warehouse on Station Avenue. 527.

Reasoning it would have been unwise to fall asleep, I concentrated on deconstructing and reassembling the internal mechanisms of various kinds of clocks. This got me to thinking about how I was rarely needed to set them anymore, which made me a little anxious and angry, which only helped to perpetuate my wakefulness. When life throws you potatoes, you make a potato clock. No lemons or sour grapes here.

Finally, the door opened. It was a nobbish scientist type. I only say this because his white lab coat looked more like a suit jacket, and probably was. He also wore cufflinks.

“Great, you're awake! Dustin, I do apologize for the circumstances that brought you here. Believe me, it was necessary,” he said to me and seemed sincere.

“Well, I would not say it was a treat to be escorted here by my younger and older selves, but it was truly unique.”

“Oh, I meant the blow to the head. I was apologizing for that.” Nobby looked remorseful for a second but then shook it off.

“Thank you, I could have done without that.” I would have rubbed my head for effect, but I could not lift my arms, all I could do was tilt my head slightly. I could only assume my arms were strapped to the gurney underneath the blanket covering my torso.

“It did not affect the procedure, fortunately, and we were able to extract what we needed. However, we have punished #63 accordingly,” Nobby spoke as if I should have known all these things he was mentioning. I did not.

There comes a moment in every man's life when he is strapped to a gurney, waiting patiently for some revelation. It felt somewhat underwhelming, I have to say. I looked at Nobby expectantly.

He seemed cognizant of my non-verbal cue and clasped his hands. “All right, Dustin. I suppose you are wondering why you are here, what we have done to you, and what the plans are going forward.”

His intonation was so flat that I could not discern if he was making a statement or asking a question. I decided that a response would prompt a more loquacious explanation.

“Yes, please, that would be a nice start,” I goaded him gently.

“Okay, good. We have studied you for years, Dustin. Decades in fact. It turns out that your DNA makes you uniquely qualified for our intentions. While I am not one to resort to hyperbole, this uniqueness of yours is... have you heard that story about the woman who bought the winning lottery ticket while she was struck by lightning?”

I nodded. What an unlucky lucky day that had been!

“Okay, placing the chances of that on the same relative scale of you having exactly what we need would entail that same woman having had triplets who all gave birth to identical twins who would grow up to all buy winning lottery tickets on the same day at the same time to the very minute while Smells Like Teen Spirit was playing on the radio,” Nobby reasoned, finishing with a flourish.

I noticed that he had removed lightning from the equation. “How does a Nirvana song make it any more uniquely rare?” I asked.

“Nothing really. I just like the song. I guess it makes me smile. Oh well, whatever, never mind.”

Nobby seemed almost melancholic, that he was offended by me even asking. Nausea overwhelmed me. I felt stupid and contagious. I hated hospitals or whatever this place was.

“So, what is this procedure, doc?” I asked, hoping the moment that I said the words that I sounded more like Marty McFly than Bugs Bunny.

“Dr. Jones. Well, Dustin, we started studying you for your affinity with clocks and time. Your sublime understanding of the inner workings of these mechanisms initially had us characterizing you as a savant, but we realized there was more, infinitely more.”

“Was that a joke about time?” Dr. Jones smug smirk made me ask this.

“Yes, and see! That's just it. There is just something about you and time that is unheralded and unprecedented. Dustin, we want you to be time.”

This made absolutely no sense to me. What did this even mean? I knew what Greenwich Mean Time meant but not this.

“I can tell that you are confused, Dustin, and the misunderstanding is understandable. Studying you and following you for all of these years, we have witnessed to your dismay and ours, that there is no longer a need for your services. The modern technological world has passed you by. But what if it did not have to? When I say that I want you to be time, I mean that you will become the personification of it, that you - your body - will be the global regulator of time.”

I was no less perplexed than before. Had he been there, my cousin would have stomped his foot and gesticulated to indicate how my biological clock was ticking like Marisa Tomei's. I smiled at the unhelpful thought.

“Look, Dustin, I could explain all of the science to you but it is irrelevant and then some fastidious types would just pick it apart and dissect the logic, looking for loopholes and incongruences.”

Oddly, that admission did offer some solace. This remained a tiny cloud in a blue sky of confusion, however. I mentally prepared myself to pose another question, but Dr. Jones anticipated my inquiries.

“You have already met some of our previous attempts to harness your unique gift. Those other yous, you see, were not time travelers at all. They are not you from the future or the past. At least not in a certain sense. They are clones of you, Dustin. The best of the hundreds we have made of you. They all do well enough in emulating your life and thoughts, but they cannot manipulate time as you do. As clones and replicas, they are cheap imitations. If the intent was Dollywood, the result was Branson, Missouri. Unacceptable.”

I was trying to keep pace with this lunacy. "So, you thought that time travel would be easier for me to process and absorb than clones? How did you even make clones of me anyway? Without my knowledge, and I don't believe I left any of my DNA lying around, come to think of it."

"Dustin, remember that credit card you signed up for a few years ago? Did you read the fine print?" Jones looked self-satisfied again, with that pompous grin.

"I did actually. All 30 pages. I was waiting for a bus. The Bank of Omaha was only concerned about enslaving me with debt and corrupting my credit. There was nothing about clones."

Jones sneer degenerated into a frown of defeat. He scanned his clipboard. I could see his eyes light up before he looked back at me. "My mistake, Dustin, it was in the Apple user agreement. Page 376."

Darn it all. He had me. He knew it and I knew it.

"In sum, the clones were perfectly capable at some things, but were all thumbs when it came to time. We could never put our finger on why, so we just gave up and decided to abduct you."

"But who is we/us? Who is doing all of this to me?" I doubted it was Apple. They had their watches and Dr. Dre's headphones. Why would they need me? Beats me.

"We are doing it for you, Dustin. Not to you. We will be doing this together even if you will be doing most of it. Well, all of it. And just call us the Consortium. The world needs you. Time needs you. You will set things right. Truly."

“All right. I'll play along for now. What do I have to do? Will it be like back in the salad days when I was still needed around the world to set and fix clocks?” This might not be so bad after all.

“Not exactly, Dustin. You will be able to work from here. Right here in this room. And you will not even have to lift a finger. Only because you cannot. We have replaced your fingers with something better, something more appropriate for your new and hallowed function. Would you like to see?” Jones was giddy and already moving towards me.

“Yes, lay it on me,” I said bravely. I knew he was going to show me anyway so why not take it on the chin?

Jones pulled back the blanket with gusto like those lounge acts who can remove the tablecloth without disturbing the place settings on top. What was beneath the blanket was disturbing, however.

No explanation was necessary, but Jones felt compelled. Perhaps he had been rehearsing this in front of a mirror. I must admit that he did have some aplomb.

“We took away your fingers, Dustin, but we gave you better hands. An hour hand AND a minute hand,” Jones chirped triumphantly.

And there they were, on the dial of my chest. The limb length discrepancy was inevitable. I was reading it from an awkward topside angle but it was 6:22. This matched the clock on the wall. Exactly.

“Wait a second! Where is the second hand?” Rather than horrified, I felt incomplete and inadequate.

“Oh, that's another story, Dustin,” Jones said and appeared as though he was going to say more about that, but instead said less.

Second hand. It was one of those incredibly self-indulgent references that only a few people would understand, not even peak (or valley) Dennis Miller.

Jones continued, "your heart keeps track of the seconds. All of our hearts do this, but yours is better than most. Than anyone's."

I did not know what to think. Jones took advantage of this opening to continue speaking. "Pacemakers have been around for decades. Essentially, what we have done is reversed the process. Instead of some device regulating you, it will be you regulating everything, all devices."

I had a function again. I was fulfilling my calling, just that it would be in that Rod Serling sort of way that was less than satisfying. The disappointment was palpable. As though my balloon had burst, or similar to the sinking feeling you have when you see a sporty car on the highway, and you are momentarily excited until you are close enough to it and then you realize that it is a Hyundai.

I did nothing to conceal my frown and Jones picked up on this. "But Dustin, don't forget what happened to the man who suddenly got everything he always wanted."

"What happened?" I asked.

"He lived happily ever after," Jones replied.

Cry me a chocolate river. "That's wonky. Your Consortium" - I hissed the words - "has just made me into a living potato clock."

"Relax, Dustin. You have had a big day. Before you regained consciousness, we started feeding a tranquilizing agent into your IV. You will feel the effects soon if you have not already."

I did feel a certain euphoria. It could be psychosomatic, but I suppose Jones knew better than I did. I was just the merchandise. The anger had dissipated.

Jones sensed my calming. "Before you nod off, Dustin, this could be the moment for some cheesy line like "this spud's for you."

I thought for a moment, struggling against the clouds forming in my mind. "I have a better one."

"Let me have it," Jones prompted.

"Okey dokey, Dr. Jones. Hold on to your potatoes," I mumbled glibly, drifting off for another short round of sleep.

Never a time traveler in the most romantic and flashy sense, I had become a time machine in a similarly lethargic interpretation of the concept. Verily, I was the Time Machine.

All's well that ends Wells.

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