

On Time
By Charles Jade
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The passage through the birth canal was sluggish and somber, the infant seeming reluctant to surrender the dream of the womb. A nurse took him from Dr. Elizabeth Decuma, while another severed the connection to the mother. Fate had not favored the child: premature, low birth weight, respiratory difficulties, palsy. A drug addicted mother.

The lay upon the table insensate, a stark contrast to her arrival, screaming, "I want a natural birth, natural--damn you." Her blood was a pharmacopoeial sampler. The anesthesiologist just shook his head. That was six hours ago. In the present, under the unflinching fluorescent light Elizabeth stared tiredly at the shiny gold remnant of multiple body piercings. The mingling scents of disinfectant and afterbirth, combined with a twelve hour shift made her dizzy. It was time for her to go home.

After cleaning up and getting dressed, she stopped by the neonatal intensive care unit, to check on Sardonyx. Sardonyx, what a name. She had looked on the Internet and found it was an ornamental stone, striped brown and white. Sardonyx was repudiated to have healing powers. She hoped so, as the preemie would need all the help she could get. On the short walk from the university hospital to her nearby home, Elizabeth tried to imagine the future of the child, but she could not.

It was just after midnight when she arrived home and the house was dark.

"Herbert?"

She turned on a light and stepped inside, the hardwood floors creaking beneath her. He was most likely in the basement, his workshop, unless he was at the university physics lab. She frowned. The basement light was on.

"Herbert," she yelled, from the top of the stairs, but there is no answer. She did not like his workshop; he once told her, "please, please, please, do not touch anything," and that had irritated her. Though she was not a theoretical physicist, she was still a doctor, a feat of learning in itself. She had demanded to know if his experiments were dangerous. He had rolled his eyes and stomped downstairs.

How long ago was that?

She felt old and tired, as if her life, their life, had slipped away, but really the question was whether it had ever been within her grasp at all.

With each step down the stairs more of the strange apparatus appeared: computers, wires, diagrams, books. And a phone booth. At least that is what it looked like. Herbert was not there.

It was six feet tall, a framework of silvery rods welded together, a phone booth without door or glass panes. Copper wires ran every which way from it. Inside, on the bare floor, a five-pointed star was inscribed within a circle. She sat down at the computer next to it. A scrolling screensaver rolled by on the screen: **If you really want to know run the program and step inside.**

This was so like him, enigmatic to the point of irritation. At one time she had found this attractive, but then it just made her tired. She was tired and irritated.

Elizabeth hung her head in her hands. She did not want to sleep. Sleep was not the friend of a resident physician. She turned to the computer and moved the mouse, columns of text and numbers scrolled endlessly. She clicked 'OK' to run the program.

"Twenty seconds," said the machine, and she jumped. It was her voice. The memory of Herbert chasing her around their old apartment with a tape recorder made her smile weakly.

"Fifteen seconds." Her voice was light and happy. He had said there would be far fewer mad scientists around if they kept a comforting voice near.

"Ten seconds." She wondered what her voice sounded like now.

"Five seconds." Elizabeth stepped within the phone booth.

"Whoa." It is Herbert's voice. Blinking from the bright light, like a camera flashbulb, Elizabeth steps out of the booth.

"Herbert? How did you get her? And thanks, your little joke was really funny." She feels a little dizzy and sits down.

"Well, I hope it's not Ouroboros," he says, frowning.

"What? What is Ouroboros?" More nonsense. She is nearing the end of her patience.

"Ouroboros is a legendary snake, one that devours itself, starting with its tail. It's a name for one of the theories relating to my experiment."

"What theory, what experiment?"

"Tell me, tell me exactly what happened to you from the

moment you came home," he says, picking up pen and pad.

"What? Why?" Elizabeth stands up, crossing her arms before her. "Herbert, I want you--"

"For God's sake, woman, because it might destroy the universe!"

Elizabeth stares at him. Something is wrong, very wrong.

She swallows. "All right, Herbert," she says coolly, telling him what she had done since she came home.

Herbert nods, taking notes, and when she finishes he reads it back to her. She confirms his notes.

"Excuse me," he says, moving to the computer. He changes the screensaver.

Elizabeth is confused. He is changing it to what it already is--except it isn't.

"What are you doing?" Elizabeth asks. Herbert ignores her, and she can feel the muscles knotting in her neck.

"Hang on," he replies absently. "I have to draw the pentacle. It's funny, because I was kicking around doing something like that, for no particular reason." He pulls some chalk from a drawer and gets down on his knees before the phone booth, to draw the symbol on the bare floor--

--but it is already drawn--

--except it's not.

"Herbert, what is going on?" Elizabeth suddenly feels afraid.

"What you are really asking is why isn't the pentacle here, the one you saw when you came downstairs. The answer is that it's not when yet." He glances over his shoulder to see her reaction.

"What?" Elizabeth is lost.

"Not what, when," he replies, and turns to finish the diagram.

"Herbert, get up off the floor and explain to me exactly what you are talking about. Now." The edge in her voice makes him stop, and he gets up and turns around.

"Okay. We don't have much time, so listen carefully. The long and the short of it is that I have invented a time machine and that I am leaving you."

She stares at him, her brows furrowing. It is as if he is speaking another language.

"There were two important ideas in that utterance," he says nervously, "time travel and leaving. The former is what I have

been tinkering with for the last ten years, the latter is what I am doing because I have been tinkering for the last ten years, instead of, for instance, having a relationship with you."

Elizabeth opens her mouth and continues to stare.

"Look," he says, sighing and rolling his eyes, "I don't have time to break out the hand puppets. In about five minutes you are going to walk down the basement stairs, and if we are both here it might very well mean the destruction of the known universe. I, for one, am not going to stick around to see if it is the Forbidden Fruit or the Branching Tree theory, because it might not be."

"I don't know what you are talking about, trees, and fruits, and snakes, and I don't care. What do you mean you are leaving?" Elizabeth finds her voice and it is numb to her ears. She is not surprised to find that she does not feel anything.

"You think that's the most important thing, and it is, right now, to you, but in the big picture the most important thing is what happens in five minutes."

"Herbert, she begins, "I don't--"

"Listen," Herbert interrupts her. He does this by firmly grasping her behind the neck with one hand while placing the other over her mouth. In all their years together he had never done anything like that, and it shocks and frightens her.

"There are four theories concerning the effects of time travel: Forbidden Fruit, Branching Tree, Ouroboros, Boom." He removes the hand from her mouth. "Repeat them back to me. Now."

She is afraid, and angry, but fear wins out. "Forbidden Fruit, Branching Tree, Ouroboros, and Boom," she replies quietly, his hand on her neck is very tense.

"Boom refers to what might happen if you create a paradox and destroy the universe, an example being if we are chatting when you come down the stairs in a few minutes." He checks his watch and looks at her again. "Branching Tree is the current fave among theoretical physicists, that any time travel causes a branching of reality, the effective creation of a parallel universe. Should we be here when you come down the stairs, well, it could make for a really interesting ménage à trois. Schrodinger's work supports this--the idea of quantum realities--not a ménage à trois."

"Schrodinger's shorts," Elizabeth whispers suddenly. Herbert looks at her then, a wry grin upon his face, but he does not release her.

"Yes, Schrodinger's shorts, your wonderful interpretation of the essay concerning macroscopic indeterminacy. Schrodinger cannot know whether he has on underwear until he looks in his pants.

"Herbert--" She begins, sensing the real Herbert in his voice, not the . . . madman.

"No, there is no more time, time is no more, more is the pity, he says quickly, his forehead sharply creased. "Ouroboros refers to the effect whereby an act of time travel destroys the future, the traveler's future. From the moment the traveler arrives in the past the future is wiped out, but the traveler escapes destruction in the past." He turns quickly and picks up a suitcase.

"Where are you going?"

"Not where, when, and I think if you really, really ask yourself that question, you will find that it doesn't matter anymore. By the way, Forbidden Fruit refers to the fact that you simply cannot create a paradox, that it cannot happen, meaning that it is impossible to meet yourself in a minute or two, because you being alone in the basement has already happened." He is standing in the phone booth, and he points to his eyes and closes them.

She shuts her eyes in reflex, but the brightness still registers faintly through her lids.

She blinks.

Herbert is gone.

She falls into the chair.

Above her, the floorboards creak.

Elizabeth freezes.

"Herbert?"

It is her voice, coming from upstairs.

Boom.

Elizabeth panics, spinning around frantically. She hurriedly runs into the laundry room, separated from Herbert's workshop by a door. Crouched between washer and dryer, the door open a sliver, Elizabeth watches the stairs.

"Herbert?" Elizabeth hears her voice, again, clearly. It sounds higher in pitch than she thought it ought to, and tired, and irritated. Loud footfalls follow.

She sees herself.

Elizabeth crams a fist into her mouth to keep from screaming. She knows what is going to happen. She focuses on

that with all her will. Shortly, she hears her voice again, counting backwards from twenty. When it is over she walks back into to the empty basement, to sit down and shake properly.

It was just past three in the morning when she arrived at the hospital for the second time. She had spent two hours pacing and wondering whether she had gone mad. She needed to tell someone, so she went to the hospital for the first time, but she couldn't tell anyone. It was crazy. She had decided to check on Sardonyx, if for no other reason than to think about something else.

Sardonyx was dead.

Initially breathing on her own, a good sign, she had suffered a sudden respiratory failure shortly before two.

It was strange. Elizabeth not felt anything at all, in the same way she felt nothing when Herbert had told her he was leaving.

Come on, come on, feel something.

She went to the nurse station, and there she found the file for Sardonyx. She leafed through it backwards, beginning with the death certificate and the time of birth, all the data in between pointing towards that inexorable conclusion, ending with the birth certificate and the time of birth. Time. Lightly, she touched two ink stains upon its surface. They were the imprints of two tiny feet. Elizabeth left the floor with the folder clutched tightly to her chest. The folder against her chest felt warm, felt something, and in that something Elizabeth felt a change, from anger to righteousness, and hope.

By the time she got home she was no longer shaking and her breathing was regular.

Sitting in the basement, she quietly read the help files and technical notes for Herbert's time machine. If Ouroboros were correct she had already destroyed the future once, as had Herbert.

Does it really matter?

It didn't seem like such a big deal, partly because the present, the past's future was not all that great in Elizabeth's personal opinion, and partly because almost everything would happen again, anyway.

Except for the death of Sardonyx.

Of course, if the Branching Tree was correct, Sardonyx would die, 'here', in this time and live, 'there', in that time. This

theory was a nihilist's dream, in that it was perhaps the ultimate proof of the meaninglessness of existence. If everything happened, nothing mattered.

Except it mattered to Elizabeth.

She had set the computer early if enough so that she could get a cab to the hospital. She would arrive before Sardonyx died and save her, carefully, without creating paradox, if that was even possible. If the Forbidden Fruit proved true, it was not possible, and this again rendered her actions meaningless, this time through an absolute determinism.

Standing in the phone booth, Elizabeth thought it odd that, given time travel, the only way a person could validate their existence would be to destroy the universe.

Boom.

She goes largely unnoticed, just another doctor on the floor, as she makes her way to the NICU, checking her watch every few seconds. She waits in the shadows until the nurse makes her rounds.

Sardonyx is alive.

Her mottled flesh atremble, her tiny hands twitching, the small form lies in the center of the incubator. The cardiorespiratory monitor is positive, as much as can be expected, and her chart is good. Elizabeth cannot fathom why she is going to die.

Now.

Now she must unplug the cardiorespiratory monitor, alert the doctor on duty, and demand the baby be put on a respirator, but the restless grasping of those tiny hands, the unceasing motion, hypnotizes her. She watches the child for several minutes, fear and doubt gnawing at her, and finally, foolishly, she reaches down and carefully picks up the child.

Elizabeth's grandmother, an eccentric and devout Roman Catholic was quite disappointed when she and Herbert announced they had no plans for children, let alone the sanctification of marriage. She had told them babies were not long from heaven, and that adults needed to hold them, to be with them, in order to remember a better place.

This thought strikes her as she lifts Sardonyx, to place the child against her cheek, not because she needs to remember heaven--whatever that meant--but because Elizabeth cannot feel the baby's weight, so ephemeral is she. In that unearthly moment

time seems to slow, but in reality it is the aimless grasping and twitching that slows, then stops.

Elizabeth holds the Sardonyx in timelessness.

The cardiorespiratory alarm sounds and she quickly and calmly lays the baby down and disappears into the shadows, tears streaming down her cheeks. She watches from a distance as men and women of goodwill frantically try to resuscitate the infant. It is pointless, of course. The death of Sardonyx is meant to be, but only in the sense that she is too sick to live. There is nothing Elizabeth could have done to help her, nor, it seems herself.

It was dawn when, again, she arrived home, and she was relieved to find neither Herbert, nor herself, there. It was not within her power to save Sardonyx, regardless which temporal theory proved true. Even were it the Branching Tree, it meant nothing more than a parallel Sardonyx growing within a corrupted womb, born only to die again.

She stood in the living room of their home, before the mantel and an assortment of pictures from the past. She picked up a photograph from ten years gone, the two of them before a ferriswheel at the city carnival. He had proposed to her on it that night. Staring at the photograph, she could clearly remember the moment, but she could not feel it. He blamed her for their end, but the slow decline was as much his fault as hers, his career as much as hers. If only there was a fifth theory, one that allowed a person to travel back into their past and live it again, a Happy Ending Theory.

Isn't there?

Her heart beat faster, reviving her sleep deprived senses. She should sleep on it, but if she did, she would not have the courage to do it. She quickly walked downstairs and set the machine accordingly.

"Hello, Herbert," she says, as he opens the door.

"Hello," Herbert replies, somewhat tepidly. "Do I know you?"

Elizabeth takes a deep breath.

"No, you don't, but I know you and. . .I love you. I have always loved you, and if you let me in you will love me too, so please, please, let me in, because I am very tired, and I need you so very badly."

She steps toward the young Herbert, in his second year of college, and living quite lonely, and grasps him firmly by the head and kisses him. The tears quickly running down her cheek are a counterpoint to the slow motion of their embrace.

Elizabeth opens her eyes. At the foot of the bed is Herbert, sitting, naked, watching her. It is early morning.

"You are from the future," he says quietly. It is not a question.

"Yes," she whispers. She had hoped they would have a little more time together before the truth be told.

"You are my wife." he says, his voice cracking, again this was not a question. He has in his hands her ID.

Damn.

She foolishly brought her purse, and under the circumstances she can not blame his intrusive curiosity.

"I can explain," she begins, licking her lips.

"I have all the time in the world," he replies.

She tells him about the four theories of time travel. She tells him about their lives, including the ending. She even tells him about Sardonyx. And she tells him painfully and clearly why she returned to him, ten years older, and much the wiser. In the end he looks at the ground and shakes his head, and crushes her heart and hope in that simple gesture.

"You can't stay here," he says evenly, clearly struggling with emotion.

"I know, I know," she whispers, and begins to cry. "I just thought, that maybe, if the Branching Tree or Ouroboros were right, that we could--I don't know--start over."

"I understand. . .and I would like that. . .I like you--and will like you--this is so hard to deal with--but we have to live as if the worst case scenario would prevail, the Boom theory." He puts his head in his hands.

"I'm sorry," she whispers. "I'll go now." She rises quickly to gather her clothes.

"Where?" Herbert asks, suddenly, apparently he hadn't thought it through all the way yet.

"I set the time machine to come on late tonight, your time, and to transport back into the future whatever is in the booth. It was all in the help files."

"What? But what if Ouroboros is correct? The future no longer exists."

"Then I'm stuck here, alone, which is exactly where I was

stuck twenty-four hours ago in the future. What difference does it make?"

"It matters to me," he says.

"Please don't say things like that anymore," she replies, entering the bathroom, shutting the door behind her.

He insists upon accompanying her to the deserted warehouse that would be their home ten years hence. She stands upon the carefully marked spot she made upon arrival. It is then Herbert strides purposefully forward and kisses her.

"I love you," he says, stepping back.

She closes her eyes, hoping against hope that she has destroyed the future.

She had not.

Ouroboros was dead, for all the good it would do, but as Elizabeth laid in bed, she realized Ouroboros has always been dead.

*Then why did Herbert tell me about that before he left?
The Branching Tree.*

The young Herbert who declared his love for her was not the old Herbert who left, as the young Sardonyx whom she delivered was not the one who died in her arms. Elizabeth sat up and leaned far forward. She had created two, no three--her first inadvertent trip counted--separate universes. The results of her actions were. . .too much to assimilate.

The alarm sounded. It was time for her shift.

The immensity of her actions could not be felt, the creation of fifteen billion people. Too much. She shook her head and rose. Another thought came to her. She was approximately one day older because of time travel. Her birthday would come a day earlier for the rest of her life. She shook her head again as the shower ran on.

Arriving at the hospital, Elizabeth needed to return the file for Sardonyx to the nursery. However, when she arrived upon the floor there was a disturbance. It was the mother of Sardonyx. She was demanding the birth certificate. Elizabeth listened to the exchange between the staff and the woman, the tears and emotion, contrived or real, struck her as bizarre. A nurse told Elizabeth that the woman was supposed to have checked out an hour ago, but wouldn't leave without the birth certificate.

"What difference does it make?" Elizabeth asked. The

doctor speaking to the woman looked at Elizabeth warily.

"I want it," Amie Everson replied, crying. "It's all that's left of her."

"What were you thinking?" Elizabeth asked her. It was too much for her to watch.

Amie Everson stared at her.

"How could you not know what you were doing?"

The rest of the staff was silent, perhaps they felt the same way.

"It wasn't my fault."

It was the tone of her voice, its pitch, its essence a thing created of self-love, not love of other, not even of her own flesh and blood, that gave rise to something within Elizabeth, something that at last felt.

"You killed her," Elizabeth yelled, and the nurses and orderlies were aghast. "You killer her before she was born."

The woman shook her head violently.

"Tell us, tell us Amie, why did you do that to her, your daughter?"

"It's your fault! You were supposed to save her!" Amie was spitting and yelling, cursing them all. A nurse quickly buzzed for security, while a doctor and nurse struggled with the woman.

Later, sitting cross-legged at home, the contents of the file before her, Elizabeth desperately tried to make sense out of it. Out of anything. She was unsure as to whether it was because her husband had left her, or because time travel had effectively rendered all action meaningless, or because she stood at the end of ten years of intensive study without caring about anything.

If anything, Elizabeth would have been content if she could have just figured out why had Sardonyx died. The pieces of paper surrounding her were the answer, of course. Elizabeth could find out the why to one question, even if she could not change the past. She would have to plan carefully, though, but she had plenty of time.

In 1999, on every Friday afternoon, Elizabeth goes to the city mall to watch the couple, Amie and Onyx--now she knows where the name came from--spend afternoons at the food court. Moving backwards through time, Elizabeth sees Amie grow less pregnant. This, to Elizabeth, seems right and just and proper. She does not deserve that baby.

In 1998, Amie leaves her parents' house, the middle-age couple, red-faced and shaken, pleading with their daughter not to go. They live in a nice house in a nice neighborhood. Amie and Onyx depart in a bright red convertible, one that is stolen six months later.

In 1996, Amie wraps her brand new, cherry red, convertible around a tree. Her parents thanks God she is alright and buy her another one.

In 1995, at the age of fifteen, she loses her virginity, not at a party, but after school, before her mother and father get home from work. This Elizabeth finds out from listening to conversations between Amie and her loud friends riding public transportation to school.

In 1994, Amie is introduced to alcohol and drugs through her new friends in high school. Elizabeth wants to intervene, but is held back by the fact that it makes no difference.

In 1990, Elizabeth discreetly follows Amie, a shy, wary, girl home from school. She has a key to the house tied around her neck. The blue light of television can be seen from outside in the early afternoon darkness of wintertime.

In 1985, Elizabeth finds out why on a cool autumn morning. Amie's mother and father drive their little girl down the well-kept suburban street to a neighbor's house. It is the day her mother returns to work. From across the street Elizabeth watches the girl standing in the picture window waving as the car backs out of the drive. Amie's mother is crying as they drive off.

Elizabeth has seen enough. One more trip, one more trip and she will dismantle the time machine.

She appears in the basement of the burned out warehouse, flashlight in hand, to mark her spot.

It's already marked.

"You can't do this, Elizabeth."

Instinctively she shines the light towards the voice. Herbert has a beard, that is what she notices first, meaning he has been away from their 'present' for awhile.

"What difference does it make, Herbert?" What she really means to say is what difference did it make to him, but she isn't going to be the one to broach that topic.

"Elizabeth, I have been in prison for the last ten years, a prison of time, desperately trying to avoid a paradox death sentence. The only positive thing I can say about the experience

is that if I had to be in prison, I cannot imagine anyone I would rather be with than you. I love you, Elizabeth, but you cannot take Amie from the hospital."

Elizabeth is not impressed by Herbert's sudden change of heart.

"I want her, the child that nobody else wants, Herbert, your coming back doesn't change that," Elizabeth replies, firmly.

"If you take that child and return to the future, you will create a paradox, and that is not permissible."

"Herbert, it's the Branching Tree. I proved that when I left the 1990 Herbert and returned to my present, an act which proved Ouroboros false. The 2000 Herbert, which may or may not be you, told me about Ouroboros, anyway. If the 2000 Herbert knew Ouroboros to be false, he would not have told me about it." Elizabeth dared him to contradict her.

"That is an incredible act of deduction, one that would no doubt have Sherlock Holmes putting a gun to his head," Herbert replies, wryly smiling, "but it is completely wrong."

She raises an eyebrow at him.

"Of course I am the Herbert you married, and the one you visited in 1990," Herbert starts, sounding vaguely offended. "And I figured the bit about Ouroboros as soon as you disappeared from that spot, ten years ago, but you told me the theory. I had considered it, and the others, but I had to tell you ten years later, because you told me. I had to build a damn time machine because you told me I did." He slumps to the floor, closing his eyes and leaning against the wall. "You have no idea what the last ten years have been like, always trying to avoid paradox, but it is now, finally, part of the past." He opens his eyes and looks at her, smiling broadly.

Elizabeth blinks. She does not know what to believe.

"Herbert," Elizabeth speaks slowly, "how do you know it's the Forbidden Fruit?"

"I traveled to the future," he says simply.

Elizabeth closes her eyes, considering the possibility.

"I met us, you and me. . .and our son."

Elizabeth eyes snap open.

"I traveled a year into the future and, well, we were waiting for me. . ."

"Our son?" Elizabeth is overwhelmed.

"Yes. Do you remember when we got married and decided not to have children, and how we decided that the simplest solution

to birth control would be for me to have a vasectomy?" Herbert grimaces when he says the last.

Elizabeth nods slowly.

"Well, if you remember I didn't have that vasectomy until after we were married."

"Oh, no," she gags, raising a hand to her mouth.

"I didn't plan on telling you this way. . .but we weren't much help in the future," he says, grimacing in irritation.

"I never stole Aimee from the hospital."

"No, you did not," he replies quietly.

"And she grows up alone, and leaves home, and has Sardonyx, and Sardonyx dies." Now it was her turn to lean against a wall for support.

"Yes. I'm sorry." He walks over to her and put his arms around her.

"Oh God, Herbert, it's so terrible. Everything has already happened. I could say, that I don't want a baby--which isn't true--but it doesn't matter anyway, because I will have one. Amie did grow up and become an addict, and had Sardonyx, and Sardonyx died, because she had to." Elizabeth looked at him with tear-filled eyes, eyes possessing of a horrible understanding.

"Only if you have a time machine, or if you are God," Herbert replies, very clearly and surely. "Everybody else is born and lives and dies, and every choice they make is their own, for good or evil."

"Good or evil no longer exist, Herbert," she whispers.

"Then why do you still care, Elizabeth?"

She stares at him, rather than say because she already did, because she hasn't, at least not yet--it was too much. She pulls away from him.

"I can't stand it." It is more than the human mind can comprehend, can assimilate, not too mention the fact that she is now pregnant, from an encounter ten years ago with a twenty year-old Herbert--it was too much!

"Try not to think about it, Elizabeth, just live--here is an example--we need a name for the boy." He positions her on the mark, holding her close.

"Don't you know?" Elizabeth asks, interested despite the fact that the name is already chosen.

"No. You wouldn't tell me," he replies, and they vanish.