

“The Beginning”

Second short story in a potential anthology. Original story here:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/17y3Zf-dVmlkYC8myhTC1M8lhoLbRs2HV-JvPGCnK2IM/edit?usp=sharing>

The Beginning

The first day of the Great Reset started off like every other day. I awoke, I ate, I worked, I ate some more, worked some more. I snacked too much and my snack choices were, well, they were poor. I didn't drink enough water and later, a few hours before the big event, I drank too much whiskey. A lot of my days were like that.

All the hard working and hard drinking and hard playing were purposeful, to be sure. I think back on it and the best explanation I can give for it is that I was running. Running hard. Sure, you take one look at me and you ask, really? You? Running? To which I reply, not physically! No, that day, just like so many before it, I ran after things and ran as fast as I could. I ran after knowledge, mostly. Knowledge of politics. Knowledge of far flung wars. Knowledge of my work, my craft.

I am sure I chased after knowledge for the joy of it. Most of the time, at least. But life's ever present ticking clock ticked and tocked away, promising the certainty of death. And worse - enfeeblement before death, most likely, maybe long before death. The fracturing of mind, the loss of mental elasticity, physical control of bodily function. So dramatic, right? In my defense, back then, that last normal day of my life, our lives, I felt like time was in short supply. So, I had to run, run as far as I could, learn as much as possible, become as skilled as possible, before time ran out.

Don't laugh. We all felt that way.

I remember we used to play a game - “where were you when Kennedy was shot?” or “where were you when the Challenger exploded” or “where were you on 9/11?” I no longer trust my memory. Where was I on 9/11? For that matter, what, exactly, was 9/11 all about? Why can I remember the question so clearly but so little that gave it rise? The Memories claim we've endured over 100,000 days of living in this ... state of existence. I assume they are right, or right enough. Even if they off a few hundred days off in either direction, it's too many days no matter how you look at it. Too many days to remember the answers to such questions. Of course, we have books to answer with those ones and I'm tempted now to go find one and look it up. I know exactly where to find it. I know exactly where to find everything that's findable around here. Most of us do. But 90,000 days ago? Those days are lost. Except for the Memories, of course. They know. Or at least, they know it better than I do. I dabbled but never found the talent or especially the persistent patience required in the face of, well, all of this, to be any good at it.

I'll try again at some point. Cycles and all that.

Despite all those intervening days, I know full well the answer to this question: "Where were you on the day of the Great Reset?" The universe has seen fit to ensure we never, ever forget the answer to that one.

I count myself lucky. Damned lucky, in fact. True, I'm overweight but not grossly obese. My travel circle is limited but I am quite mobile, thank you. The weather is nice outside my apartment all day, though I do miss rain, snow, hurricanes. I never did get to see a tornado. But I speak of luck. I have some leftovers in the fridge. I can't warm them up, of course, but I don't have to forage every single day like others. My refrigerator keeps its two bottles of water cold for the morning and if I toss them in the freezer, they will stay cooler, longer. Currency, that. I awaken every morning in a comfortable bed with sheets and blankets recently washed. Not a hospital, or worse. Oh, it could be so much worse.

I even share the bed with a woman. My wife, I suppose, though the promise behind "till death do us part" has been sorely tested. Tested to the breaking point and beyond, in my case. Most times, we get about with our plans for the day without comment. What's left to comment on? But sometimes, we seem to remember the other is there. We'll talk, share physical intimacy for a time - months or even years. It comes and goes in cycles. Sometimes, things turn dark. One or the other will refuse to participate in the other's mania of the moment. I don't like those times. My point is that I'm not alone. I've seen what happens to most of the folks around here that wake up in an empty bed. I don't think I'd do any better than they do.

I've had other loves. Flings and long term affairs. One particularly long-running relationship redefined who I am. It's eventual doom is as obvious today as it was impossible to conceive at its start. Karina. I still see her often. Not every day, but most weeks. She's a special one. I can hold her uniqueness in mind better than anyone else. The years have a forced an impossible familiarity between and among us, blurring the lines between people so that they are hard to distinguish, one to the other. We all know the same things, know each others' habits and preferences which have grown so similar in this static world. I even enjoy egg salad sandwiches! More remarkable still, I think of them as a delicacy, a thing to trade for! Who could have imagined!

But, back to Karina. The mathematical part of me insists she's no different and I fear it's winning that battle. It wins ever so slowly, but it's winning. But then I'll remember she had the clever idea that we learn how to write with our left hand. Pointless as it is to write anything down anymore, it opened the doors to new possibilities. She was and I assume still is very clever at that. It meant there could be new things to learn. New reasons to get out of that bed. New reasons to keep the pill bottle capped, new reasons to keep the gun locked in its locker. Sure, those are temporary answers at best but for some, it's how they cope. It was a beautiful span of years. Unfortunately, her compulsion drove her to extremes and I failed to constrain her. She's paid the price and the debt in full, but that's another story entirely. I prefer to remember the good, the joy in discovery, the acquisition of new skills.

Whenever I think of skills persistence, I think of the babies. That's a tough one. Not now. I digress.

The day of the Great Reset, I went to work. I was very busy that morning - one of those days where you have five or six thirty minute meetings, back to back. Meetings that require active. See what I mean about running? Intellectually, I know it made sense to pack so much

into so little time given that giant time sword hanging over us, but man! How our sense of time has stretched out!

(I'm not usually given to such emotional outbursts; it's been so long since I remembered back to that day, the contrast is jarring; I'll restrain myself going forward.)

I first became aware that something unusual had happened when I went to check up on the status of the Ukraine war, a habit I had developed at the time. I wonder what they are doing now in that conflict? Surely it couldn't have continued...

Reddit users - yes, the old Internet chat group that allowed strangers(!) to interact - some amateur astronomers claimed they had recorded impossible distortions in gravity or space time or some such. Most people dismissed them as quacks when I first became aware. It was in interesting kind of quackery but quackery nonetheless.

When I did another sweep of social media later that day, the quackery had been picked up and amplified in the way only a global network of disconnected strangers can do. It had been debunked here, it was verified over there, it was a government plot, it was God (choose your favorite) sending us a Message. At the time, I had learned that you don't pay much attention to early reports of unusual phenomena. The thing itself seemed real enough - and of course, we know it now - but back then, it was pretty sketchy.

By day's end, people who were paying attention agreed that something "impossible" had happened. Scientists were giddy with excitement. I remember one, Dr. Becky Smethurst, created an "emergency YouTube announcement" to walk us through what was known. I wonder how she feels now? I hope she is well, she was and I hope still is, one of the good ones. Work ended that day. I was home and I started negotiating with myself. "I'll exercise tomorrow to offset the steak and creamed spinach I'll have tonight." As my permanent waistline demonstrates, I was an excellent negotiator. Exercise never had a chance when I mediated between it and steak.

I met a friend at local steakhouse and we ate steak - the last truly good steak I've had. Mashed potato and, of course, creamed spinach. John Sullivan has some spinach left over in his fridge. The scientists taught us how to use the sun and magnifying glasses and such to warm things up. Not hot, but barely. I tried his leftover spinach once, slightly better than room temperature. I prefer to remember delicate nutmeg spiced serving from Wolfgang's over that. The fantasy version I recall, in any event.

We had not seen each other much in those, Dave and I, so we started with the whiskey. To be accurate, I should continued with the whiskey since we'd started before the steak arrived. We were well on our way to a missed day of work when the the now all too familiar reset started. You have to remember that the first time, 100,000 days ago, no one had any idea what was happening. Everyone on the restaurant, and so far everyone that can speak told us the same - we all knew something was off. Everything was in some fundamental way. That scary animal nature against which we war forever - it knew something was wrong and it wouldn't let us ignore it. We looked at each other, realized everyone else felt the same. Some people reached for their ... mobile phones. What a concept? Communication at distance. Oh how we took such things for granted! But, I digress again.

We looked at each, some instinctively reached for loved ones via these little phones. Dave and I stood and walked outside. We weren't the only ones. The restaurant near emptied

itself out in less than a minute without the slightest protest from staff. Indeed, the joined us, along with the cooking staff and people from every other little restaurant on Cobb street. That night, the first night, I was afraid. Since then, I've met the Reset with grim determination, annoyance, excitement and even joy. That night, thought, the first night - it was, quite frankly, terrifying.

The stars... swirled.

We know a little about how other people experienced it. We were lucky, we got to see the stars. The people in Regalsville to the west, it rains on them. Every day, without surcease. For me to experience rain, well, it's very hard and by the time I cycle my way over there, I've only got less than an exhausted hour to enjoy it. I've done a few dozen times - my sanity is important to me and variation is sanity's cornerstone these days. But for some of those people, those further west - it's how they start every day. I am sure that some of them have never seen the sun. Let's not dwell on the weather, it's too depressing. I'm lucky, let's leave it at that for now. But I was speaking of swirling stars. We stood in the street, standing, mouths agape, looking upward. I had always taken the stars completely for granted. I was no astronomer. That said, my father had instilled curiosity and stoked astronomical inspirations. Astronauts! Even now I look up and wonder if they escaped this hell. We know through the Long Line, that their space station did not but perhaps the men and women on it lived out a non-repeating life and died hundred of years ago. I am not optimistic. You see what I mean when I say I'm lucky. Everyone in this town is lucky.

I have digressed yet again. Back to the last night ...

So, we stood in the street, mouths open, staring upward. Some whit in this increasingly frightened crowd made a comment, "this can't be good." He didn't know how right he was. The stars swirled, slowly and then quickly. I don't need to trust my memory on this because I've seen it happen thousands of times, each time the same. The swirling ends with bright flash crack of a boom, cut short! We're back where we started. Literally. In my case, I awoke in bed, next to my wife.

I am prone to vivid dreams and when I awoke this way, my first thought was that I'd just experienced one of those. It was exciting for the first handful of seconds, imagining to myself that I'd hit some new level of dreaming excellence. Even now, I take great joy from my vivid dreams. They are rare. We don't seem to sleep a full night. The scientists believe and my own experience indicates that the resetting moment every night snaps us back to the same moment every day in an immeasurably short amount of time. The scientists, working endlessly on their theoretical physics models and, thankfully, still not bored by it, say their math shows it's approaching Plank time short. Which is basically a very short amount of time, they say the shortest. And literally immeasurable these days. We were even able to measure Plank time? But if that's true, why do we dream? It doesn't seem like enough time.

My wife stood up in bed and her wild but sharp movements sewed the first doubt in my mind. I don't blame her, but I do mark that as my last moment of innocence in this new world. It might have been a vivid dream for myself but her physical reaction that morning turned my thinking. Something was clearly off. We'd both experienced the same sense of a day rewinding and that wasn't right. We talked it out and soon noticed that there was no power in the apartment. The refrigerator had died, our bedside clock was dim. Alexa would not respond to commands. Most concerning, both our cell phones failed to awaken at our touch.

The cell phones were the final straw, unleashing a torrent of wild fantasy. Had we been attacked? Was it an EMP? What was an EMP, exactly? Had we been irradiated by some nuclear bomb? It was so nice outside, nuclear holocaust was unthinkable. Had a sun flare wrecked our electronics? We hadn't heard anything about possible sun flares and felt like we should have. Was it aliens? We were so naive. If only it had been as simple as that. We dressed and ran out into the hallway. We were not the only ones to act on that instinct. Our neighbors and their kids - oh the kids! - packing hurriedly to return to venture out meet with family. Mothers, fathers, siblings. My wife and I, new to the town (heh, "new"), had no family. We naively thought we could jump in the car and make it to her parents' home in a few hours. As you know, the cars wouldn't work either and of course, we've never driven one again.

That first day, panic never quite set in. I don't think it had time. Sure, there was great movement, speeches and plans. The mayor Too Charge and we lined up around the town square to hear her updates. She was brilliant, calming us, organizing Expectation and hope carried us. She had sent people here, sent people there. Inventories of medical and food supplies were being taken, messengers sent by bicycle north and west along the highways. The police still took direction from her.

It was, as I say, brilliant. There was no mass panic. We rallied around her words, an infinite supply of life preservers. We didn't realize how empty all those efforts were and would, it seems, always be. I, for one, still place hope in the scientists. I'm an eternal optimist and most of them are as well.

When the second Great Reset started, a good half of the town was camped around the great statue of George Washington in the square. People had banded together. We had food, we had water and warming soda. People were passing around bottles of hard liquor - whiskey, rum, vodka. Children - oy - children ran around playing. We hadn't learned much yet about the surrounding towns except that they had experienced the same loss of power. We strained for the sounds of helicopters arriving to share news of some kind. The consensus was North Korea. I hope that man, his evil family and the entire regime have suffered every day since it started. Justice grows tired, though.

But if I could sum it all up - we were optimistic. We expected news and rescue and a return to normalcy soon. We'd awoken to find that power had restored in our sleep. Or certainly in the next few days. The government would arrive, the Internet would return and talking heads on television would explain everything to us. Sure, we'd debate it, but we know how to do that. As you can imagine, we were not ready for the second Great Reset at all.