

A
Brief History
Of
Time Travel
(Revised)

By
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To my Dad,

For giving me his sense of humour and his love of Pink Floyd – without which this book would never
have been written

Thank you to Mauro, for inadvertent inspiration

Chapter One

Date: 28th March 2344

It was a perfectly ordinary day. Just like all the other ones he had experienced. The ones where the sun rose, and mostly set. There were some days where the sun barely spiked above the peaks of the Sierra Nevada mountains; and others it just coasted along the plateaus and sunk into fog. Some days people died. Some days people were born. Some days life was hard. Some days people conned themselves into believing it wasn't. They were all ordinary days; even the ones where it seemed there could be no such thing.

These days were filled with people. People who ate, people who slept, people who got angry with their pets for destroying their new sofas, people who were sad when they realised it wasn't Friday. And then when it was Friday, the same people got sad anyway because the weekend was short, and they had already lived through most of it by the time it had hit five o'clock.

However, the odd thing about five o'clock on a Friday was that it could never end. One could simply disappear from one Friday night and slip into another, and another, and another until the money ran dry. There would be no Saturday morning hangover, because there would be no Saturday. There would be no Sunday blues because Sunday would always be a figment of the future; just that little bit out of reach. Monday's depression would never come. Tuesday's sleep deprived state was not a thing. The hump of Wednesday would be but faded memory. Thursday's optimism and hope could be consigned to history. Eternal happiness, at least for a little while.

Though Fridays could last forever, money could not. And while it was possible to live a thousand consecutive Fridays, the time would come when the party would stop, and the fun would end as summer sunshine ends in thunderstorms and rain.

That was the nature of Time Travel. It was as if skipping through a film, and while the dull and uninteresting bits could be avoided; ultimately it had to end. Everything always does.

The racket inundated his ears like artillery fire. The radio station was playing Golden Oldies from the 21st Century and it was making his ears bleed. It was the kind of music that children were pleased with, but adults hastily graduated from and every Thursday it played without fail.

It was exactly the kind of music that suited the joint that he worked in. Dilapidated, outdated, greasy and shunned by the intellectuals of society. The only reason it was able to maintain itself was its location. Conveniently placed, it was accessible for all 21st Century travellers who may pass through, or at least scoop up the custom overflow from other venues. Indeed, the diner was not at the top of anyone's list - not even the health and safety inspector's - and to a certain extent that suited Mauro perfectly.

With a plastic non-functional kitchen and an overzealous decoration harking back to only a semi-thought-out generation, it was an interchronal mess of cuisine and culture. In a world where grease infused food was shunned in modern society, the diner provided a precious resource for the lonely 22nd Century traveller or curious tourist in need of a succulent heart attack. Still, the owner was

playing the long game; having surreptitiously staked out the future food markets before declining an offer on the business. It was borderline illegal, but Nate had a way of not caring about the rules that Mauro envied to an extent.

Such a mindless job required an equally mindless state. Customers only interrupted that unconscious state and in such irritable ways: the food was too hot, the atmosphere too cold, it was the wrong colour of drink, it wasn't historically accurate enough. It was a never-ending cycle of complaint, and though every day was exactly the same that was *exactly* the way Mauro wanted it. Predictable, boring, expected.

A cold wind swept into the diner and rustled the napkins at the edge of the counter he'd just wiped clean. The entire day had been a cyclone of customers. Mauro had skipped his break in the hopes of finishing early, but when his colleague threw in the metaphorical towel and resigned, the crosshairs of responsibility narrowed onto his shoulders. It meant that absolutely everything that went wrong was his fault. As his boss barked orders from the comfortable rim of a coffee cup, Mauro shot backwards and forwards across the shitty vinyl flooring delivering sad plates of pathetic grease to less than impressed customers. The very soles of his feet were wearing away - almost as fast his own soul.

"Can I trouble you for a cup of your finest?" the girlish voice chirped at him from the other side of the counter behind him as a fresh breeze of steam burned his hand.

Mauro turned around, "Hi Janice, how's things?"

Her pristine uniform presented to the world the image of the world's most famous company: Time Corps. Janice - Mauro never learned her surname - worked across the atrium at the check-in desk. Her crooked nose and lust for coffee regularly visited the diner. They chatted often, but conversation never ventured beyond the playful misery of work. That day was no exception.

"Been a crazy afternoon," she said, examining her polished fingernails in the stark diner's light as Mauro's hands suffered another steamy defeat.

"Oh yeah?" he feigned interest as the coffee dust clattered his skin and suffocated him in a caffeine high as it spurt from the spout and drizzled into the watery mixture that he was going to sell to her for four hundred dollars more than it would have cost back in the era the diner was supposedly trying to recreate.

"Some guy tried to board the same service twice," she sighed, "With the same ticket - I mean it was stamped already and by me as well! What an idiot."

"Why was he trying to board twice?" Mauro looked at the dreadfully made coffee with disdain. He never drunk the stuff, and the thick mud that stared back at him in a placid reflection certainly solidified his desire never to try to.

"Apparently, he cheated on his wife on that trip - biggest mistake of his life so he was trying to rectify it," Janice said, "Because that *always* works."

"See this is why I don't do Time Travel... it's too...messy," he said, "I don't know why people bother." He handed the coffee over the counter. Janice was a much older woman but that scarcely stopped her eyes from wandering where he wished they wouldn't. Though, Mauro vaguely thought from time to time, she might be a hundred years younger than him in chronologically.

"It's not as bad as you think, Mauro," she smiled, simpering off back to her desk on the other side of the terminal.

As his eyes departed from the back of her surprisingly slender figure, they caught another set staring back at him. It was not the first time Mauro had seen them either. In the corner booth a solitary man had been sitting, sipping his drink slowly until the time came to order exactly another. He wanted no food. He had nothing to occupy his time. At first Mauro had written the weirdo off as a random Time Traveller, but as his shift elongated into eternity he began to think that he recognised the man from somewhere.

Often, on days significantly less busy than today, Mauro would gaze across the atrium and into the long lines and stressed queues of people waiting for the Time Network. The diner was in San Francisco's largest terminal and the only point from which to jump years into the past or future. Occasionally he would fantasize about what lay in waiting for him out there. He would sink his head into his hands in sheer boredom and ultimately lose himself in to make-believe. There was nothing that could ever make him Time Travel.

Mauro was by no means the only one who avoided the Time Travel Network. Many of his friends showed no interest in it beyond travelling to work, and he had heard of a colony living out in Western Australia who opposed of Time Travel so strongly they took no active part in accepting it existed. Still, Mauro was amongst the minority who declined to frivolously access time. He had never held a single visa or even so much as travelled an hour into the future to avoid being late for work. He wasn't exactly sure why. In principle, he didn't disagree with it; it was a perfectly normal mode of transport. His friends regularly went on holiday to the future, and even his boss had made a trip to 1950s America as part of a research business trip on authentic pancake recipes. Though he had one dark secret regarding a school trip to ancient Egypt that he never liked his mother mentioning around certain company. Never Time Travelling wasn't a status symbol as such, Mauro just didn't like to be contradicted.

It bothered him. Most days it didn't, but this particular Thursday it did. From the moment he woke up that day he felt annoyed by Time Travel. On the bus over, he thought eagerly about when he might travel had he the money. Tickets were not cheap. The future held so much promise that could easily be broken; the past seemed fixed, unadventurous. At least here in the present he knew what to expect. His family were nearby, well at least his mum, step-dad and two half-brothers. His biological father was another story; and one that he had not even reached the first chapter of. One day his dad was there, the next he was gone.

Ten years ago, his mum had found love with a truck driver named Don Kochanski and they had married and given birth to twins, Milo and Marvin. They were only five years old in Mauro's present, but already he knew them as adults for he shared the same apartment as them. Curiously, they were both older and younger than him. Their work brought them back to their early years. As auditors, they reviewed historical business practice and reported it back to their employers on a quarterly basis. It was by pure chance they were assigned the same Timezone as the one they were born into. The men Mauro ate breakfast with every morning or went drinking with of an evening were exactly the same boys he would read bedtimes stories to and in a world where Time Travel was as regular as catching a train, this was not even the least bit extraordinary.

By sunset the rush had diminished to three customers in the diner that evening. It was a slow evening of fake smiles, wiping already clean surfaces and swiping away dirty dishes from disinterested faces. At least there were no mad requests for items blatantly not on the menu, and no fights had started... at least not yet. It was just an insatiably dull shift. He was at least relieved when a hand was raised from one of the tables and he was able to obediently whip them up the grimmest cup of coffee this side of the 21st century. Hours previously Mauro's boss had departed in the arms of a desperate twenty-something-year old, and he was glad the of the peace.

As he deposited the disgusting drinks on their table in the manner befitting of the 1980s USA vibe they were after, the liquid spilled over the edge and drowned the table in a spiteful smear that he knew he would inevitably have to clear up later. But it was all part of the service; part of the decor. When Nate Wilson had bought the joint over twenty years ago, he had inherited pristine premises. No sooner than the building deeds were in his hands than he set about demolishing it until it

resembled the decrepit state that Mauro now circumnavigated with disdain for four days out of seven.

Over the past five years he had worked here, Mauro had served millions of customers from all over the world and throughout every age he could possibly think of. There were the Norwegians from 4295 who had laughed at the simplicity of the meal served to them; and the Australians who had eyed every angle of the place in awed reverence. Most of the travellers barely acknowledged the place for what it was and instead subscribed to its inadequacies. Mauro had to laugh, for even he couldn't see past the cheapness of the place.

It was exactly the sort of dead end job that a dead-end kind of guy needed in his life. There was zero responsibility - most of the work was actually done by robots in the kitchen - so his job was mainly to saunter around epitomising the struggle and misery of the 1950s underpaid employee; which was a task he did not find considerably challenging considering he was a miserable 2340s underpaid employee.

Amongst the long list of drawbacks, however, was its location: inside the Y-Terminal. Time Travel seemed to mock him everywhere he went. To him, there was something to be said about taking the long route through life. Everyone was desperate for shortcuts - and it seemed that when the ultimate shortcut came, they weren't really sure what to do with the time that they saved. Many went back on their own lives to try to change it - not inherently illegal, but downright depressing nonetheless, and frequently fruitless. Mauro looked back on his own life; what part of that would he want to revisit? The bullying in the playground? His first girlfriend ditching him for another boy in another Timezone? The endless anecdotes mocked him as he cleared the empty plates from the table the two girls had just vacated. They had left him a tip in a currency long since defunct. He slid the coins into the bin alongside their rubbish.

It was now just Mauro, bad lighting, mouldy bread, the sticky substance underneath the authentic 1990s (it was close enough to the 60s) coffee machine that no one had yet felt courageous enough to combat, and the man sitting in the end of the booth. He hadn't ordered anything in over an hour and quite frankly Mauro was grateful for it. He was in no mood to entertain customers with cheap grins and false enquiries into how their miserable lives were going. If his boss had been around, it might have been another story; as it was Mauro continued to clear up around him, wasting time until his shift was over, and he would close up for the night.

In twelve hours' time he would be back again. If he hopped into the Time Travel Network now he would walk in on himself sweeping up food debris; but the world wasn't ready for that kind of depressing scenario. There was only enough room for one sarcastic, miserable twat in the world at any given time, and he was it.

Little under an hour later, he was disposing of a particularly interesting formation of mould into the waste and as he turned around, he saw the man from the booth standing at the counter.

"Do you need the bill?" Mauro asked, not even remotely attempting a smile let alone the hideous accent Nate made him do whenever he was around.

"No," the man said, stepping under the light.

He looked vaguely familiar; probably one of those weirdo Time Tourists who liked to revisit the places they went with their ex-girlfriends in a desperate bid to try and dupe them into sleeping with an older version of themselves.

"Right, well I'm closing up now, so you can't order anything else," Mauro said, releasing the bill from the machine and handing it to the man.

He didn't even acknowledge it.

"We accept 21st Century dollars, Hop-credits, Swiss Findles, Canadian D-"

"I have the right money," he said, "Not that much has changed in twenty-nine years."

"Oh, is that when you've come from?" Mauro asked, secretly seething underneath. Small talk was for pricks with not enough going on in their lives.

"Yes," the man said, "I suppose it was too much to ask for you to recognise me?"

Mauro stood back and surveyed the customer with a frown, "Maybe I've seen you before? A lot of people come and go here, mate. If you could just settle up the tab, I really need to clo-"

The man pushed the bill back towards Mauro.

"I am sorry I left."

"Left what?" You're going to have to pay that regardless," Mauro pushed the receipt back in the man's direction.

He didn't need this hassle. He had a luxurious night of sleep planned and in a few minutes time he would be free of any obligation to stay.

"You," he said.

"Are you okay? Did you drop out of the wrong Timezone? This is 2344, is this when you are supposed to be?"

"Yes, this is exactly when I wanted to be," he said.

"Right, well, if you don't mind paying up -"

"I didn't think I'd find you this soon," he said, "It's literally been hours since I last saw you."

"Oh hey, is this a Time Travel thing? Have I yet to meet you and you're a bit confused? Sometimes we get customers who come back thinking it's later than their first visit and then we get a shit tonne of bad reviews because they think we are rude or something..."

"Yes, we have met before, but not in your future. Both our pasts."

"Okay, well it's nice to see you again, but I really have to go -"

Mauro was at the point of paying off the bill himself. It was only a few drinks anyway.

"I'm your father," the man said.

Mauro stood back, squinting.

"My father left me -"

"Yes, four hours ago," he said.

"Twenty-nine fucking years ago!" Mauro yelled, faltering backwards in shock.

The man advanced around the counter, "Please, don't be angry-"

"I'm not angry! I'm fucking furious!"

Everything was true. The nagging feeling of familiarity that had been tugging his memories all evening had finally pulled out the picture of a man holding his mother's hand in an old family photographic album. He hadn't looked at them for years; not since he was a kid, why would he bother reminding himself what his father looked like when he would never meet him?

"Mauro, I'm sorry."

"Why the fuck did you just leave? I was five months old! I needed you! And why come back now? Actually, can you just leave?"

His father approached him tenderly, "Please, son -"

He couldn't help it. His fist was magnetically attracted to the man's face. It plunged right into his skin, which rippled delightfully on impact; blood splashed and veins and capillaries ruptured with the satisfaction that only a twenty-nine-year wait can distil.