

When it happens, this is what happens: I shoot myself.

Not, you know, my self self. I shoot my future self. He steps out of a time machine, introduces himself as Charles Yu. What else am I supposed to do? I kill him. I kill my own future.



(module α)





There is just enough space inside here for one person to live indefinitely, or at least that's what the operation manual says. *User can survive inside the TM-31 Recreational Time Travel Device, in isolation, for an indefinite period of time.*

I am not totally sure what that means. Maybe it doesn't actually mean anything, which would be fine, which would be okay by me, because that's what I've been doing: living in here, indefinitely. The Tense Operator has been set to Present-Indefinite for I don't know how long—some time now—and although I still pick up the occasional job from Dispatch, they seem to come less frequently these days and so, when I'm not working, I like to wedge the gearshift in P-I and just sort of cruise.

My gums hurt. It's hard to focus. There must be some kind of internal time distortion effect in here, because when I look at myself in the little mirror above my sink, what I see is my father's face, my face turning into his. I am beginning to feel how the man looked, especially how he looked on those nights he came home so tired he couldn't even make it through dinner without nodding off, sitting there with his bowl of soup cooling in front



of him, a rich pork-and-winter-melon-saturated broth that, moment by moment, was losing—or giving up—its tiny quantum of heat into the vast average temperature of the universe.

The base model TM-31 runs on state-of-the-art chronodiegetical technology: a six-cylinder grammar drive built on a quad-core physics engine, which features an applied temporalinguistics architecture allowing for free-form navigation within a rendered environment, such as, for instance, a story space and, in particular, a science fictional universe.

Or, as Mom used to say: it's a box. You get into it. You push some buttons. It takes you to other places, different times. Hit this switch for the past, pull up that lever for the future. You get out and hope the world has changed. Or at least maybe you have.

I don't get out much these days. At least I have a dog, sort of. He was retconned out of some space western. It was the usual deal: hero, on his way up, has a trusty canine sidekick, then hero gets famous and important and all of that and by the time season two rolls around, hero doesn't feel like sharing the spotlight anymore, not with a scruffy-looking mutt. So they put the little guy in a trash pod and sent him off.

I found him just as he was about to drift into a black hole. He had a face like soft clay, and haunches that were bald in spots where he'd been chewing off his own fur. I don't think anyone has ever been as happy to see anything as this dog was to see me. He licked my face and that was that. I asked him what he wanted his name to be. He didn't say anything so I named him Ed.

The smell of Ed is pretty powerful in here, but I'm okay with that. He's a good dog, sleeps a lot, sometimes licks his paw to



comfort himself. Doesn't need food or water. I'm pretty sure he doesn't even know that he doesn't exist. Ed is just this weird ontological entity that produces unconditional slobbery loyal affection. Superfluous. Gratuitous. He must violate some kind of conservation law. Something from nothing: all of this saliva. And, I guess, love. Love from the abandoned heart of a non-existent dog.

Because I work in the time travel industry, everyone assumes I must be a scientist. Which is sort of correct. I was studying for my master's in applied science fiction—I wanted to be a structural engineer like my father—and then the whole situation with Mom got worse, and with my dad missing I had to do what made sense, and then things got even worse, and this job came along, and I took it.

Now I fix time machines for a living.

To be more specific, I am a certified network technician for T-Class personal-use chronogrammatical vehicles, and an approved independent affiliate contractor for Time Warner Time, which owns and operates this universe as a spatio-temporal structure and entertainment complex zoned for retail, commercial, and residential use. The job is pretty chill for the most part, although right this moment I'm not loving it because I think my Tense Operator might be breaking down.

It's happening now. Or maybe not. Maybe it was earlier today. Or yesterday. Maybe it broke down a long time ago. Maybe that's the point: if it is broken and my transmission has been shifting randomly in and out of gears, then how would I ever know when it happened? Maybe I'm the one who broke it, trying to fool myself, thinking I could live like this, thinking I could stay out here forever.



. . .

The red indicator light just came on. I'm looking at the run-time error report. It's like a mathematically precise way of saying, *This is not how you do this, man*. Meaning life, I suppose. It's computer for *Hey, buddy, you are massively bungling this up*. I know it. I know it better than anyone. I don't need silicon wafers with a slightly neurotic interface to tell me that.

That would be TAMMY, by the way. The TM-31's computer UI comes in one of two personality skins: TIM or TAMMY. You can only choose once, the first time you boot up, and you're stuck with your choice forever.

I'm not going to lie. I chose the girl one. Is TAMMY's curvilinear pixel configuration kind of sexy? Yes it is. Does she have chestnut-colored hair and dark brown eyes behind pixilated librarian glasses and a voice like a cartoon princess? Yes and yes and yes. Have I ever, in all my time in this unit, ever done you know what to a screenshot of you know who? I'm not going to answer that. All I will say is that at a certain point, you lose the capacity for embarrassment. I'm not there yet, but I'm not far from it. Let's see. I've got a nontrivial thinning situation going on with the hair. I am, rounding to the nearest, oh, about five nine, 185. Plus or minus. Mostly plus. I might be hiding from history in here, but I'm not hiding from biology. Or gravity. So yeah, I went with TAMMY.

Do you want to know the first thing she ever said to me? ENTER PASSWORD. Okay, yeah, that was the first thing. Do you know the second thing? I AM INCAPABLE OF LYING TO YOU. The third thing she said to me was I'M SORRY.

"Sorry for what?" I said.



“I’m not a very good computer program,” she said.

“I’ve never met software with low self-esteem.”

“I’ll try hard, though,” she said. “I really want to do a good job for you.”

TAMMY always thinks everything is about to go to hell. Always telling me how bad things could get. So yeah, it hasn’t been what I expected. Do I regret it sometimes? Sure I do. Would I choose TAMMY again? Sure I would. What do you want me to say? I’m lonely. She’s nice. She lets me flirt with her. I have a thing for my operating system. There. I said it.

I’ve never been married. I never got married. The woman I didn’t marry is named Marie. Technically, she doesn’t exist. Just like Ed.

Except that she does. A little paradox, you might think, but really, The Woman I Never Married is a perfectly valid ontological entity. Or class of entities. I suppose technically you could make the argument that *every* woman is The Woman I Never Married. So why not call her Marie, that was my thinking.

This is how we never met:

One fine spring day, Marie went to the park in the center of town, near the middle school and the old bakery that is now a furniture warehouse. I’m assuming. She must have, right? Someone like her must have done something like this at some point in time. Marie packed her lunch and a paperback and walked the half mile to the park from the house where she lived or never lived. She sat on a worn, wooden bench, and read her book, and nibbled on her sandwich. The air was warm syrup, was literally thick with pollen and dandelion clocks and photons moving at the speed of light. An hour passed, then two. I never arrived at the park, wearing the only suit I never had, the one with a hole



in the side pocket that no one ever saw. I never noticed her that first time, never saw her looking at the tops of the eucalyptus trees, running her thumb over the worn page corners of the book open, faceup, on her lap. I never did catch her eye while tripping over my own foot, never made her laugh that first time. I never asked what her name was. She never told me that it was Marie. A week later, I did not call her. A year later, we did not get married in a little white church on a hill overlooking the park where, on that first afternoon, we shared a bench, asked polite questions, tried hard not to stare at each other while we imagined the perfect life we were never going to have together, a life we never even lost, a life that would have started, right at that moment, and never did.

I wake up to the sound of TAMMY crying.

“How do you even know how to do that?” I ask her. I wish I could be more sensitive, but I just don’t understand why they would program her to have such depressive tendencies. “Like, where in your code are you getting this from?”

This makes her cry even harder, to the point where she starts to do that warbly gasping heaving sobbing thing that little kids do, which makes no sense, because it’s not like TAMMY has a mouth, or vocal cords, or lungs. I generally like to think of myself as pretty empathetic, but for some reason my reaction to crying has always been like this. It’s hard for me to watch and just generally stresses me out so much that my initial response is to get mad, and then of course I feel like a monster, which is immediately followed by guilt, oh, the guilt. I feel guilty, I feel like a terrible person. I am a terrible person. I’m a 185-pound sack of guilt.



Or maybe I'm not. Maybe it's just that I'm not the person I was going to be. Whatever that means. Maybe that's what messing with the Tense Operator does to you. You can't even say things that mean anything anymore.

I would ask TAMMY what she's crying about, but it almost doesn't matter. My mother would do this, too, all that liquid emotion just filling her up, right up to the top of her tank, a heavy, sloshing volume, which at any moment could be tipped over, emptied out into the world.

I tell TAMMY it will be all right. She says what will be all right? I say whatever you are crying about. She says that is exactly what she's crying about. That everything is all right. That the world isn't ending. That we'll never tell each other how we really feel because everything is okay. Okay enough to just sit around, being okay. Okay enough that we forget that we don't have long, that it's late, late in this universe, and at some point in the future, it's not going to be okay.

Sometimes at night I worry about TAMMY. I worry that she might get tired of it all. Tired of running at sixty-six terahertz, tired of all those processing cycles, every second of every hour of every day. I worry that one of these cycles she might just halt her own subroutine and commit software suicide. And then I would have to do an error report, and I don't know how I would even begin to explain that to Microsoft.

I don't have many friends. TAMMY, I guess. Her soul is code, is a fixed set of instructions, and although you might think having a relationship with someone like that would get boring after a while, it doesn't. TAMMY's AI is good. Really good. She's smarter than I am, by a mile, by an order of magnitude. In all



the time I've known her, TAMMY's never said the same thing to me twice, which is more than you can ask from most human friends. Plus, I have Ed for petting and body heat. I think that probably sounds more yucky than it really is.

That's pretty much it for companionship from sentient beings. I don't mind solitude. A lot of people who work in time machine repair are secretly trying to write their novels. Others are fresh off a breakup or divorce or some personal tragedy. Me, I just like the quiet.

Still, it can get lonely. One of the perks of the job is that I get to use the mini-wormhole generator in my unit for personal purposes, so long as any distortions I create in the fabric of space-time are completely reversible. I modified it slightly to pry open really tiny temporary quantum windows into other universes, through which I am able to spy on my alternate selves. I've seen thirty-nine of them, these varieties of me, and about thirty-five of them seem like total jerks. I guess I've come to terms with that, with what it probably means. If 89.7 percent of the other versions of you are assholes, chances are you aren't exactly mister personality yourself. The worst part is that a lot of them are doing pretty well. A lot better than I am, although that's not saying much.

Sometimes when I'm brushing my teeth, I'll look in the mirror and I swear my reflection seems kind of disappointed. I realized a couple of years ago that not only am I not super-skilled at anything, I'm not even particularly good at being myself.

