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All Our Wrong Todays

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All Our Wrong Todays

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For my wife

All Our Wrong Todays

So, the thing is, I come from the world we were supposed to have.

That means nothing to you, obviously, because you live here, in the crappy world we *do* have. But it never should've turned out like this. And it's all my fault – well, me and to a lesser extent my father and, yeah, I guess a little bit Penelope.

It's hard to know how to start telling this story. But, okay, you know the future that people in the 1950s imagined we'd have? Flying cars, robot maids, food pills, teleportation, jet packs, moving sidewalks, ray guns, hover boards, space vacations, and moon bases. All that dazzling, transformative technology our grandparents were certain was right around the corner. The stuff of world's fairs and pulp science-fiction magazines with titles like *Fantastic Future Tales* and *The Amazing World of Tomorrow*. Can you picture it?

Well, it happened.

It all happened, more or less exactly as envisioned. I'm not talking about the future. I'm talking about the *present*. Today, in the year 2016, humanity lives in a techno-utopian paradise of abundance, purpose, and wonder.

Except we don't. Of course we don't. We live in a world where, sure, there are iPhones and 3D printers and, I don't know, drone strikes or whatever. But it hardly looks like *The Jetsons*. Except it should. And it did. Until it didn't. But it would have, if I hadn't done what I did. Or, no, hold on, what I *will* have done.

I'm sorry, despite receiving the best education available to a citizen of the World of Tomorrow, the grammar of this situation is a bit complicated.

Maybe the first person is the wrong way to tell this story. Maybe if I take refuge in the third person I'll find some sort of distance or insight or at least peace of mind. It's worth a try.

Tom Barren wakes up into his own dream.

Every night, neural scanners map his dreams while he sleeps so that both his conscious and unconscious thought patterns can be effectively modeled. Every morning, the neural scanners transmit the current dream-state data into a program that generates a real-time virtual projection into which he seamlessly rouses. The dream's scattershot plot is made increasingly linear and lucid until a psychologically pleasing resolution is achieved at the moment of full consciousness . . .

I'm sorry – I can't write like this. It's fake. It's safe.

The third person is comforting because it's in control, which feels really nice when relating events that were often so out of control. It's like a scientist describing a biological sample seen through a microscope. But I'm not the microscope. I'm the thing on the slide. And I'm not writing this to make myself comfortable. If I wanted comfort, I'd write fiction.

In fiction, you cohere all these evocative, telling details into a portrait of the world. But in everyday life, you hardly notice any of the little things. You can't. Your brain swoops past it all, especially when it's your own home, a place that feels barely separate from the inside of your mind or the outside of your body.

When you wake up from a real dream into a virtual one, it's like you're on a raft darting this way and that according to the blurry, impenetrable currents of your unconscious, until you find yourself gliding onto a wide, calm, shallow lake, and

the slippery, fraught weirdness dissolves into serene, reassuring clarity. The story wraps up the way it feels like it must, and no matter how unsettling the content, you wake with the rejuvenating solidity of order restored. And that's when you realize you're lying in bed, ready to start the day, with none of that sticky subconscious gristle caught in the cramped folds of your mind.

It might be what I miss most about where I come from. Because in this world waking up sucks.

Here, it's like nobody has considered using even the most rudimentary technology to improve the process. Mattresses don't subtly vibrate to keep your muscles loose. Targeted steam valves don't clean your body in slumber. I mean, blankets are made from tufts of plant fiber spun into thread and occasionally stuffed with feathers. Feathers. Like from actual birds. Waking up should be the best moment of your day, your unconscious and conscious minds synchronized and harmonious.

Getting dressed involves an automated device that cuts and stitches a new outfit every morning, indexed to your personal style and body type. The fabric is made from laser-hardened strands of a light-sensitive liquid polymer that's recycled nightly for daily reuse. For breakfast, a similar system outputs whatever meal you feel like from a nutrient gel mixed with color, flavor, and texture protocols. And if that sounds gross to you, in practice it's indistinguishable from what you think of as real food, except that it's uniquely gauged to your tongue's sensory receptors so it tastes and feels ideal every time. You know that sinking feeling you get when you cut into an avocado, only to find that it's either hard and under-ripe or brown and bruised under its skin? Well, I didn't know that could even happen until I came here. Every avocado I ever ate was perfect.

It's weird to be nostalgic for experiences that both did and didn't exist. Like waking up every morning completely refreshed. Something I didn't even realize I *could* take for granted because it was simply the way things were. But that's the point, of course – the way things were . . . never was.

What I'm not nostalgic for is that every morning when I woke up and got dressed and ate breakfast in this glittering technological utopia, I was alone.

On July 11, 1965, Lionel Goettreider invented the future.

Obviously you've never heard of him. But where I come from, Lionel Goettreider is the most famous, beloved, and respected human on the planet. Every city has dozens of things named after him: streets, buildings, parks, whatever. Every kid knows how to spell his name using the catchy mnemonic tune that goes *G-O-E-T-T-R-E-I-D-E-R*.

You have no idea what I'm talking about. But if you were from where I'm from, it'd be as familiar to you as *A-B-C*.

Fifty-one years ago, Lionel Goettreider invented a revolutionary way to generate unlimited, robust, absolutely clean energy. His device came to be called the Goettreider Engine. July 11, 1965, was the day he turned it on for the very first time. It made everything possible.

Imagine that the last five decades happened with no restrictions on energy. No need to dig deeper and deeper into the ground and make the skies dirtier and dirtier. Nuclear became unnecessarily tempestuous. Coal and oil pointlessly murky. Solar and wind and even hydropower became quaint low-fidelity alternatives that nobody bothered with unless they were peculiarly determined to live off the main grid.

So, how did the Goettreider Engine work?

How does electricity work? How does a microwave oven work? How does your cell phone or television or remote control work? Do you actually understand on, like, a concrete technical level? If those technologies disappeared, could you

reconceive, redesign, and rebuild them from scratch? And, if not, why not? You only use these things pretty much every single day.

But of course you don't know. Because unless your job's in a related field you don't need to know. They just *work*, effortlessly, as they were intended to.

Where I come from, that's how it is with the Goettreider Engine. It was important enough to make Goettreider as recognizable a name as Einstein or Newton or Darwin. But how it functioned, like, technically? I really couldn't tell you.

Basically, you know how a dam produces energy? Turbines harness the natural propulsion of water flowing downward via gravity to generate electricity. To be clear, that's more or less *all* I understand about hydroelectric power. Gravity pulls water down, so if you stick a turbine in its path, the water spins it around and somehow makes energy.

The Goettreider Engine does that with the planet. You know that the Earth spins on its axis and also revolves around the Sun, while the Sun itself moves endlessly through the solar system. Like water through a turbine, the Goettreider Engine harnesses the constant rotation of the planet to create boundless energy. It has something to do with magnetism and gravity and . . . honestly, I don't know – any more than I genuinely understand an alkaline battery or a combustion engine or an incandescent light bulb. They just work.

So does the Goettreider Engine. It just works.

Or it did. Before, you know, *me*.

I am not a genius. If you've read this far, you're already aware of that fact.

But my father is a legitimate full-blown genius of the highest order. After finishing his third PhD, Victor Barren spent a few crucial years working in long-range teleportation before founding his own lab to pursue his specific niche field – time travel.

Even where I come from, time travel was considered more or less impossible. Not because of time, actually, but because of space.

Here's why every time-travel movie you've ever seen is total bullshit: because the Earth moves.

You know this. Plus I mentioned it last chapter. The Earth spins all the way around once a day, revolves around the Sun once a year, while the Sun is on its own cosmic route through the solar system, which is itself hurtling through a galaxy that's wandering an epic path through the universe.

The ground under you is moving, really fast. Along the equator, the Earth rotates at over 1,000 miles per hour, twenty-four hours a day, while orbiting the Sun at a little over 67,000 miles per hour. That's 1,600,000 miles per day. Meanwhile our solar system is in motion relative to the Milky Way galaxy at more than 1,300,000 miles per hour, covering just shy of 32,000,000 miles per day. And so on.

If you were to travel back in time to yesterday, the Earth would be in a different place in space. Even if you travel back

in time one second, the Earth below your feet can move nearly half a kilometer. In one second.

The reason every movie about time travel is nonsense is that the Earth moves, constantly, always. You travel back one day, you don't end up in the same location – you end up in the gaping vacuum of outer space.

Marty McFly didn't appear thirty years earlier in his hometown of Hill Valley, California. His tricked-out DeLorean materialized in the endless empty blackness of the cosmos with the Earth approximately 350,000,000,000 miles away. Assuming he didn't immediately lose consciousness from the lack of oxygen, the absence of air pressure would cause all the fluids in his body to bubble, partially evaporate, and freeze. He would be dead in less than a minute.

The Terminator would probably survive in space because it's an unstoppable robot killing machine, but traveling from 2029 to 1984 would've given Sarah Connor a 525,000,000,000-mile head start.

Time travel doesn't just require traveling back in time. It also requires traveling back to a pinpoint-specific location in space. Otherwise, just like with regular old everyday teleportation, you could end up stuck *inside* something.

Think about where you're sitting right now. Let's say on an olive-green couch. A white ceramic bowl of fake green pears and real brown pinecones propped next to your feet on the teak coffee table. A brushed-steel floor lamp glows over your shoulder. A coarse rug over reclaimed barn-board elm floors that cost too much but look pretty great . . .

If you were to teleport even a few inches in any direction, your body would be embedded in a solid object. One inch, you're wounded. Two inches, you're maimed. Three inches, you're dead.

Every second of the day, we're all three inches from being dead.

Which is why teleportation is safe and effective only if it's between dedicated sites on an exactingly calibrated system.

My father's early work in teleportation was so important because it helped him understand the mechanics of disincorporating and re-incorporating a human body between discrete locations. It's what stymied all previous time-travel initiatives. Reversing the flow of time isn't even that complex. What's outrageously complex is instantaneous space travel with absolute accuracy across potentially billions of miles.

My father's genius wasn't just about solving both the theoretical and logistical challenges of time travel. It was about recognizing that in this, as in so many other aspects of everyday life, our savior was Lionel Goettreider.

The first Goettreider Engine was turned on once and never turned off – it's been running without interruption since 2:03 P.M. on Sunday, July 11, 1965.

Goettreider's original device wasn't designed to harness and emit large-scale amounts of energy. It was an experimental prototype that performed beyond its inventor's most grandiose expectations. But the whole point of a Goettreider Engine is that it never has to be deactivated, just as the planet never stops moving. So, the prototype was left running in the same spot where it was first switched on, in front of a small crowd of sixteen observers in a basement laboratory in section B7 of the San Francisco State Science and Technology Center.

Where I come from, every schoolkid knows the names and faces of the Sixteen Witnesses. Numerous books have been written about every single one of them, with their presence at this ultimate hinge in history shoved into the chronology of their individual lives as the defining event, whether or not it was factually true.

Countless works of art have depicted *The Activation of the Goettreider Engine*. It's *The Last Supper* of the modern world, those sixteen faces, each with its own codified reaction. Skeptical. Awed. Distracted. Amused. Jealous. Angry. Thoughtful. Frightened. Detached. Concerned. Excited. Nonchalant. Harried. There's three more. Damn it, I should know this . . .

When the prototype Engine was first turned on, Goettreider

just wanted to verify his calculations and prove his theory wasn't completely misguided – all it had to do was actually *work*. And it did work, but it had a major defect. It emitted a unique radiation signature, what was later called *tau radiation*, a nod to how physics uses the Greek capital letter T to represent *proper time* in relativity equations.

As the Engine's miraculous energy-generating capacities expanded to power the whole world, the tau radiation signature was eliminated from the large-scale industrial models. But the prototype was left to run, theoretically forever, in Goettreider's lab in San Francisco – now among the most visited museums on the planet – out of respect, nostalgia, and a legally rigid clause in Goettreider's last will and testament.

My father's idea was to use the original device's tau radiation signature as a bread-crumbs trail through space and time, each crumb the size of an atom, a knotted thread to the past, looping through the cosmos with an anchor fixed at the most important moment in history – Sunday, July 11, 1965, 2:03:48 P.M., the exact second Lionel Goettreider started the future. It meant that not only could my father send someone back in time to a very specific moment, the tau radiation trail would lead them to a very specific location – Lionel Goettreider's lab, right before the world changed forever.

With this realization, my father had almost every piece of the time-travel puzzle. There was only one last thing, minor compared to transporting a sentient human being into the past, but major in terms of not accidentally shredding the present – a way to ensure the time traveler can't affect the past in any tangible way. There were several crucial safeguards in my father's design, but the only one I care about is the *defusion sphere*. Because that's how Penelope Weschler's life collided with mine.

Nearly every object of art and entertainment is different in this world. Early on, the variations aren't that significant. But as the late 1960s gave way to the vast technological and social leaps of the 1970s, almost everything changed, generating decades of pop culture that never existed – fifty years of writers and artists and musicians creating an entirely *other* body of work. Sometimes there are fascinating parallels, a loose story point in one version that's the climax in another, a line of dialogue in the wrong character's mouth, a striking visual composition framed in a new context, a familiar chord progression with radically altered lyrics.

July 11, 1965, was the pivot of history even if nobody knew it yet.

Fortunately, Lionel Goettreider's favorite novel was published in 1963 – *Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

Vonnegut's writing is different where I come from. Here, despite his wit and insight, you get the impression he felt a novelist could have no real effect on the world. He was compelled to write, but with little faith that writing might change anything.

Because *Cat's Cradle* influenced Lionel Goettreider so deeply, in my world Vonnegut was considered among the most significant philosophers of the late twentieth century. This was probably great for Vonnegut personally but less so for his novels, which became increasingly homiletic.

I won't summarize *Cat's Cradle* for you. It's short and much

better written than this book, so just go read it. It's weary, cheeky, and wise, which are my three favorite qualities in people and art.

Tangentially – Weary, Cheeky, and Wise are the three codified reactions I couldn't remember from the Sixteen Witnessess to the Activation.

Cat's Cradle is about a lot of things, but a major plot thread involves the invention of Ice-nine, a substance that freezes everything it touches, which falls out of its creator's control and destroys all life on the planet.

Lionel Goettreider read *Cat's Cradle* and had a crucial realization, what he called the 'Accident' – when you invent a new technology, you also invent the accident of that technology.

When you invent the car, you also invent the car accident. When you invent the plane, you also invent the plane crash. When you invent nuclear fission, you also invent the nuclear meltdown. When you invent Ice-nine, you also invent unintentionally freezing the planet solid.

When Lionel Goettreider invented the Goettreider Engine, he knew he couldn't turn it on until he figured out its accident – and how to prevent it.

My favorite exhibit at the Goettreider Museum is the simulation of what *could've* happened if the Engine had somehow malfunctioned when Goettreider first turned it on. In the worst-case scenario, the unprecedented amounts of energy pulled in by the Engine overwhelm its intake core, triggering an explosion that melts San Francisco into a smoldering crater, poisons the Pacific Ocean with tau radiation, corrodes 10,000 square miles of arable land into a stew of pain, and renders an impressive swath of North America uninhabitable for decades. Parents would occasionally complain to the museum's curatorial staff that the simulation's nightmarish

imagery was too graphic for children and, since the experiment obviously *didn't* fail, why draw attention away from Goettreider's majestic contributions to human civilization with grotesque speculation about imaginary global disasters? The simulation was eventually moved to an out-of-the-way corner of the museum, where generations of teenagers on high school field trips would huddle in the darkness and watch the world fall apart on a continuous loop.

I'm not a genius like Lionel Goettreider or Kurt Vonnegut or my father. But I have a theory too: The Accident doesn't just apply to technology, it also applies to people. Every person you meet introduces the accident of that person to you. What can go right and what can go wrong. There is no intimacy without consequence.

Which brings me back to Penelope Weschler and the accident of us. Of all of us.