

Doppelganger

Chapter 1

Frank, Marcia and George all take their morning coffee break at 10:30 am. Every morning of the week they look at their watches, put down the phone, save the document they are working on and stop what they are doing for fifteen minutes. Frank is usually on conference calls from the moment he steps into the office at 7:30 until this first break. George, a software engineer, rarely leaves his desk. Marcia smokes. The shop associates at the Timothy's[u1] and the Tim Horton's, where Frank and Marcia buy their coffees, respectively, announce the beginning of the rush based on their arrivals.

Every day, this fifteen minute break has its own personality, which reflects the state of time on that given day. Time ebbs and flows and expands and contracts, like every other bit of matter on the planet. On the whole, it averages out. Over the course of a day, a year, a life, it settles in to the neat compartments of seconds, minutes and hours. It follows a rhythm throughout the course of the day, slowing down between two and four in the afternoon and two and four in the morning, approximately.

None of this affects the workings of the world or the unfolding of people's lives beyond the occasional feeling that time has slowed to a standstill, or that a watched pot never boils.

Time is gravity's sister. The gravitational pull of the sun and the moon balance each other out, on average, and give us the natural rhythms the world follows. Time, like gravity, has a sun and a moon, two sides that tug at us as we move through the world. There are, however, patterned occurrences where time splits open for a brief instant before slipping quietly back into its natural path. Like a total eclipse[u2], where two gravitational fields line up and combine their forces to tear the ocean out of its basin, the flow of time will sometimes open to reveal the other side of life, the upside down reality that flows unnoticed alongside our every waking moment.

Today, on Frank and George and Marcia's coffee break, time opens up. Like a river that comes across an island in the middle of its current, time splits and then flows on, leaving the water unchanged.

Frank

Frank wears a dark suit because it's always acceptable. He is a professional of indeterminate age.

Wings of grey at his temple. He drives a Saab, slightly outside the norm of the standard grade middle-tier executive BMW. He is a Vice President of Systems Operations, one of 115 other Vice Presidents in the company. Twenty Senior Vice-Presidents, of which he plans to become in the next year or two. He presents well.

He buys lottery tickets because they offer a slight jolt of energy. He buys these underground. Where he parks and buys CDs and most of his Christmas presents and picks up steaks for dinner on his way home. Frank is a good man. He is married and has two children, goes to church on Sundays and keeps his work life buttoned up in a briefcase when he leaves the office.

Completely at odds with his appearance, Frank likes to choose activities that push the limits of safety. He regularly drives his Saab at speeds of 135-150 km/hour. Last month he spent an extra three days following a business trip in New Mexico parasailing[u3]. His favourite sport is boxing. Of these three facts, his wife is only aware that Frank likes boxing, which she chooses to overlook as a by-product of Frank's lower middle-class upbringing. It comes from the same place as the Cheese Whiz and celery [u4] Frank will indulge in when allowed to make his own lunch.

Today he is buying a coffee at Timothy's. It is his morning break. He's pouring the excess coffee out of a Styrofoam cup and into the grate to leave room for the cream. As he rights the cup and reaches for the cream, Frank looks up and through the pane of glass with the Timothy's logo on it and directly into the eyes of a man who is identical to him in every way. The man is carrying a bouquet of roses. Frank's mouth shapes itself into a perfectly round "O" of surprise. He startles and spills scalding hot coffee onto his hand, which causes him to jump and drop the entire cup of coffee. The cup bounces off the edge of the counter, splashing hot coffee all down the front of his suit pants. Frank springs back, too late. He looks down and sees the large stain running down his pants and a puddle of coffee spreading across the floor. When he looks up again, the man is gone. Frank is immediately surrounded by a group of concerned well-wishers and friendly helper-outers, who he pushes past, leaving the spilled coffee on the floor and a second, untouched cup on the cream and sugar counter.

The man with the roses sees only his reflection in the window and keeps moving toward the escalators that will take him under the street to the north, straight to the elevators of the office tower where he works, and up to the empty office where he has arranged to meet the woman with whom he is having an affair.

Frank has run out to the large open concourse area. Sunlight shines through the glass-panelled second floor and breaks the uniformity of the underground halogen lighting. He stands for a moment in the concourse with a large wet stain that begins at his belt, encompasses his groin and continues down his left leg. His hair is ruffled and his breathing is erratic. He turns in a full circle, runs to the fountain where he can see up to the mezzanine, runs back the other direction past the Timothy's Coffee where a blue-aproned associate is mopping the floor by the cream and sugar counter.

"Exactly", he mutters to himself. He catches sight of his reflection in the window of The Gap and realizes how quickly a man's appearances can dissolve into those of a lunatic. He pulls his Blackberry out of its holster, dials, waits a minute, then asks his assistant to inform any callers that he is running behind. Even underground, the reception is perfect, five bars. Why can't they fix that dead spot on the drive to and from work? Every day he sees the bend in the highway coming, has to end the call, re-dial. How hard can it be? Frank smoothes his hair and goes to pick up his dry-cleaning, which is ready at the convenient underground location.

George

George is above all a collector. He has collections of: hockey cards, coins, stamps, model airplanes, first-run 1950s detective novels, Star Wars action figures still in the box, beer bottle caps, autographed music CDs and an extremely detailed knowledge of computer systems and networks. All of these collections at various times help George to sleep at night. He lies in bed and counts them, sorts them, lingers over items that he is particularly fond of. This is what makes him endearing. What makes him somewhat tragic is that in his heart of hearts, he believes that one day all these collections will add up to something.

George's least favourite time of the day is the elevator ride up to the 40th floor of the office tower he works in every morning. When he arrives at the tower, he has to go underground to wait at the bank of elevators servicing floors 40-58. There are six elevator shafts. He stands in anticipation of which elevator will arrive first, gauging by the floor each elevator is on, the time of day and the number of people waiting.^[1] Since starting his job seven years ago, he has a 72% accuracy rate. It has been increasing steadily over the years, from 64% when he first started to his current average successful prediction rating of 85%. The difference hasn't been in the accuracy of his calculations. Over the years, he has learned to trust his instinct.

When the doors open, George always rushes to get in before remembering to allow the ladies who may be waiting to go in first. If he remembers, and chivalrously ushers the ladies in, he then has to ride the entire way up with the itching feeling he gets when someone is standing directly behind him. If he forgets, and charges in first, everyone by the door is forced to exit the elevator when he gets to the 40th floor, his floor being the first in the numbers this elevator serves. His favourite position is in the middle of the right-hand side of the car.

The most important reason for George's dislike of the morning elevator ride is that he is afraid of heights and this daily routine is a constant reminder of the fact that he is forced to spend 31.5% of his year 40 stories above the ground. When he is at his desk or in Frank's office looking through the binoculars at activities in neighbouring office towers, it doesn't bother him so much. It doesn't seem real when the people look like ants and the cars, beetles. But in the elevator, George is very conscious of the cables and winches that are carrying him floor by floor up and out of the real world and into this alternate universe.

Because of this fear of heights and subsequent dislike of elevators, George, unlike almost everyone else on the floor and very unlike Frank, drinks the coffee available from the machine at the employee kitchen area instead of the superior roasts available at the Timothy's on the concourse level. Sometimes Frank will offer to bring him one back when he goes down for his morning break. It is on these occasions that George will pass the time waiting in Frank's office by picking up the Bushnells Frank has sitting on one of his shelves, and scanning the windows of the neighbouring office towers. There is very rarely anything of interest to see. There is very rarely any physical movement in offices. People are in their cubicles sitting at their computers or talking on the phone. Lately, there have been renovations on three entire floors of the office tower across the way, leaving precious little activity for George to watch during the fifteen minutes it takes for Frank to return with the coffees.

Today is different.

Marcia

When Marcia was a girl growing up, she was the gullible one. Now she's head of Learning and Development for HR with a large financial firm. She chose human resources because she believes in

people.

Marcia lives alone in a downtown loft space with oak timbers that span the 12' cathedral ceilings. She lives 8 blocks from the office tower where she works. The living space is open, light and her mortgage is the same as rent would be. She doesn't drive, because it's bad for the environment. She has signed up for an Autoshare program, so that when absolutely necessary, she has convenient access to a vehicle for less than \$10 an hour. She's always late, which means that, like she did today, she takes a lot of cabs. Marcia likes living downtown. When she goes to the cottage, as she does every summer, she gets restless and irritable. Trapped in that great expanse until she can get a ride back down to the city. A large part of Marcia's frustration is that she knows these things about herself but continues to follow the same patterns anyway.

Right now Marcia is taking her morning break. She goes to street level because it is Secretary Day, which she had forgotten until she arrived at work this morning, and is buying a dozen roses from the man who sells them from buckets in front of the hospital. She is in part doing this because she smokes. Only 5 or 6 a day and very light, very slim ones, angel farts her mother calls them. But smokes nevertheless. She tries to keep this from her colleagues, as she feels it sends a negative image.

She walks above ground back to her office tower, taking enough time to finish her cigarette. As usual, her break is taking longer than fifteen minutes. The time it takes to ride the elevator down 32 floors, go back up to ground level, smoke a cigarette 10 metres from the entrance and then try to accomplish anything else is always closer to twenty minutes. While Marcia knows this, she continually pushes herself to fit within the fifteen minute allotment, because it's nobody's fault but her own that she smokes. She has a choice. Today, she is already running late when she stops to buy some dissolvable Listerine tablets because she is about to meet the man she is having an affair with. This purchase takes longer than she expects, as there is a man arguing with the woman across the counter over the price of public transit tickets. This particular convenience store refuses to offer the reduced rate offered when tickets are bought in denominations of five. The man grows angrier and more urgent as the rumbling of the approaching streetcar grows louder. He changes his tack and asks for change for his ten dollar bill. The woman behind the counter refuses to make change without a purchase. The man turns to Marcia, trying to drag her in as an ally. He eventually uses his ten dollar bill to buy one ticket, gets his change and sprints up the street to where the streetcar is already starting to move past the stop.

Marcia emerges from the convenience store, glances at her watch and sees with irritation that it is 10:57.

“Hey lady, spare some change?” A punk with a pit bull, chain for a collar. Torn cardboard sign that reads Will Fight Globalization for Change.

She is about to mutter something apologetic, when she reads the sign and snaps her mouth shut, feeling taken in, her sympathies falsely played upon. She hurriedly takes six steps south before hearing a loud dull smack off to her right. This sound is followed by another, louder sound of glass and metal meeting, followed by screeching car tires and the inevitable honking that accompanies anything out of the ordinary in the downtown grid. At the same time that she hears these things, Marcia feels something splash against her thigh, as if a nearby car has sped through a puddle. While all of these sensory inputs register in different areas of Marcia’s brain, they are combined temporally into the same instant. Marcia looks down, past the bouquet of roses in her hand across her grey skirt which is now lightly spattered with blood, along the pavement, up the length of a grotesquely twisted body and into the eyes of the man she was hurrying to meet.

Marcia begins to scream.