

Echo Eternal

by Brendan Mitchell

On Thursday I was late so I bought twenty minutes of time. I try to buy as little time as possible as it becomes an expensive habit. I paid the red haired clerk with cash because my wife had maxed out all my credit cards. **I don't get how she spends so much on clothes because whenever I see her she wears a bathrobe and slippers. She's become a real pain in the ass, but it's okay because I've become a real son of a bitch.**

I handed the clerk, or temporal technician, as they liked to be called, four fresh twenty-dollar bills straight out of the ATM. I told him I needed twenty minutes. He jammed my semi-hard worked for cash into the register and took me over to a walkway that looked like a mad scientist version of a metal detector. He gave me the usual spiel about how it all works, the rules and regulations, etc. **I've learned to ignore the clerks, believing they just say this stuff to make them sound intelligent.**

I walked through the machine, blinked twice, and walked out. I came out on the other side of the building. **It's like they purposely shoot you out on the other side so they don't have to see you again. Truthfully, I've never understood how it all works. But it does work and that's all I need to know.**

I walked out of the machine at 8:03. I walked in at 8:22, meaning that I had twenty-seven minutes to get to work. **I didn't like dropping cash like that, but the result was well worth it. With the extra time I could be spared being yelled at by Frank, my obese boss that smells like cheap cologne and Thai food. Everyone in the office calls him Mr. Mason but I called him Frank.**

I hate Frank.

As it turns out I was still late to work, but I would've been much later if I hadn't bought any time. I sat at my desk and switched on my computer. The monitor made that weird fuzzy sound while it warmed up. I don't know if fuzzy is even a sound, but it sure sounds like one to me. The computer took too long to turn on. I don't understand how we can literally bend time but we can't make computers faster. It's like asking the Professor to make a radio out of a coconut instead of asking him to fix the hole in the damn boat.

It didn't take very long for Terry to stick his nose in my business. He was a plump man with pink cheeks and a saggy neck and sweaty palms. Every once in a while we would eat together in the break room. He mostly did the talking. He would eat tuna sandwiches that his mother made for him. The smell, the taste, even the color bothers me. "Mr. Mason wants to see you," said Terry. I looked into his doll like eyes. There didn't seem to be anything behind there. "Now," he finished.

I hate tuna.

I sat in Frank's office behind his mahogany desk that had a withered flower and a metallic picture frame. Frank sat there, his bird like nose twitching in the air. His eyes were concentrated on a manila folder held up to his face. "We feel your work is becoming unacceptable," he said.

"Pardon me sir, but what about my work do you find to be 'unacceptable,'" I asked.

"Your attitude," he said trailing off, "has begun to annoy others."

"If you don't mind me asking sir, but what is wrong with my attitude?"

"We have just had some complaints."

"From who?"

"You're on thin ice right now," he said, "and if you're late one more time, you're fired."

And like that, I was back at my desk. I spent the rest of the day there, not doing a damn thing. I didn't even check my email. The day ended soon enough and I took the one hundred and seventy six steps through the lobby to the subway station at the bottom of the street. I found a seat near the back against the window. The train moved fast, but I felt like I was moving slower than I ever had before. It felt like it was never going to stop. The lights flew past as my eyes closed, tightly and deeply.

When I got home, all the lights were turned off. The house felt like a museum, cold and empty. I swear I could even see my own breath in doors. I wandered into the kitchen, and to my surprise, I didn't find anything to eat. Not even frozen hot dogs in the sink. I walked up the eighteen steps and through the plum colored hallway that led to a bedroom with only one window. She was already asleep with an empty bottle next to her. She's probably been asleep since the afternoon. Her face was smothered in red lipstick. I took off my clothes and slid into bed next against her frigid skin.

I hate her.

Even though I woke up early the next morning I was still late for work. I bought another twenty minutes meaning another eighty dollars went spiraling down the drain. I still don't understand how the machine works. I just pay the clerk, walk through the machine, and I get an extra twenty minutes to my life. I once asked the clerk if I would run into the past version of myself. He said that once you enter the future you erase the past of your former future. According to him, if you could change the past you wouldn't be going to the future in the first place because it already would have been fixed. I don't know if that makes sense, but it sure as hell sounds like it. I remember that for a long time, groups protested the use of the machines, claiming that they can disrupt history, that people can erase the past. I don't know whatever happened to those people. I think they all died. Accidents, or something like that.

I walked in and sat at my desk. I waited for my fuzzy computer monitor and threw a bunch of memos in the trash. It wasn't long before Terry showed up and told me to report to Frank's office. It's sad that Terry has become a stooge for upper management, selling his soul for a closer parking spot or a longer lunch break. I must have blacked out during the walk over there because

all I remember hearing is, “You’re fired.” I didn’t protest when I found out. I just didn’t feel like moving my mouth. I wasn’t angry. I was indifferent to the point of insanity. I don’t know if I still hate Frank anymore. Even though I didn’t hate him, I sure as hell didn’t like him.

After collecting my broken unopened picture frame, red pen, and seven paper clips, I took the elevator downstairs and took the subway instead of walking home. Despite the fact that I had just lost my job, a note before I left read that there would be stew when I arrived for dinner. I was hoping she would remember but I knew she would probably forget. The thought of stew comforted me.

I walked into the house around 9:30. I didn’t smell any stew. Even though it was early, she should have already started cooking. I heard a faint giggle from upstairs. She never giggled. The pills were too strong to let her giggle.

A part of me expected to find her waiting for me. I imagined the joyous greeting of a wife welcoming her husband home after a long day of work. When I got to the second floor, I found the bedroom door closed. I opened it softly and saw them together. He was much bigger than me. **I couldn’t see what he looked like, as all I noticed was a smear of lipstick etched across the side of his face. They didn’t see me. I didn’t move, her giggling ringing in my ears. I wanted to shout, the eternal echoes of my anger silenced by the disgust of my inaction. I just watched them for a moment, maybe hoping that they would see me so I could confront them, kicking and screaming. As I walked down the stairs, I twisted my ankle on the broken step near the floor. I heard the sound of stammering feet from above. I slammed the back door shut and ducked down the alleyway behind the house. I heard a voice from the upstairs window say, “I think he might be coming home. You should go.”**

I lugged along down the street, my stomach empty and twisted and yearning for something to fill it. **I didn’t know if it was because of hunger or the pure devastation of what was happening. I decided to buy some more time and return to the house to catch them in the act. But then I realized that if I were going to do that, then I never would have found them in the first place. I know that I’d still feel like shit and she would still screw other guys. Instead of trying, I found a man selling hot dogs in the park. I bought two with mustard and relish and ate them before napping on a bench near a small stream.**

I woke up hours later and realized it was time for dinner. I made the isolated walk through the park out into the city where I took the subway back to the house. As I entered the house, my nose buds were immersed in a wonderful smell of unpredictability. I followed the scent into the kitchen to discover my wife stirring a big bowl of stew. **She didn’t say anything, just smiling. I wasn’t going to say anything. She didn’t know that I came home and saw them together. I felt comfort in her not knowing. So, I sat down with an empty bowl and spoon before me and waited as she poured me some stew.**

I like stew.

