



SECOND

a short story

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UNSTUCK

Future.

I won't be able to control the jumps. One moment I'll be arguing with a teacher in high school, the next I'll be five years old again, building sandcastles on a beach with my dad, will still have been gone for ten years. The emotional whiplash will be brutal, a kaleidoscope of joy and grief that will leave me disoriented and raw.

It won't be enlightenment. It will be chaos.

A desperate scramble through the wreckage of my own memories.

Past.

The strobe lights turned the dance floor into a battlefield of epileptic jellyfish. Bass thumped through my ribcage, rattling my internal organs like dice in a cup.

Gregory, ever the connoisseur of chaos, was lost in the pulsating throng, a fly caught in a spiderweb of bodies.

David, ever the wallflower, nursed a beer at the bar, a monument to misplaced piety amidst the booze.

Fat Man Stomp was an old distillery of the factory district that campus could not lay claim to thanks to zoning issues. A repurposed warehouse surrounded by dorms but untouched by academic pursuits.

It was the Nietzsche dichotomy of the Dionysian nested inside the Apollonian. A multilayered worn brick building of clashing tastes from a neon rave at ground level to a comedy club upstairs, from proletariat bare knuckle boxing in the basement to a rooftop restaurant fit for the bourgeoisie.

Then, she appeared. A raven in human skin, draped in a black dress that clung to her like a second night. Her hair, the color of spilled ink, cascaded down her back.

A cigarette, a crimson ember in the darkness, dangled limply from her thin lips. My eyes met hers, and for a fleeting moment, I saw not desire, nor invitation, in her gaze but a cold, reptilian pursuit.

Present.

The mist from the large cauldron releases the sickly-sweet tang of wormwood, anise, and fennel. David meticulously measures each ingredient, his brow furrows in concentration.

"Just a pinch of *Sand*, Johan," Nathan rasps, his voice sandpaper after a night of feverishly studying. "Authentic Hourglass requires the unholy trinity."

This isn't your corner-store, green-fairy. This is a concoction whispered through madhatter-esque etching on graph paper. A self-brewed brew that supposedly fractures the perception of time. Bill Pilgrim, the unstuck-in-time protagonist of *Vonnegut*, is our muse. The LIE we are exploring.. We crave his disjointed reality, the ability to hop between moments like a malfunctioning DVD player.

David, the history buff, swears it is a secret recipe of French soldiers in the trenches, a way to escape the horrors of war by experiencing them all at once. Gregory, the conspiracy theorist, concocts a complex cover-up story that it's an alien mind-control tool. Nathan, the biology major, endlessly elaborates on the organic chemistry behind the process.

Me, I just wanted a break from the monotonous grind of reality, even if it meant a temporary psychotic episode.

Past.

She sidled up to me, the air around her thick with the cloying scent of tobacco and something vaguely familiar. Citrus perhaps. In her hand, she held a worn composition notebook, its green cover emblazoned with an hourglass symbol that glowed faintly under the strobe lights.

She pressed the notebook into my chest. “Here. Make this exactly as—”

“Yoach, you brought homework to Stomp?” Gregory materialized beside me, oblivious to his interruption. “You dipshit.”

“It’s not mine.”

“Then, where the fuck did you get it?”

“Her.” I motioned to her black eyes as they pierced him.

His pupils dilated, the manic grin plastered on his face sank. “You?” He pointed. “You’re... you’re the bitch that has been following me.”

She took one last long drag on her cigarette before dropping it to the ground. Exhaling the smoke into his face, she smeared the ashes across the floor.

“Listen, Twitcher. You and your morons make this exactly as it states.” She taps the notebook I’m hugging to my sternum. “You will share it with your new assignment. But you cannot tell him—”

“Fuck o—”

Forcefully, she grabbed him by the collar of his polo. With Gregory’s chest pressed against her cleavage squeezed by her

corset top, her lips were mere inches from his. For a moment, she looked primed to kiss him, but the silver shine of a razor sharp blade appeared at his larynx.

“Don’t tell him that you and these two fools you call friends even know each other.” She looks at me. “You are officially strangers tha—”

“How are we s-s-s-suppose to make this shi—” he stutters.

She quickly moves her dagger closer to his throat, drawing a thin line of blood, “figure it the fuck out.”

“And what if we refuse?” Gregory chokes out in dwindling defiance.

Suddenly, her other hand drew from her back. Spinning the other dagger around her finger like a butterfly knife, she rested it against his groin.

“Then, I castrate you idiots. Understand?”

With wide terrified eyes, Gregor mutters like a feeble child, “yes.”

Without a word, she melted back into the throng, a phantom lost in the neon haze.

“Fuck!” I shoved the notebook at him, the weight of it suddenly oppressive.

Present.

The brewing process is a ritualistic dance. I crush the hyssop with a mortar and pestle, the rhythmic thudding a primal counterpoint to the symphony of bubbling green liquid simmering on the stove. The emerald hue pulses hypnotically, drawing me in like a moth to a flame.

We pour the concoction into plastic cups, the steam swirls like a miniature time vortex. Gregory, the guinea pig, takes the first sip, his face contorting in a grimace that quickly morphs into a goofy grin.

"What if," Nathan breathes, his voice echoing. "It really makes everything happen all at once."

I down the burning liquid, the taste, then a slap in the face that follows a slow, creeping numbness.

My vision blurs, the room warps and stretches like Dalí's melting clocks. Memories flicker through my mind – childhood birthday parties, the sting of a first heartbreak, the mundane Tuesday morning I just woke up from. All jumbled together, existing simultaneously.

Past.

As Gregory wiped the trickle of blood from his throat he snatched the notebook. Devouring the contents, a slow smile spread across his face. A predator eyeing its prey. He slammed the notebook

shut, shoved it back into my chest, his voice a hoarse whisper. “Read it.”

I flipped open the notebook, its pages filled with a spidery scrawl. Not a blueprint, not a manifesto, but a recipe.

A meticulous breakdown of ingredients and steps, the instructions for brewing a concoction ominously titled: *Hourglass*. The ingredients were a twisted shopping list ripped from a deranged chemist's dream.

The recipe for *the elixir of gods*.

David, ever the cautious one, finally approached, his brow furrowed with concern. “What was that?”

The method itself was a twisted sonnet of siphoning, boiling, and filtering. A dark alchemy promising an escape far more potent than the lukewarm beer David clutched.

The strobe lights beat to the raving metronome. The pounding bass, a war drum urging us on. We were new alchemists, soon to brew a wormwood-worthy tonic in our grim basement.

The green hourglass on the cover, a malevolent promise of the time we were about to waste. The lives we were about to shatter, all in pursuit of a high deadlier than any we'd ever known.

Future.

With a primal scream, I'll lurch for the sink, purging the Hourglass from my system. The room will steady, the fractured timeline will realign with agonizing slowness.

David. Nathan. Gregory. My friends will still be giggling hysterically, but look like strangers. We will have tasted eternity, and it will taste like bile.

I will realize we got it wrong again.

I will recognize the secret instruction again.

Time may be linear, but it's a line between the notebook pages of graph paper. Directions for being unstuck woven between the formulas you had to layer like eternalism to read.

You had to be on *Sand*, to brew *Hourglass*.



Darwinian Disclaimer: This short story was enhanced through a symbiotic iterative process with generative artificial intelligence composed of intentional prompt engineering and discriminative human refinement. Similar to evolution, creativity is not making endless variations but selecting those that survive in the niche of our minds.

corpses are improvements. - Kurt Vonnegut

I believe that
empowering students with the ambition
to change the world they are inheriting
as well as equipping them with
academic and social tools
to accomplish those changes,
is the true purpose of education.

- Nicholas Anthony Linke



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