

TIME OUT

The first time Zack Morris made time stop, it was unintentional.

He was getting his ass kicked by Sebastian when it happened. Sebastian chased him down a gray dirt trail which led into a little grove of trees. Local kids in Bayside called them the “bike trails,” as the uneven character of the dirt as it traced little slopes through trees almost replicated the pleasure some find in mountain biking. Besides biking, the grove was well known as a place to smoke cigarettes, drink filched wine, grope, be groped, and occasionally fight.

Look, before you start to shed any tears of pity for Zack, you should know he had it coming. Just the week before, Sebastian and his girlfriend Jeanette had found Zack hiding in Jeanette’s closet, hoping to catch a glimpse of the two of them doing the “nasty.” That day, Zack had darted across the room and out of Jeanette’s open window, dropping a few feet to the ground and sprinting away. But when Sebastian found Zack strolling by the bike trails, there was no place to run or hide. Rationally, Zack knew that the bike trails did not furnish an escape route—they culminated in the grove and there were no paths through thick tress. But in his fear, he sprinted to the left and into the woods.

Zack tripped a little on a branch in his path, falling onto his torso. As he scrambled to get back to his feet, he could feel the weight of Sebastian bowling him over. Sebastian was the varsity middle linebacker for the Bayside Tigers, and the full force of his weight crushed in on Zack’s kidneys and liver. When Sebastian started punching Zack in the side of the head, he made little whimpers to distract himself from the pain. The trees and ferns of the inner trails swirled into gray pain. He was desperate, shouting for help but was too far from the road to be heard. He hadn’t planned to shout “Time out!” It’s not like Sebastian kicking his ass was a sport, with rules. But he found himself yelling it anyway, in panic: “Time Out!”

And then, everything stopped.

He still felt Sebastian’s weight pressing down on him, but there were no more punches. Zack slithered out from under the hulking body bearing down on him and was shocked to see that Sebastian’s huge frame remained a few inches in the air, a look of frenzy and rage frozen on his face. Zack ran his hands down his torso—he wasn’t dreaming. He was still there. He could feel the blood trickling down the side of his face where Sebastian’s fist had pummeled the skin. But everything *else* was paused. Two birds who had been watching the boys struggle perched in stillness on a branch. Even a dewdrop falling from a plant at his feet precariously perched on the lip of a green leaf, on the cusp of spilling over.

"Holy fucking shit," Zack thought to himself, as he staggered backwards and away from Sebastian's horizontal, levitating body. He tripped on a thick branch in the dirt and almost lost his balance, but when he regained it and took a breath everything was still the same: unmoving, unchanging, the forward march of time arrested. Zack started walking briskly back down the trail to the street, occasionally looking over his shoulder to see Sebastian's body still hanging there in air, one foot smushed into the mud and the other bent into the space where Zack's back had just been.

Out on the street, Zack was shocked to find the spell occupied the outside world as well. Old Mr. Whillikers was behind the wheel of his car, stalled in the middle of the street. His hands were at 10 and 2, gripping the wheel, a look of mild grumpiness in his eyes. Zack walked over to the driver's side window and looked in. He could see a patch of gray hair sprouting from the old man's ear. His body was rigid. Zack could see no air moving in and out of his lungs, and yet Mr. Whilliker's wasn't *dead*. What, then, was he? Zack didn't fucking know.

Leaving the car and driver behind, Zack took a walk through the neighborhood. Nothing moved anywhere in sight. The neighborhood had the feel of one of those plague films where the protagonist walks around an abandoned city, tense and gloomy, the only sound their footsteps scuffling the sidewalk, diligently inspecting their periphery for the greedy sick lurking in the bushes. Zack made it home. Inside, he found his mother sitting in the living room watching television. She was completely motionless, staring at the screen. On the screen was a tennis match between Serena Williams and Tsvetana Pironkova. The match was stalled—Serena's body levitated six inches or more in air, mid-lunge, her mouth open in a shout of effort. But there was no sound. Both players were frozen mid-gesture, as were the hundreds of people in attendance, and the referee.

Zack walked over to his mom. "Mom?" he said, then again in a louder voice. "MOM!?" He lightly shook her shoulders but she just flopped back and forth in her hands like a doll. Leaving her in the position he had found her in, an idea came to Zack. He walked into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, and opened one of his dad's Millers. "I'm drinking *beer* mom! Aren't you gonna *ground me*?" The beer didn't taste that good but the taste of Zack's liberation, on the other hand, was *delicious*. He walked over to his mom's purse and pocketed two twenty dollar bills before throwing the rest of the beer down the drain and leaving the house.

It took Zack a little while to remember what he had said just before the world froze. "Fuck," he thought, "did I really try to call time out in the middle of a fight?" He had. And indeed he got what he asked for. But, he reasoned, if yelling "Time Out!" had actually effected the stoppage of time, for seemingly everyone but Zack, then how could he make time start again? Not that he wasn't tempted by the idea of having free rein in a silent, still world. Zack reflected that he

could do whatever he wanted now: load up on free fries down at the burger joint where he and his friends hung out, change all his grades from D's to A's, put a sign on the principal's back that said "Kick My Dick."

But even someone with such modest analytic skills as Zack could anticipate the crushing loneliness of a world full of people, sounds, sights, and smells, and yet nobody to share them with. If it was as simple as saying "Time Out" to stop time, maybe he could just say "Time In?" There was only one way to find out. But first, he was going to get a little bit of revenge on that psycho Sebastian. Happily skipping down the sidewalk to the trails, Zack considered a few possibilities for vengeance before settling on the freakiest. When he got back to the grove of trees, Sebastian's body still hovered over where he had been beating Zack's ass. Zack walked over and pushed him, barely able to shift Sebastian's huge torso with his hand.

Slowly, Zack undid his belt and hiked his pants down to his knees. Squatting over Sebastian, he shat three perfectly shaped turds in the dirt. Not bothering to wipe, and giddy with anticipation, Zack kicked the turds in the dust until they made a small stinky ziggurat just below Sebastian's face. Zack stepped back three or four strides, took a deep breath, and tried it. "Time...*In!*" With a huge groan, Sebastian's body dropped to the dirt. His face sank in the soft pile of Zack's shit. Sebastian screamed in horror. Looking up and perceiving Zack standing there, hiding his smile with his hand, Sebastian said, "That's it Morris, I'm going to *fucking kill you.*"

But before Sebastian could get to his feet and wildly wipe off the streaks of Zack's poop from his face, Zack intervened. "Time OUT!" he said, this time planting the fingers of his right hand into the stretched-out plane of his left to make a fleshy "T." This time, when the world stopped, Sebastian was stuck on the ground, his arms planted, his chest slightly elevated, his face agape as he regarded Zack's figure through the layer of feces. Zack beheld his work with reverence, hurried away from the scene, went home, and wiped his ass clean.

For a few months, Zack practiced his newfound powers with restraint. One afternoon at school, for instance, his perennial frenemy Albert threatened to punch him in the face. Zack said what he always did when a stronger and tougher person threatened him: taunt the other person into pure rage. As their conversation grew more heated, Albert reached back to throw a huge punch. "Time Out!" Zack shouted, stalling Albert's fist in the air. Zack walked into the principal's office, dragged the body of the balding administrator out of his chair and down the hall, propping him up right in the trajectory of Albert's fist. "Time *In!*" he said with even more volume and confidence, as Albert's balled fist careened through the principal's cheek.

It's not like Zack called "Time Out!" only when being threatened by physical violence from the hulking bullies who found him so annoying. Zack was only good at a few things, but exercising

and exploiting the privilege he was born with was definitely one of them. So no wonder he was a natural when it came to weaponizing this new power to obtain what he wanted from others and obstruct others from taking what he viewed as his property. Like Kelly for instance. While Zack didn't go so far as to touch Kelly after he had called "Time Out!", he did play what he called "practical jokes" on people Kelly was romantically interested in. Once he wrapped duct tape around the mouth of one of these jokers just as he was about to tongue kiss Kelly. Another time, he stuffed a would-be Romeo's mouth full of raw garlic, Kelly's least favorite smell.

But while Zack's use of "Time Out!" was somewhat various and often puerile, it's worth nothing that he never yelled "Time Out!" to protect someone from being violated or hurt, or to take the paper and electronic records of the country's major student loan creditors and incinerate them, initiating a massive jubilee. And he never called "Time Out!" and unlocked the doors of the prisons where over 2,000,000 people were caged, disarming the guards so everybody could walk into freedom. Zack never called "Time Out!" to take a would-be rapist frat boy and throw him in a toilet.

Zack graduated high school, and went to college at Harvard (he had called "Time Out!" when they received his application, traveled to Cambridge and tampered with their admissions process in order to offer himself a full scholarship, which he, naturally, accepted.) After graduating summa (Zack called "Time Out!" before every exam to find the answers on his phone. He'd also turn in essays, call "Time Out!", and mark the front of his paper with a huge A+ so professors would think they had already read it with pleasure), Zack started a venture capital firm called Timeless. He made a huge fortune speculating on stocks which he would tamper with after calling "Time Out!"

One September morning, Zack came into the office a few minutes earlier than usual. His assistant, Dick, was already waiting for him with a hot pot of fresh coffee (a few weeks before, in response to Dick's perpetual tardiness, Zack called "Time Out!" and went to Dick's house to change all of his clocks.) "Thanks, Dick." Zack sat down at his desk and turned on his computer. He had a number of e-mails waiting in his personal box, congratulating him on his fiscal successes, but one was from an address he didn't recognize. The sender was named "Miss Bliss," the subject simply "I see you." Zack opened the e-mail and read the following words with some trepidation:

Zack:

I know about your secret power. Meet me at the Max at 3:15 today or else.

Bliss

Zack looked over the e-mail with disbelief. He had never told anyone about the ability to stop time which came to him that summer afternoon. In the countless times he had called "Time Out!" he had never seen anyone impervious to being frozen in time. He had been tempted over the years to tell someone else, just to get it off his chest. But he anticipated not being believed, and after all, how could he ever prove it? Sometimes the fact that he was always alone in the timed-out world even made Zack momentarily melancholy. He would daydream of stopping time with Kelly, the two of them traveling the stopped world. Kelly and Zack floating in a gondola, in Venice, eating all the best ham in Europe, and finally making love on the lawn of the Louvre while tourists and French people stood in a truly never ending line.

"Clear my calendar, dick," Zack ordered from his office, gruffly.

At 3:10, Zack sat in his car, watching the door of the Max. Several people went in and came out, mostly high school students at Bayside. Zack recalled the many hours he had wasted sitting in the Max with his friends. He wondered what had happened to all of those people. Where was Albert now? Did Lisa ever give in to the annoying importunements of her stalker, that idiot Screech? What about Jessie, did she ever kick that speed habit? He should really look them up on social media when he got back to the office, or ask Dick to do it for him. He looked at his watch. It was time to go in.

The Max had barely changed since Zack was in high school. The owner, Max, was still around and up to his old tricks—literally (Max was a magician.) When Zack walked in, Max gave him a glare from across the restaurant. He had always fucking hated Zack, and in fact all high schoolers. "Table for one, Max!" he shouted across the restaurant. Max ignored him, turning back to the trick deck of cards spread out on the table in front of him. After a few seconds, Zack gave up and sat himself down in a booth. He checked his watch—it was almost 3:20 and there was no sign of anybody waiting for him.

Zack's anticipation mounted as he waited for his food. His server brought his usual: Maxburger, medium well, extra lettuce. Rings. Large Pibb. The food smelled wonderful and looked delicious, but Zack had a hard time focusing on his meal. Every time the little bell jingled on Max's front door, he shot up straight and craned his neck to see who had walked in. Just another dumb high schooler, one after another. Zack felt melancholy about his glory days, and the disappointment he had made into his life.

He was savoring the last bite of his Maxburger, relishing the crunch of all that lettuce, when he noticed that someone across the restaurant was looking at him. The face looked familiar, but distant. Maybe somebody he went to Harvard with? The guy was about his age. He was a bit stocky, but his body was concealed behind a vintage *Bayside Tigers* shirt so that Zack couldn't

tell if it was muscle or fat. When had the guy even come in and sat down? Zack reasoned that he must have been really intent on his Maxburger when it happened.

The guy was just sitting there, staring intently at Zack.

Ever since he realized his power to stop time, Zack took things like this in stride. After all, no matter what was about to happen, all he had to do was call "Time Out!" He calmly returned to his plate and stuffed the last, soggy onion ring into his mouth. He wiped a thin film of grease off his upper lip, and settled back into his seat. The guy was still staring. Finally, he had to break the silence. "Do I know you?" Zack asked the stranger. The man said nothing, just continued to stare.

Zack called the waiter over and paid his bill, tipping his customary 11% By now it was almost 4:00, and Zack decided that he had had enough. He got up, swatted crumbs off the pleats of his pants, and headed for the door. The man kept his eyes fixed on Zack as he got up and moved. When he passed the man, he heard a whisper.

"What did you say to me?" Zack demanded.

The man's face broke into a smile.

"Did you just whisper something?" Zack noticed a sensation in his sternum: anger. He stopped and got into the man's face. "Trust me, you don't want to get into it with me fella."

The man kept smiling his odd smile and staring at Zack with clear eyes. "Well fuck you then," Zack said, turning to go. But as soon as he turned he heard the man whisper something again. Zack flipped, his face filling with blood, and grabbed the man by the shoulders. "*What the fuck* are you saying, friend? Do you want me to bash in your face?"

The man's face registered no fear. He continued to look at Zack in silence for a moment before he spoke. When Zack heard his voice, he realized, too late, who he had been called to the Max to meet. The last words he heard Sebastian say were "time out."