

A Punch In The Face

LET'S SAY YOU'RE HAVING A BAD DAY. Let's say it's not just an ordinary bad day where you didn't get enough sleep, but one of those days that you really remember. Let's say you lost your wallet and you thought you knew where you'd left it, but you were wrong, or somebody stole it and you were parked on the street while you went and checked and somebody dinged your car and drove off without leaving a note.

You could have gotten fired that morning too, or diagnosed with cancer, but that might be too much and you've already got the point.

Now let's say you've got one of those expressions on your face - somewhere between I hate the world and I'm going to cry. A woman comes up to you in all this and she smiles and puts her hand on your arm and it doesn't feel bad really. It actually feels kind of nice. Let's say she doesn't stop there, though. Let's say she gives you a hug and leads you into the coffee shop down the street and buys you a coffee or a latte or a hot chocolate or whatever you want to drink, and then she buys you a cookie too.

Let's say this woman sits with you and she smiles at you some more and she tells you it'll be okay. I should add that this woman is a complete stranger, or she was five minutes ago.

Let's say it's at this point that you feel a stabbing pain in your lower abdomen. You gasp and she comes over beside you, and she hugs you and rubs your side and then she cradles your head and kisses the top of it.

Let's say you burst into tears, a little because you've had such a shitty day, but mostly because the pain isn't getting better, it's getting worse.

Let's say this woman says shh and tells you it'll be fine, better than fine, and she says you can rely on her and she'll make sure you're safe.

Imagine that when she says this you suddenly can't breathe and you think maybe it's an asthma attack, except that you've never had an asthma attack before. Let's say that you clutch her arm so tightly that she cries out, and you sputter 911, and then fall out of your chair.

Let's say this woman is truly kind. Let's say she calls 911 and she asks the coffee shop if anyone is a doctor or knows first aid or CPR or anything and then she gets down on the floor with her legs crossed and puts your head in her lap.

Let's say the ambulance is quick, because they were nearby or because the dispatch operator could hear the desperation in the woman's voice. Let's say the ambulance only takes four minutes, but that's still too slow. Let's say you've already asphyxiated and your heart stops right when the paramedics come through the door with the stretcher, and the paramedics can't get your heart started again and they can't get you to breathe again.

Now let's say that the afterlife is generally dull, and a really shitty day aside things were better when you were alive. Let's say also that people in the afterlife talk about this

woman who was with you when you died, and what happened between you and this woman happens pretty regularly with her. She's so kind that she kills people.

Let's say time goes by. Years and years and one day you run into this woman, who was a serial killer, at least one a week for the last twenty years. Let's say this woman smiles at you and you wonder if she remembers you and you wonder if she knows she's a serial killer. One a week for twenty years is a lot, but maybe she never connected the dots.

The question is, when you meet this woman and she smiles at you, do you smile back and keep walking, or do you stop and tell her that she killed at least a thousand people over the last twenty years with kindness, or do you punch her in the face?

The Same Don River

ROBIN CREATED AN ALTERNATE UNIVERSE exactly like this one so that she could test the Butterfly Effect. The Robin in this universe didn't do anything to the butterflies, but the Robin in the alternate universe went out at lunch on a Tuesday and caught one in a net and took it back to the lab and ripped its wings off and dissected its body, and then both Robins monitored their worlds for a month and when they compared after a month, everything was the same.

It turned out, though, that the butterfly in question had been sterile and so it couldn't have mated, and the Robins thought maybe that was a fluke and didn't count, so the Robin in the alternate universe killed two more butterflies on a Friday after work, and they waited until the next spring to observe the changes, and they established that nothing had changed.

The Robins repeated the experiment dozens of times over the course of ten years. During those ten years both Robins dated Petes, and when it didn't work out with the Petes they dated Terrys, and when it didn't work out with the Terrys they went out with Pindars. The Robins married the Pindars and they cheated once with Laurences from the universities.

Everything was the same in both universes, even after ten years and dozens of butterflies. The Robins wrote up their observations and concluded that the Butterfly Effect was a myth.

In the alternate universe, the other Robin's work was widely accepted, but in this universe, people said the whole thing was bullshit. They said that alternate universes only existed in science fiction and only when the writer was out of good ideas.

The Robin in this universe told people to look at the evidence, and people in this universe said to hell with the evidence. They said it was clear everything was different in this universe than in the other one, and then they dragged Robin off to the Don River in Toronto, which isn't the nicest spot to be stuck, and they moored her in the middle of the river up to her neck and said that it was a different Don River than the one they'd stuck her in and it was different from the Don River in the alternate universe, but they haven't provided any evidence to support their conclusions.

Dying Alone

IT'S TRUE ABOUT EVERYONE DYING ALONE. Nobody used to think that was a problem, but then they learned about post-traumatic stress disorder, and the need to grieve, and stuff like that.

They did a pilot project back in the sixties where people died in groups of four. They couldn't rely on chance to get four people to die at one time, so sometimes they had to keep people artificially alive until the others were ready. From sixty-two to sixty-four the average death throes tripled in length.

Also, the existing infrastructure wouldn't support four people dying at one time, so the afterlife had to upgrade for the project. The upgrades ran way over budget, and that, combined with the death throes problem, led to the project being scrapped.

The powers that be didn't want a return to the status quo, though, so now when you die, you appear in a support group for others who died alone which, except for a few hundred people in the sixties, is everyone.

Ed died alone. He's standing in front of a folding chair in a circle of people in folding chairs, and there's a woman with curly red hair - who looks like Little Orphan Annie got fat and middle-aged - who's running the group. There's one empty chair in the circle, right beside Ed.

Ed is saying that he's Ed and he died alone and then fwoomp, there's somebody new sitting beside him.

The somebody new is Takahito. Takahito is welcomed to the group by the woman who's in charge and by Ed and by everyone else in the room, and then Ed talks about what it's like to die alone, and everyone in the circle goes over and hugs Ed, except Takahito, who still doesn't quite understand what's going on.

After the hugs, the woman who's in charge gives Ed a token, and then the circle breaks for a few minutes so that people can get stale coffee and dry chocolate chip cookies that don't have any chocolate chips.

Lisa, who on top of dying alone, is trying to quit smoking because it turns out that the afterlife is smoke free, goes over to Takahito and tells him it's nice to meet him. Lisa says she's not sure when after is, but if Takahito would like to go for a drink after, she'd be game.

The woman who's in charge asks everyone to retake their seats, and then she says where were they. Somebody says Ed went last, and the woman who's in charge says oh yes, and then she says that means it's Takahito's turn.

Takahito stands up and says he thinks maybe he's in the wrong group. He says no offence, but English isn't his first language and he's all for support groups, but he'd really prefer one in Japanese.

The woman who's in charge says that's just an excuse for Takahito to avoid the issue. She says that no mistake was made. Then she says she knows how hard the first time can be and they're all there for Takahito. She says Takahito should take his time.

Finally Takahito says how he died alone, and people come up to him and hug him and he finds himself crying. They all tell Takahito that he's not alone anymore and that it

gets better, and Lisa asks him if he has any gum and it turns out he does, so he gives her a piece.

The woman who's in charge gives Takahito a token and then the group moves on to the next person.

The group goes on like this for a while, until they get to Martha. When it's Martha's turn, she says how she died alone and she talks about what it was like, and people come up and hug her, but this time everyone else cries, and the woman who's in charge gives Martha a different coloured token and wishes Martha luck and everyone, except Takahito and Lisa, promise they'll call Martha once they're out. Martha smiles through her tears and says she knows.

On her way out, Martha talks to somebody at the front desk about facilitating a group of her own, and the person at the front desk leads Martha down a hall to a room with two people sitting in folding chairs looking lost.

Back in the other room, they take another break after Martha leaves, and then they get back to it. Somebody new lands in what used to be Martha's chair, which is right next to Lisa and on the other side of the room from where the confessions are.

Lisa asks the newcomer if she has any gum, and Takahito says again how he's finding the English hard and he'd really rather a group that spoke Japanese, and the woman who's in charge stands up and says her name is Dana and she died alone.

It's not true about Dana, though. She died in sixty-three and she was part of the trial and she died with three other people. She still keeps in touch with the others. She took the job in the support group partly out of guilt and partly out of jealousy.