

When Jake awoke on Friday morning, Sadie wasn't there. He had no memory of her leaving, which was strange considering he was such a light sleeper. She hadn't touched the coffee maker or the toaster; the usual signs of her semi-nightly occupancy of Jake's apartment. Worse, her toothbrush was no longer in the cup by the bathroom sink. There was no note.

Jake dressed quickly, trying not to let himself think about Sadie. The argument last night (or was it the night before?) hadn't been the way he wanted to leave things, but there was nothing he could do about that now. Light gray slacks and a white shirt. No tie. He didn't bother to shave. What would be the point?

He didn't see the school bus until he had already stepped out onto Elsbeth Street. The driver laid on the horn, and Jake jumped back just before it came rushing past his nose. A receding trail of audible laughter told him the kids onboard found this near-collision very amusing. Catching his breath, he finished crossing the street and unlocked the Pontiac, realizing with a slight stumble that if those kids were already on their way to school, he must have woken up late this morning. What time was it? No matter. He wasn't planning on going into work today. Classes were sure to be cancelled in the afternoon.

He shook his head. Why would classes be cancelled? Was he that convinced of his own impending failure?

He drove. It was out of his way, but he swung by the house on Beckley Street, just to see if Oswald was hanging around. Maybe he could just convince him to go visit his wife in Irving today. He smiled at the thought. He'd probably get punched in the nose if he did that. Besides, Jake hadn't spoken to Oswald in almost a year, not since Marina and the girl moved out of his building on Elsbeth. Before the man had wound up renting a room just a few blocks down the road.

Oswald was nowhere to be seen as he crept slowly past the house. Probably already at work. The car gave a slight shudder and stopped. Jake's vision blurred for a moment and he realized that he must have hit a parked car. He got out and checked the damage, but there wasn't even a dent on his or the Ford he had run into. Solid metal on these old cars, he mused.

He had no memory of the drive to Norma's, except to note that the sign outside St. Cecilia's Catholic read "Welcome, Mr. President." As if the motorcade would ever find its way down to Winnetka Heights.

Norma's was busy, but there was an empty stool at the counter. He sat and ordered a coffee, head pounding.

"You remember you were supposed to meet me here a half hour ago, right?" came a nebbish voice to his right. He turned to find Bill leaning against the counter beside him, hair greasy and bags under his eyes. Clearly he hadn't had much sleep last night.

"Bill." Jake's voice was rasping like he hadn't spoken in weeks. "I'm sorry. What time is it?"

"Almost nine," the older man replied as Norma set a brown mug down in front of Jake. "Any luck this morning? Did you take care of Oswald?"

Jake blinked and took a sip of the lukewarm coffee and tried to sort through his muddy thoughts. Was he supposed to have done something this morning?

Bill sat down in the stool next to Jake as its former occupant dropped a few quarters on the counter and vacated. "Well?" he pressed.

"I didn't see him," was Jake's slow reply. "Probably at work by now."

Bill's voice dropped to a whisper. "Do you still have the gun?" he asked.

"Gun?" Jake tried to remember what Bill was talking about.

"Yeah, you know, bang bang bang!" Bill fired his finger-guns at Jake. "They still have guns in the future, right?"

"Yeah, there are still guns," Jake nodded. Goddamn, this headache was killing him. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to ignore the pain for a moment. There was a heavy clatter on the counter, and Bill shouted "Hey!"

His eyes sprang open and he found that his mug of coffee was lying on its side, contents splattered all over, soaking the newspaper belonging to the lady to his left. She was scowling at him and dabbing at a drop on her dress with a napkin. He had been holding the mug just a moment before. He must have dropped it.

His hand was still closed, as if his fingers were still wrapped around the mug's handle. How the hell did he manage to drop it? He must be losing it.

"You're close to the nexus point is all," came a gruff voice occupying the space that Bill was supposed to be. He turned to find the old man with the yellow press card in his hatband sitting on Bill's stool, looking him directly in the eyes. Bill was nowhere to be seen, as if he'd never even been there.

"You," Jake said simply as he stared at the stranger with the wild eyes. "What's a nexus point?"

The Yellowcard Man smiled. "The hub where all paths meet. The convergence that connects all the differing threads of causality. The vanishing point, if you will. You might even call it a very unmiraculous time-hole."

Jake looked back down at the counter and realized he was holding the coffee mug again. It was still very full of coffee. He set it down on the counter, which was completely clean. The newspaper to Jake's left was dry. He looked back at the Yellowcard Man.

"You saw me spill that, right?" Jake asked hesitantly.

"Maybe there's a timeline where you spilled the coffee, and you've just managed to sidestep it."

Jake blinked and said nothing. The strange man chuckled to himself.

"Ripples in a pond, Mr. Ellering."

"Epping," Jake quickly corrected, then he caught himself. "Amberson, I mean. How do you know me?"

"Because you're not supposed to be here. You're causing too many ripples."

"What does that mean?" Jake was breathing harder now. The pounding in his head was getting worse, and his limbs were starting to numb. He tried to massage the feeling back into his fingers.

"If you spill the coffee this morning, does the woman sitting next to you have to go home to change her coffee-stained dress? When she gets home, does she find her husband in bed with the neighbor's wife? What happens then? Strong words and a hasty divorce? What about the children they had planned on raising together? Are they never even born? Who have you met in your life, Mr. Epping, who cease to be because of the ripples you've caused? Can you even remember their names?"

Jake's mind strained, trying to focus on faces from his past. Did they have names? Were they just faces he had invented? Who was this young woman and why did he feel like he had slept with her last night? It was like trying to read a book written in a language you don't speak while wearing someone else's prescription lenses.

"Is it possible," the Yellowcard Man's voice faded to a whisper, "that your actions might invariably prevent your own conception?"

Jake nervously sipped at his coffee, trying to remember who he was supposed to have met at Norma's today.

The streets near Dealey Plaza were packed with cars, so Jake parked the Pontiac a block past Union Station and walked to the Texas School Book Depository. His watch told him it

was almost noon, which meant he was running way behind. How much time had he spent at the diner? It felt like hours.

The crowds had gathered, and Jake felt a jolt of déjà-vu. He crossed Main, approached Elm Street, and stared at the very spot that it would all happen in less than an hour. Al's old tape copy of the Zapruder film had been played so many times that it had been practically falling apart, but he still recognized some of the blissfully ignorant standers-by from the footage. It was surreal.

Crossing Elm, he approached the seven-story brick structure of the Depository building and peered up at the corner window on the sixth floor. The window was open, but there was yet no sign of Oswald, whom he found in the alley behind the building.

"You're fucking late, asshole," he said accusatorily. He looked pissed off, but Jake was used to seeing him like this by now.

"You knew I'd be here?" Jake asked after a moment.

"Don't talk to me. Not out here. Just get in position, okay? He's downtown and heading this way. I'm going upstairs."

Jake didn't know what the man was talking about, but he had an inkling he was supposed to do something. "Where are-" he began, and Oswald cut him off.

"Tell me you brought the rifle."

Jake chewed on this for half a second, but suddenly remembered that it was stashed in the trunk of his car. He nodded to Oswald, who rolled his eyes and said, "Then get to the knoll." He ducked back inside the service entrance of the building, letting it shut behind him.

Something about this was seriously off. In all the months Jake had been living in the past, mostly within a few feet of Lee Harvey Oswald, he had never been able to ascertain whether or not the man had had any co-conspirators. The microphones Jake had planted in the apartment above his own back when Lee and Marina had lived there told him that he was an angry man, prone to violence, who felt deeply dissatisfied with the state of his country. There was no evidence, however, that he had maintained any contacts with agents in the Soviet Union. The lone gunman theory had seemed the most likely.

Of course, Jake's vigilance had slipped in the last few weeks. Oswald lived close, but Jake couldn't keep tabs on him all the time. Jake had a job. He had a girlfriend, though he couldn't place her name at the moment. He had been living his life in this part of the twentieth century for so long that his mission had become a bit of a blur. Everything had become a bit of a blur.

He thought about the rifle resting in the trunk of the Pontiac and made a decision, and as he did so, memories from the last few weeks solidified slightly in the mush that was his brain. Whispered conversations and hasty phone calls as Jake worked to gain Oswald's trust bubbled up in his mind. Infiltration was the key to his strategy, and now their plans were coming to fruition. Today was the day they were going to assassinate President Kennedy.

Doubt struck him then. Surely there were other conspirators, right? Had Jake suddenly become the rumored, but never confirmed co-conspirator in the JFK assassination? Was that even possible?

Jake walked quickly back to the car, which he had conveniently parked just to the West of the Book Depository (hadn't it been several blocks south just a moment ago?), and popped the trunk. He eyed the rifle suspiciously for a moment. Jake had only ever fired a gun a few times in his life, but Oswald didn't know that. He lowered the lid of the trunk a bit and stared off towards the grassy knoll, the location that had supposedly hidden the second shooter according to many conspiracy theorists. Oswald's plan seemed to be to have Jake camp there with his rifle and... and what? And shoot Kennedy? There's no way he would do that! Besides, even if he tried, he'd miss by a mile! He was no sniper!

The entire world seemed to pass underwater for a brief moment and Jake shook his head to clear it.

He opened the trunk again and looked at the handgun lying inside. Part of him had expected to see a rifle sitting there, but he wasn't sure why. Some words came to him unbidden then. "Maybe there's a timeline where you spilled the coffee, and you've just managed to sidestep it." Was it Bill who had told him that?

He pocketed the revolver and shut the lid of the trunk, entering the Texas School Book Depository through the service entrance where Oswald had disappeared minutes before. Jake checked his watch. Almost half-past twelve. Where had all the time gone? It was almost too late!

Jake bounded up the stairs two steps at a time, navigating as if he'd been in this building before, though he was pretty sure he hadn't, and found Oswald crouching by the open corner window on the sixth floor, partially hidden amongst several stacked cardboard boxes. There was a rifle in the small man's hands, held vertically in a ready position. He seemed unaware of Jake's presence.

There was a quiet roaring sound from outside the open window as several dozen people standing along Elm Street began to cheer. Was the president's motorcade already passing

through? Oswald visibly tensed, and he rested his elbow on a box that he had set up as an armrest, pointing the barrel of the rifle out the window and towards the open-top limousine that was no doubt cruising their direction. The pistol was now out of Jake's pocket, held shakily in his sweaty hands. Hopefully he wouldn't have to use it, but what if Oswald rounded the rifle on him? He'd have no choice but to kill the man.

He became acutely aware that this was the moment that he had been working towards for the last two years. He was now in the room with Lee Harvey Oswald as he prepared to put a bullet through President Kennedy's skull, and he realized that he couldn't let it happen.

"Lee," Jake said hoarsely to get the man's attention. It seemed to work. Oswald jumped a foot into the air and spun, clumsily striking the muzzle of the rifle against the window sill as he turned, apparently caught completely off-guard by Jake's sudden appearance.

Another line floated through his head as if from a dream, "Is it possible that your actions might invariably prevent your own conception?"

Jake closed his eyes and squeezed the trigger.

White-hot pain erupted in Oswald's left arm as the bullet struck him and he let out an involuntary howl. He dropped the rifle, falling against the brick wall next to the window, and gripped the bleeding wound with his right hand, squeezing his eyes shut in pain. Fear of a second gunshot forced him to open his eyes, but when he did so, he found that he was alone in the room. A moment ago, Jake, the man he thought had been his friend, was standing ten feet away with a gun pointed at him and now... nothing.

"Jake?!" he shouted, but there was no response. The pain seemed to fade for a moment, and he managed to compose himself long enough to regain his knees and poke his head over the sill of the window. There, only fifty yards below him, goddamn Kennedy's limo was passing by on Elm Street. In a panic, he grabbed the rifle off the floor with his bloody hand, aimed it out the window, took a deep breath, and fired! The shot was hasty, and it ricocheted off the rear bumper of the car, now already making its way towards the railroad underpass. He cursed under his breath, cocked the bolt-action rifle, and fired again, but the limo had already begun accelerating, secret servicemen rushing to hop aboard the car and protect the assholes aboard. The shot managed to strike within a few inches of the president, but the car was now too far gone to get in a third shot.

He had failed. Kennedy had managed to get away. Oswald had missed his chance, and where the fuck was his backup!? Wasn't that jerkoff...(what was his name?) supposed to be

firing from the grassy knoll? Wait a second, wasn't he just up here a minute ago? James? No, Jake! That sounded right. Oswald spun back towards the room, but there was nobody there.

*Who's Jake?* he thought to himself. *And why does my arm hurt?* He looked down at his left bicep, but it seemed to be completely fine. *What the fuck just happened?*

*THE END.*