

THE GIRL WHO DESTROYED THE WORLD

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At first, I could only think of the personal benefits that could come from pushing the button that would essentially re-write history.

It was an extremely powerful thing, and it went straight to my ego. One push of a button, and I could make all of the immensely disappointing things about human civilization disappear. Vonnegut said it was embarrassing to be human, and I agreed wholeheartedly. But now, I could singlehandedly negate reality television shows, backwards Jesus-spouting politicians, and teenagers that couldn't find Canada on a map in one clean motion. The most positive outcome, to me, would be eliminating all that ignorance from society. It would be a relief; like a huge weight off the human collective conscience. I could be a hero for pushing that button.

But what if none of that happens?

And then my stupid stepbrother brought it all crashing down. Cue the record scratch track.

"I mean, what if we end up dumber?" he elaborated.

I hadn't really thought of that, as I was too preoccupied with becoming the savior of intellectualism. Would there be annual parades in my honor?

I grasped for an answer. "We can't... we as humans, we are inherently intelligent," I mumbled.

"Yeah, yeah but what if we push the button and we end up stuck in an alternate timeline where, like, slavery never ended?" said Max.

Several rapid thoughts occurred to me at once. First, I wanted to make a comment on how this was real life, not *Back to the Future Pt. II*. Then, briefly, when did this "we" push the button start? But my ear really caught on slavery.

"Ah, but human slavery still goes on. Human trafficking is everywhere. It's been going on since we were smart enough to understand the concept of property," I answered, glad to have caught his mistake.

“What if I *don’t* push the button,” I continued, “and it never ends? Wouldn’t it be worth it to push the button and end that? To eliminate it completely? All the pointlessly dumb pain and suffering that’s ever happened because of human ignorance and cruelty?”

The scene was the back patio of our apartment where most of our more meaningful discussions took place on dirty outdoor furniture recovered from the rec pool. The big monster houses on the hills were reflected sharply in Max’s sunglasses. He is the only other person I’ve told about the button. Who else could I tell? He was my companion, *my brother*, and we often shared together the encumbrances that come with knowing a little too much about life. In the many long dialogues we have had together over the years, a trust and respect has developed. The human condition was a favorite subject of these young and jaded times. And so I knew unquestioningly that this was not something I could burden anyone else with. Certainly not my college friends. As intelligent as some of them may be, most of them already seem a few steps away from minor breakdowns due to finals or the LSATs. There was a fine tinge of hysteria in the air. If I told one of them about the button, they just might crack. Max was a calm person though, and I knew he would have a strong enough constitution, an openness of thought to deal with this final problem.

Max agreed that it was a great deal, but like many great deals, it was too good to be true. He argued passionately that it would be a mistake and an indescribable shame to erase everything we have ever valued about human history. To destroy all that knowledge was unthinkable to him.

“Everything we’ve learned, every mistake we’ve made, no matter how horrible—it’s been a learning experience,” he urged.

“It’s the 21st century, if we haven’t learned our lessons about not killing people...not killing children, or not enslaving, torturing, and *ruining* the lives of other people, how could we ever? Hasn’t it been enough time? I mean how long is this grace period of learning and forgiveness supposed to last? Shouldn’t we be civilized by now?”

He agreed that we should, but weren’t. And I won the argument for the day.

But the next day he came back with a new argument, one that I had heard in various classes before, but that fit perfectly with our unique

situation.

“If we imagine the entire 14 billion years of the universe compacted as one year,” he read from the text perched on his knees, “then the history of human beings falls into only the last thirty seconds of that year. The pyramids were built 11 seconds ago, Galileo knew the Earth orbited the sun only 1 second ago.”

He stopped and skipped to the next paragraph where he had highlighted a sentence.

“Using this scale of time, the human race is the youngest of infants.” He snapped the book shut and looked up not smugly, but imploringly. “See! We’re just babies,” he said, “We’ve only just gotten started, give us a chance!”

We were back on the patio overlooking the affluent houses in the distance again. Their Romanesque stucco columns and oak double doors were separated from our bleak apartments by a gargantuan golf course.

“Yes,” I sighed heavily letting my cheeks puff out. I had to agree, by the perspective of the whole of the universe, us humans were weak pathetic little boogers. I told my companion as much and he smiled.

“Boogers that can do calculus and compose symphonies. Compared to the other species slouching around, we’re prodigies. The best of the best.”

Oh yes, the paragon of animals.

“What if the best is still horribly backwards and stunted? What’s the point of having a society that can do advanced math and imagine wonderful transcending music if we’re still beating each other daily in the streets? It seems such a paradox.”

Max opened his mouth very slightly but didn’t have an answer. On his lips the words ‘give us a chance’ slowly died.

“We’ve just barely started,” he said instead.

“It was a bad start. So lets do a quick re-write. You’re right, what’s twenty seconds?”

The beginning is the most important part of the story. How many times do writer’s edit their beginnings?

“So you say we would truly be back to the beginning of human intelligence?” He asked later in the evening. I was glad to hear the slow ac-

ceptance in his voice. That maybe he knew I wanted to push the button no matter what he argued.

I nodded quickly.

I had been doing some research of my own. By my best guess it looks like the button will take us back to when humans were at least 200,000 years ago. Everyone was a hunter-gatherer then, we all lived basically the same. Equal, I mean. I told him as much.

He seemed wary and afraid of this answer.

“But, we’re not going back in time, right? Won’t we still be here, technically in the 21st century? But will everything be gone? Buildings, houses, roads?”

I suppose this is why I needed Max in the first place, to ask the questions I had not thought of, or didn’t want to.

“I don’t know.”

“Gone?”

“They would have to be, I guess.”

“So, the question is, would it be worth it? You’ve said there is no guarantee.”

“In the long run, maybe, yes. Kinda like what you said, in the perspective of the universe, what’s the big deal of a few steps backwards when it results in a hundred leaps forward?”

Over the course of the next few days I pushed the argument against religion. I sneered that religion delayed science and we would be much better in a world without it. How much further along would we be if Galileo weren’t condemned a heretic, if Copernicus wasn’t so afraid to say the Earth revolved around the sun? What ever happened to all the excitement around stem cell research? Are we just going to let all that potential go just because some bible thumpers thinks it’s too creepy? But Max would come back just as hard in human’s favor, vehement to change my mind.

“You’re just *assuming* that this hypothetical better world would be free of religion, what if it wasn’t?” He asked this while cooking spaghetti, energetic swirls of heat coming up in his face.

“If religion existed post-button,” I answered, “the same problems would crop up that we have now. It’s only logical to assume religion can’t exist in order to create a more peaceful world.”

Max hummed noncommittally as he stirred the steaming pot with a fork.

“Religion,” I began again, “tends to make people extremely conservative. Conservatism makes people cold to one another.”

“Do you mean traditionalism? You sound like a cult leader. Follow me and I will lead you into the new world, free from problems!”

I didn't speak to him for three days after that comment.

I was standing at the edge of a large expanse of cold dewy grass clutching a scalding coffee cup when I made the abrupt decision to cancel my previous resolve about talking to my other friends on the button issue. It was day two into my not speaking to Max as punishment phase, and I was getting antsy. The problem haunted my every waking thought, and I did not sleep well. My old freshman roommate stood stiffly with me, watching our college gain ground on the soccer pitch. Soccer was something we both agreed upon fervently, and we decided we needed to at least witness a school match together before graduating. A burly girl wearing our colors made a failed attempt at a goal, but my friend shouted approval anyway. Her whoop quickly formed a bubble of warm mist in the chill air and faded just as rapidly.

“My philosophy professor asked a funny question to the class yesterday,” I finally said after rehearsing the sentence in my head. She attached her mouth quickly to the welcoming heat of her coffee cup while looking up as if to say ‘go on.’

“Well, he asked whether, if given the choice, we would flip a switch to re-start modern humans. And if we flipped that switch, you see, we would be basically guaranteed a better world. Like y'know this time around we wouldn't have as many wars or diseases. Slavery and torture just wouldn't have happened.”

I tried to say this as casually as I could manage, but my stomach felt weighted and my mouth hot and dry. I refused myself another drink of coffee to wet it.

“Like a utopia?” She asked while sweeping her eyes over the game. I was wary of using that word.

“Ah, kind of. The switch would make us better, not perfect.”

I thought that by using switch instead of button that I wasn't ex-

actively lying, but also not revealing the whole story. Equivocating maybe.

“Sounds good,” she said.

“Yeah but, there’s a catch. You lose everything. Like all previous human history would be erased, like recording over a tape.”

“Oh. NO, then. No way.”

“Why though?” I pressed.

“Well you would just lose all that’s ever happened!” She waved her heavily gloved hands in wild gesticulations, just as indignant as Max.

“For the greater good, to make room for much greater things to happen.”

“But all of the blood and sweat that went into building great cities, all for nothing?”

“Lots of blood and sweat went into building cities that don’t exist now. Babylon, the great Mayan cities...”

“Yeah but Rome still exists, you would erase all that history? Culture?”

“Maybe.”

She shook her head slowly and mumbled that she didn’t think she could do it.

“What did the professor say?”

“What?”

“In class?”

“Oh. He—he remained neutral.”

I let the issue drop, feeling failure. I couldn’t concentrate on the game, and hardly acknowledged that we had lost.

Max broke the silence between us the next afternoon by asking another question I had failed to even consider in my state of hyper-anxiety.

“So, who gets to come with us?” He said this very clearly and loudly as to ensure I couldn’t pretend I didn’t hear.

“Sorry, what? Go where?” I was genuinely confused, as I had spent the whole day imagining ritualistic sacrifices, crumbling Mayan cities.

“To, you know, the past. Or the future or whatever. There are seven billion of us now, so we can’t all go. Seven billion people can’t suddenly be hunter-gatherers. There wouldn’t be enough resources, enough food.”

Oh God, he was right. Of course, the population had been much smaller 200,000 years ago. How would we—

“So who gets to go?” He asked again.

I shook my head numbly.

“The smartest?” I guessed. “The most loyal, chivalrous, and ambitious of us?”

“That doesn’t seem very fair.” Max said this quite calmly, to my shock. His tune had changed, and it was obvious he thought he was somehow going to be part of this small percentage that will go on, whose genes will survive.

“Maybe neither of us will make it.” I said turning my back and leaving the small living room of our apartment. He said something back, but I couldn’t hear past the rushing in my ears and stomach.

Would I be killing people, then? All of my friends, family? The elderly, the sick, children, all these people I’ve never met would be no more. Would they be dead, or would be as if they had never existed? Is there a difference? So they don’t even get a chance. Like performing one big abortion on the world. I tried to imagine a world of the strongest, most intelligent people but everything seemed to clash. That’s what happened in *Brave New World*; can’t have a world full of Alphas, it wouldn’t work. Who would do the dirty work? Cook the food, take out the trash. No one would want to do it, they would all think themselves above it. Or would they? How would intelligence be measured in a society of geniuses? Or maybe it would just be arbitrary. Just a bunch of random people selected and thrown together in a tribe.

But nature isn’t arbitrary, can’t be. My thoughts grew more disjointed as my mind came back to the death of billions. The moral argument of negating these lives was too much. I opened my bedside drawer so quickly that the duct-taped Ikea handle nearly flew off. I shuffled through notes and collegial debris until my hand hit a prescription pill bottle with my cousin’s name on it. I had bought these off him only for emergencies, like insomnia or migraines. But this was an emergency, and I couldn’t handle the responsibility, I couldn’t handle Max’s newfound indifference, and I just wanted peace. I a tiny white pill and downed it with a sip of tepid water that had been sitting on my desk for a very long time. I resolved not to look at the water, not wanting to see any dust or bugs that might have

been floating at the top.

Sitting on the crumpled sheets at the edge of my bed, I reached down between my legs, my wrist bumping against the metal frame in search. I pulled up with a smooth wooden box, very small, maybe the size of a kid's juice box. Maybe under the bed wasn't the best place to hide a button that could rival several nuclear weapons in its effectiveness.

I rubbed my right hand over the top of the box few times, just to feel the smooth surface. I felt like I had no time, like I had to decide soon. I opened the box, and marveled at how easily the wood cover slid open. The first and only time I showed the box to Max, as proof, he had seemed afraid to touch it. But I now ran my fingertips reverently along the sides, very carefully and well out of the way of the small button lying in the vessel's center.

You're killing Shakespeare, I thought to myself. You're killing Plato, Beethoven, da Vinci, every love song, every innovation, everything good that's ever existed and you will erase all traces of it if you push that button.

I started to cry. Quietly, though. I hadn't cried noisily since I was a child, mortified of the way my body betrayed me with heaving ragged breaths. So I just let gravity work its law with the slow drip of hot tears and snot drooping down onto my t-shirt.

I continued observing the button until I could feel the creep of the drug I had taken inch warmly up the muscles in my neck and back. I suddenly felt very afraid of the device I held. A mortal playing God. So I carefully, *very carefully*, slid the top back into place and set it down back under the bed to rejoin the dust and old textbooks.

Curling up into bed and enjoying the cool personal scent of my pillow, I thought, with a selfish detachment that Max sure as hell better not wake me up.

I spent three days locked in my room. I did not bathe, change clothes, or talk to another person. Phone off, classes skipped. I ate only instant oatmeal, sped in and out of the bathroom only when necessary, and slept only with the aid of drugs. I researched obsessively online. History, wars, famine; I listened to hours and hours of mumbling lectures. History especially was fascinating and terrifying to me in a way it had never been

before. The multitude of small actions that put all great things into motion, immortalizing them forever. Revolutions, treaties, Alexander, dictators, peacemakers, Picasso, assassinating, rebuilding, razing again. *History, said Stephen, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.*

Max had mentioned time travel enough that it was stuck in my head. I knew it was silly, but I researched this too. Would two black holes colliding create the energy necessary to throw a couple thousand people back in time? I listened to free philosophy talks all night; rewinding and pausing until it I could hear the morning garbage trucks coming. Is it human nature to war? To always fight? Maybe if we evolved to have less testosterone... I quickly opened a page on biology as my eyes strained and ached.

But it all was for naught, only delaying the confirmation of what I think I already knew, what I had known the moment I was given this task. I knew this was the end. I knew I wasn't truly meant to pass some grand judgment, to make a choice for humanity. This wasn't a research project. I was supposed to follow a very clear instruction, to carry out a task that must be done. The epiphany moment came in a blur while listening to a recorded panel where some very logical and well-educated people were shouting about whether humans were really destroying the planet. One elderly voice was finally given a chance to speak amongst the others without being spoken over, and was able to stress a few points before he was drowned out in applause and other noise. I paused, dragged the cursor back along the tracking bar.

"At the rate we're going," the stressed voice began, "global warming, nuclear bombs, disease, all these chemicals everywhere! We aren't going to make it. Humans aren't going to make it. The species, I mean. We will die out. It's obvious only to a fair few, most are in extreme denial. But we aren't... we just won't BE here anymore. Like the dinosaurs, in a few hundred thousand years, we're dead. Maybe less."

Pause. Rewind. Deep, panicked feeling, much like extreme thirst settled in my chest and throat. But maybe those were the exact arrangements of words that I finally needed to hear. Something solidified. Clicked into place. I was selected to be a tool.

After a short nap, I decided I couldn't keep hiding, so I emerged greasy and dim-eyed into the living room. Max wasn't in there, but he

must have heard the movement for he was out of his room and on me in an instant.

“Look, I think we need to have a serious talk about this,” confronted Max. He didn’t look to be in much better shape than me.

“We’ve done nothing *but* have serious talks about this,” I answered, not making eye contact. I shuffled to the small kitchen. Need real food. Max followed quickly behind.

“Ok, I’m going to be the first to admit it,” he said. “I don’t want you to do this. I want to be selfish. I don’t want to give up my nice bed and my couch and all my 21st century luxuries to go live in a hole for the greater good of mankind. I want to live out the rest of my life in moderate peace and comfort and I don’t care about everyone else. There.”

“Me too. I know. Me too.” I mumbled, opening and closing cabinets. But Max wasn’t done; he shadowed my movements and rambled on.

“I’ve been people watching, very closely in fact, and as stupid as they can sometimes be, I-I’m incredibly fond of humans, *just* as they are! What if something changes? Like we aren’t as...full of emotion next time around? Aren’t as passionate about things?”

I tried going around him, his frame blocking the kitchen entrance, but this only made him more frantic. He latched onto my hands and cupped them tightly in his own.

“However we are, we’re meant to be this way. You can’t change the past!”

“Yes, I know.” I said, “I agree. No one can change the past, we can only make a better future.”

“Great! So then lets just forget about it! Hide that thing away and we’ll never mention it again!” He looked at me pleadingly, arms outstretched, palms up.

“Ok.” I said, Ok. It sounded mechanical and defeated to my own ears but Max perked up.

“Really? Ok? Ok, good. Yes. Let’s—let’s just forget and, and we’ll get rid of it. Tonight. It has to be gotten rid of as soon as possible.” The hands he had previously released were grabbed again as he spoke and squeezed tight, like a threat. I nodded that I would take care of it. As soon as possible.

“You’re really not going to do it then? Push it? You swear?”

“I swear,” I said.

That was a lie.

I told Max I had to go to class, but that we could get ice cream or something after, I promise. He kept trying to look me in the eye to make sure I was serious, that I was ok. This made me feel incredibly guilty; out of everyone I knew, I would have wanted Max to be with me when I did this. I didn't want to be alone. I pulled on my backpack and rushed out of the apartment. The sense of urgency was rising, I shouldn't have taken the nap; I had no time. I sped-walked down the street so furiously that I could already feel the skin of my thighs getting irritated by the repeated friction of my swishing jeans. I turned right, instead of left to campus. By the time I had made it to the small park two blocks away, I had to take my jacket off, as I was so hot and panicked from the short walk over. I sat on a bench trying to calm myself, but felt my stomach churn at my surroundings. A blissfully playing child ran circles around the play structure behind me. The little girl seemed delighted by the mere fact that, for a few shining moments, she had the whole park to herself. Her mother sipped a latte and flipped through a thick cooking magazine nearby.

No, not here, I thought. Not with that kid so close by. So I lifted my backpack again and hurried past the mother, trying to cool my red face with the backs of my icy fingers. A few more trudging steps and I was in a slightly more secluded space of trees, but it was mostly a field of those weeds that have little sharp stickers that hang onto your clothes. There was a jogging trail roughly marked through the brush, but no one was here now. I sat on a huge rock, about the size of one of those zippy smart cars. Obviously a popular sitting place, as the cigarette ends and fast food wrappers denoted. Wiping the sweat from above both of my ears and nose with the back of my hand, I zipped down my backpack and presented its sole contents to the open air.

I ran my fingertips reverently along the sides. Bowing my head slightly to the revered square, I hoped to show that I had given up fighting it. My hands didn't even tremble when sliding open the lid. I took some moments to simply wait, holding the box out like an offering. The muted sounds of society nearby, music, cars, people, could not be completely unheard; though I still did my best to silence them. *Quiet*, I commanded. *Silence*.

This is the moment. Then, *yes*, I thought. *Yes, yes*, ok, now.

I slid my thumb over the button and held it there, not intending to lift it. I did not look at it as I did this, but held my gaze forward. I was much too frightened to look. I was scared to my core. For a few agonizingly long moments, nothing happened. I was about to bark out a laugh of relief and anguish at the idea that it was fake. But just as the sound bubbled up in me, the small wooden box began to shake. No, more like vibrate, but very hard. Hard enough that it immediately hurt my hands, hurt and itched all the way up my forearms. Maybe it was trying to get me to let go, but I would not. The shaking was relentless; the buzz of it was in my head, hurting. Maybe I fell over, because I could smell the dirt, feel it close to my nose. It was a calming scent though, and suddenly I relaxed, all major muscles limp, and everything was well.

She stirred from sleep as one who awakes from a simple dream, not afraid or angry, just curious. Rolling over on the rough padding beneath her offered enough warmth and comfort to shut her eyes again for a few moments. Sounds of other things stirring finally broke her out of light slumber. An elderly woman scraped by and touched her shoulder, smiled warmly, and went on to touch other shoulders or heads. She looked up over her coverings to see two aged men doing the same. Children resisted the touches, and snuggled closer to their mothers for warmth, backs turned against the harsh cold dawn air. She rose silently and stepped out of the small cave opening, careful not to hit her head on the low rocky entrance. The sandals on her feet were rough but worn, allowing every crevice of the earth beneath to be felt. Blinking quickly to adjust against the new light, the clean cold air was breathed in with a comforting shiver. Many adults without children were already outside, awake. Both men and women, talking in hushed circles, petting the dogs, pointing and gesturing about what to do with the day's precious amount of sunlight. Some were pointing at well-worn trails that led further off over the hill.

Suddenly a boy came running noisily from over the aforementioned path, laughing and gasping, shielding with one hand a small type of torch lit with flickering flames. He was caught in the arms of the group standing nearest the path. They clasped his now free hand and smiled, asking how he had passed the night. He was laughing too hard to answer, and

passed the firegift along to someone who would take it to the big pit for everyone.

She smiled as she watched this exchange, the boy being teased and praised for volunteering to bring such a nice morning surprise from their closest campfriends. He would be asked to stay for breakfast of course. She began moving down to join the group, the rough cloths scratching her skin into awakening. The previously sleepy children had heard the commotion and came rushing out of the cave entrance, full of energy and excitement. Wagging mangy dog tails flipped up and ran to go meet the noisy little ones. The girl watched the commotion of each child wanting to greet and pet each dog, some falling over from the speed at which their pup-friends ran quick happy circles around and around their pudgy bodies. The multiplying squeals of delight could be heard from the next camp over the hill.