



**MEGHAN
BELL
ERASE
AND
REWIND**

ERASE AND REWIND

Stories

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Erase and Rewind

Day Twelve

Louisa discovered she could reverse time on a dim suburban street, thirty-eight minutes after leaving Nick's house.

It happened by accident: she stepped in dog shit. The shit squished over her soles of her sandals, and wrapped around her naked feet and between her toes. She stopped walking and screamed breathlessly into the night.

If it hadn't been so dark, she could have avoided the shit. If she'd been watching, if she'd been paying attention, if she hadn't been staring at the stoplights three blocks ahead, wondering if they seemed so bright because of the marijuana she'd smoked hours before or because of the gelatinous tears stuck on her corneas like contact lenses, if none of those things, she probably would have seen the shit and she probably would have avoided it.

Louisa thought about all of this, when she realized she was walking backwards. She felt her foot step into the imprint she'd left in the shit, toe-heel, and then lift, dry, and step back onto clean concrete. She looked down and her feet stopped moving. She was standing directly behind the shit, which was now—miraculously—intact.

A string of complicated and contradicting emotions exploded in her gut. She had stepped in dog shit, and she had reversed it. How was this possible? Yet, there it was, footprint-free, right in front of her eyes.

Or had it even happened? The memory blurred at the edges. She remembered *remembering* that she had stepped in dog shit, but she couldn't recall the sensation.

No. She had reversed it. She must have. She'd been so sure a minute ago.

Louisa pulled her cell phone out of her purse and checked the time. 12:33am.

She closed her eyes and thought *back*.

Her eyes opened. She couldn't move. She stared at the dog shit for what felt like a long time, and then, automatically, she began to walk backwards. After a block she forced herself to break the trance again. She checked the time. 12:24am. She waited until the four became a five before lifting her chin. Already, she could barely remember the block ahead.

She not only could rewind, Louisa realized. She could erase.

The sadness within her burst and spread like lava. It grew out from her gut down into the dull pain between her legs and up her torso where it seared her heart, then wound its way through her limbs. The weight of it was unbearable. It threatened to drown all other feelings.

She closed her eyes and thought *back*.

Day Eleven

Louisa had only looked back once after she left Nick's house, at exactly 11:59pm on Saturday night.

When her head began to turn, she felt a sharp sense of relief. In horror movies, the mounting tension before the audience sees the monster is always more terrifying than the monster itself. Louisa watched a lot of horror movies.

It was just an ordinary student house. Faded blue paint chipped and fell on the overgrown lawn. Empty bottles of liquor littered windowsills. Automatically, her head tilted away from her shoulder and her gaze returned to the ground. She continued to step back towards her destination. Small tears rolled up her face and into her eyes.

Back, back.

Louisa stepped backwards up the three porch steps. Her hand shot back, and the doorknob swung to meet her palm.

She'd rushed out of the house, and now she rushed back into it, winding her way through the foyer and up the staircase, to his bedroom door, and inside.

Nick sat upright in bed, the fly of his jeans open, his body twisted towards the open window. He was shirtless, and the slight paunch of his stomach peeked over his *Simpsons* boxers. He leaned outside and inhaled clouds of smoke. Each time he lifted the joint to his lips, it burned bright and lengthened like Pinocchio's nose.

They both started speaking. Their voices were guttural, haunting. Louisa imagined conspiracy theorists listening for Satanic messages in their reverse-dialect. She couldn't understand a word, and when she tried to remember what had been said the first time they'd lived this scene, she started mentally humming the lyrics to *Baby, It's Cold Outside*, which, for whatever reason, she found so perversely hysterical she started to giggle or maybe vomit, and Nick and his bedroom froze for a fraction of a second, then he began to speak.

"Ha, you're so stoned," Nick said. "Seriously, just crash here."

Shit. Louisa focused and Nick repeated the words in reverse.

She dropped her purse on the desk, shrugged off her cardigan, and kneeled to fiddle with the straps of her sandals. Her hands and vision shook—she was getting drunker and higher with each receding minute. She heard a lighter click and the roll of the spark wheel, and then the sounds of Nick returning the joint to the small Tupperware he kept in his bedside table. She stood and pulled down her underwear, and returned them to where they had been lost in the sheets. She sat on the bed and waited. Then, in a single movement, she hinged down until she lay on the bed with her arms over her head.

Nick hovered above her. One hand clamped over her wrists, the other pinned down her left shoulder. His face was triumphant. As the look faded and he pressed down into her, Louisa unopened her eyes and reminded herself that this soon would be erased.

Close to the beginning, Louisa said something that sounded a bit like *own*. *Own*, she said. Then again, softer: *own*.

It took her a moment to flip the sounds. A weird sense of vindication washed through her.

She knew she'd told him she didn't want to have sex when she'd agreed to go home with him, back when they were dancing in the bar.

With a nudge at her ribs, he'd bet her he could change her mind.

She laughed. "Oh, like you're *that* good?"

He grinned. Nick had a soft face, and a pair of dimples that made him seem gentle and a little goofy. He'd delivered the warning like a joke and Louisa had ribbed back, oblivious to the punchline.

Until now, she hadn't been able to remember if she said *no* after that.

You fucking asshole, she thought.

Each thrust was more painful than the one before it, until he finally pulled out for good and the wound was healed.

Three Things To Know About Louisa:

1. A couple years ago, inspired by celebrities like Beyoncé and Emma Watson, Louisa and the group of girls she befriended in her first year of university began to identify as feminists. That Christmas, they all exchanged copies of *The Feminine Mystique*, *The Beauty Myth*, *Bad Feminist*, and autobiographies by famous comediennes like Tina Fey. Ever the diligent student, Louisa took to the Internet to learn as much about the different movements as possible. She quickly realized that not only was she impossibly ignorant, but the more she learned, the more ignorant she felt. She found some of the

more extreme—a word she would only use in her head—content difficult to relate to. Consequently, while she identified as a feminist and dedicated hours each week to reading articles, think-pieces, essays, and books by feminist writers, Louisa had never written a single Internet comment, tweet, or Facebook post on the subject of feminism and preferred to hold her tongue in conversations that touched on feminist politics—or politics in general. Not because she was afraid of a right-wing backlash (although she was, a little), but because she was afraid of getting feminism *wrong*—like her idols, Beyoncé, Emma Watson, and Tina Fey all had in some way or the other, according to the Internet.

2. Louisa lost her virginity at seventeen to her high school boyfriend. This was something she neither regretted, nor recalled with any sort of particular fondness. She had since slept with two other people, both boyfriends she'd been dating for at least three months. She liked to joke that her relative "prudishness" was a result of "recessive Catholic DNA." (Louisa was a math major, and hadn't studied biology since tenth grade.) No one in Louisa's family believed in God or went to church—other than for weddings and funerals—but seven of her eight great-grandparents had been devout. However, the secret truth was that Louisa was a bit of prude because she was a bit of a romantic, which was just one of the many traits that made Louisa suspect she was absolutely useless at feminism.
3. At this time, there were four hundred and twenty-three photographs chronicling Louisa's experimentations with alcohol, marijuana, and—just one time, at a deadmau5 concert—ecstasy, which were available online through her and her friends' various social media profiles. Eleven of those pictures were taken within the last four hours. Nick was in three of them, and in one, they are standing outside the bar, sharing a joint,

both smiling drunk like they didn't have a care in the world.

Day Ten

Falling out of sleep was like floating to the surface of a deep lake.

As Louisa slowly regained consciousness, a complication occurred to her: if she allowed time to start moving forward and didn't remember Nick was a threat, how was she supposed to make sure he didn't do it again?

She could write herself a note before her memory started to fade, but would she believe it? And even if she did, they still spent three hours per week in a classroom together, and they were technically "seeing each other", even if it had only been eight days. She'd have to drop the class. She'd have to text him that they were breaking up. This struck sober Louisa as both wildly inconvenient and potentially dangerous. So she kept rewinding.

Louisa had always prided herself on being a rational, pragmatic person. Like many people, she had little to no control over her emotions when she drank, but now she folded them up and tucked them into the analytical creases of her left brain. She wondered, as she turned and tossed to the faint backwards soundtrack of her roommate watching *Grey's Anatomy*, if it would have been better to not rewind, and just deal with the events of that night. She pushed the thought out of her mind. The fact was, the idea of going to the police or telling anyone what happened terrified her. It was better to relive this terrible thing if it meant she wouldn't have to deal with the emotional and physical consequences. The decision to rewind had been made through the lens of tequila, marijuana, and a high level of distress, but Louisa suspected she would have made the exact same call dead sober.

Louisa was not the sort of person who believed that *everything happens for a reason*. The human brain is designed to identify patterns and order, and where little to none exists,

impose it. Louisa found the concept of destiny and the people who believed in it to be terribly boring and depressing.

The rational thing to do, Louisa decided, would be to erase the whole fucking relationship.

Three Problems With Louisa's Story (Three Reasons Not To Go To The Police):

1. When Nick pulled down her underwear, she laughed and said, "Hey! Don't do that!" but did not physically try to stop him. She knew this because he said, "You're not stopping me." She then continued to not stop him because his pants were on anyway, and the situation was awkward, and for reasons she would never understand, Louisa did not interpret the removal of her underwear as threatening. She was still trying to figure out how to politely tell him she wanted her underwear back when it became too late. This could be interpreted as consent.
2. She did not realize that Nick had unzipped his own fly until he was already inside of her. He entered her so quickly and without warning, it hurt like hell, and Louisa gasped in pain. She was still thinking about how much it fucking hurt when Nick asked her, already thrusting, whether or not she was on the pill. She answered reflexively: "Yeah." This could be interpreted as consent.
3. Although Louisa did say "no" a total of three times and tried to push Nick off of her, there was a chance, she supposed, that he neither heard nor felt her try to fight him off on account of the fact that Louisa was very drunk, very stoned, and had roughly the upper-arm strength of a hamster. She stopped fighting after a few minutes and let it happen. After about fifteen minutes, desperate for the whole fucking thing to *just be over*, she pretended to moan and lifted her neck to gently bite his ear, which was

something that had made her last boyfriend come immediately. It had ended a minute later, and recalling that, Louisa could not figure out if the intense feeling of relief she'd had when he pulled out equaled the intense feelings of guilt and shame she had about the goddamn ear-nibble, like she had betrayed herself, betrayed feminism, and betrayed society by becoming just another data point supporting the fucking theory that a woman's *no* is just a *yes* that needs a little encouragement. This could be interpreted as consent.

Day Nine

The secret to reversing time, Louisa quickly realized, was to separate mind and body. She pictured her "mental" self as a tiny homunculus, spinning on its haunches in the back of her brain while her "physical" self, her body, followed the choreography being unwritten from her life thread. As long as her mental self didn't order her physical self to do anything once the rewind was going, time would continue to passively march backwards. For the most part, Louisa tried not to think about what her physical self was doing at all.

On Thursday, she started creating elaborate fantasies to pass the hours. Many of them involved horrible and/or violent things happening to Nick. When she got bored or creeped out by the fantasies, she tried to solve complicated probability questions in her head.

Louisa calculated the fraction of hours she had rewound, and how much further she had to go. She and Nick had met on the second day of the September semester in a 12:30pm astronomy seminar they were both taking as an easy elective. This meant that they had known each other for two hundred and fifty-two hours when Louisa began to rewind time. As her body brushed tangles into her hair on Thursday night and typed away inane chat messages to Nick, her mind followed her eyes when they darted up to the clock in the top-right corner of her

laptop and after a couple of quick calculations realized, with a slight thrill, that she was already a fifth of the way there.

Day Eight

Nick and Louisa had spent most of Wednesday afternoon in a local coffee bar, picking away at their respective formulas. The sunset backlit Nick. The electric candle on the table between them cast light up on his face at a sharp angle that splintered when it hit his thick-framed glasses, leaving two long shadows over his eyebrows that reminded Louisa of a cartoon villain.

She caught a glimpse of the time on the face of her cell phone when her hand lifted it from the table and turned it towards Nick. 7:47pm.

Seventy-six hours and forty-three minutes down, she thought, as her body smiled and warmed in response to a kiss Nick was about to remove from her nose. Three-tenths of the way there.

It was here, at the one hundred and seventy-fifth hour of their relationship, that Louisa first considered whether her crush on Nick could grow into something more. She found him charming, smart, and cute, but there was something off-putting, like she felt an overwhelming need to impress him and because of that she couldn't quite get comfortable, and she wasn't sure whether that was because she liked him so much or because she didn't like him nearly as much as she thought she did. She remembered the conversation leading up to this thought so perfectly she could hear the words even as they were spoken in reverse.

Nick: You're adorable.

Louisa (laughing): I don't know! I thought it was funny that I thought it!

Nick: Why'd you say it then?

Louisa: That didn't even sound clever in my head.

Nick (laughing): You should be.

Louisa (laughing): I'm sorry.

Nick: Nope, shut it down. That's the worst.

Louisa (air-quoting): Like, "Nick"-name.

Nick (silence):

Louisa: Nickname!

Nick: What?

Louisa (laughing):

Nick: I think it's cute. Could be a nickname for me.

Louisa: Oh no, that's terrible. Shybrows.

Nick: My sha-brows? Shybrows?

Louisa: With your evil shadow-brows.

Nick (taking the phone): I look downright sinister.

Louisa (laughing): Oh my god.

Nick (sinister voice): Beware . . . my evil plan. Something.

Louisa: Look! This is why I was laughing. Your eyebrows. You look like a freaking cartoon villain.

She pulled back the phone and framed Nick in the screen. At 7:39pm, her finger tapped the circle at the bottom and erased the picture forever. *Seventy-six hours and fifty-one minutes down. One hundred and seventy-five hours and nine minutes to go.*

Louisa's Three Theories Of Time Reversal:

1. Erased time took several minutes to eclipse and disappear completely after a rewind was stopped and time began to move forward again. Louisa was uncertain whether the

rewound memories atrophied at a steady rate or exponentially—in which case, perhaps the faintest outline of the memories could linger.

2. Regardless of whether it was steady or exponential, decay time was most likely affected by both the amount of focus Louisa put into trying to retain the memories, and by the number and degree of distractions available when she stopped rewinding.
3. Louisa had always been able to reverse time, but she kept forgetting about her power because of Theory #1. She suspected this because she had a hard time recalling any things she'd done that she'd consider to be "big" mistakes. Perhaps she was not such a rational, pragmatic person after all. Perhaps she was just a regular, illogical person blessed with the power to rewind and redo every fuck-up. Maybe tons of terrible things had happened to her—car crashes, bad grades, fights with friends, injuries, sexual assaults, and other troubles—and she'd just erased them all.