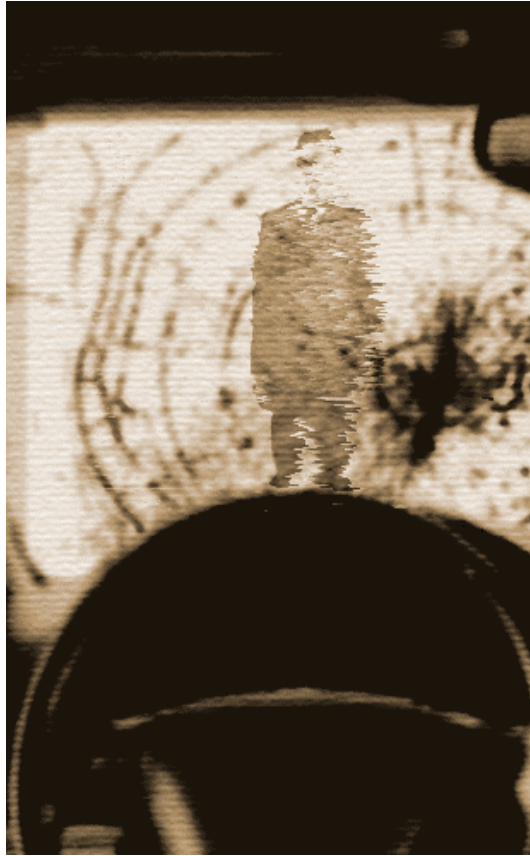


Undo Diligence



by

Matt McHugh

"Why are you stopping here?"

"I have to mail the damn Amex bill, that's why!"

"Well, hurry up!"

As Frank scraped the minivan's tires along the slick curb, Ellen unhooked her belt and reached back to the baby seat where Lilly shrieked deafeningly. Sam, strapped into his booster next to her, covered his ears and wailed "QUIET! QUIET! QUIET! QUIET!"

"Both of you shut up or God help me I'll spank both of you when we get home!" bellowed Frank.

"Just great! That really helps, Frank! Thank you for being such an understanding father."

Ellen didn't hear Frank's obscenity, carefully timed with the door slam. He went around the front of the van to the mailbox. The door was wedged by something big inside. As he tugged it hard, the door slipped free unexpectedly. He nearly tumbled backwards and felt the sciatic jolt that he knew meant weeks of crippling pain. All he could do was swear and whimper as closed his eyes and stuffed the envelope into the mailbox. When he looked up, the minivan was already rolling.

Backwards, smooth and easy, it drifted down the slight grade toward the intersection. He saw Ellen, Lilly and Sam inside--oblivious, one and all. Not that it would have mattered, but he reacted far too late. There was the horrid screech of truck brakes, then a sickening *crunk* as it struck the van. With no recollection of getting there, he found himself by the side window of the van, tearing away broken glass with his bloodied hands.

"Oh my God! Oh my God! Ellen! Are you all right! Oh my God!"

Ellen was flopped over the driver's seat, the crumpled passenger door pinning her legs. "My babies!" she cried. Lilly and Sam's hysterical screams scarcely seemed human. Frank stood at the center of a maelstrom of surreality, faltering on the edge of unreason. Then, from nowhere, calm descended.

Everything grew silent and still, like a film coasting to a stop. Frank's pain, horror, even bewilderment were simply gone. He stepped back from the wreck and saw the world hovering in kinetic stillness, like a ball tossed in the air lingering thoughtfully before it fell. Standing an arm's length away from Frank was a neatly groomed man in a dark suit.

"Hello, Frank," he said.

"Hello," Frank replied, being the only possible response in the situation.

"We don't have much time, so I'll explain this as simply as I can. I represent an organization from what you would think of as the future. We have the ability to reach backward in time, stop it, then roll it back to allow select historical events to be changed. Our capacity to do this is bound by rigid practical and ethical constraints, which I can't go into right now. Suffice it to say that the event you have just experienced qualifies for intervention. If you wish, we can set back time approximately seventeen seconds to just before you stepped out of the van. For a few moments, you will retain your awareness of this current event, allowing you to apply the parking brake and thereby avoid it. Do you wish us to make this adjustment?"

Frank looked back at the twisted metal of the minivan. Inside, the faces of his wife and children contorted in frozen agony. It was all so mind-wrenchingly bizarre, yet somehow seemed inexplicably familiar, natural. "Yes," he replied. "I do."

"Now before you give your final approval, I'm obliged to tell you your wife has suffered damage to her foot that current medical science can repair to a degree, but she may walk with a limp for the rest of her life. Your girl child has two broken ribs, which have bruised but not punctured her lung. Your son has a mild concussion that will advance an already present learning disability. However, your family will survive and largely recover without our intercession, albeit with some pain and suffering. Also note that for reasons I simply can not explain right now, each person, such as yourself, is given only a limited number opportunities during their lifetime to undo a tragic event."

"How many chances do I get?" asked Frank.

"Three."

"How many have I used so far in my lifetime?"

"Two."

"So if I undo this event," Frank spoke slowly, working it out, "I'm stuck with whatever fate I get?"

"Your colloquialism is not technically accurate, but it is correct in spirit. This is your last undo, if you will, Frank. You can use it or save it for later. The choice is yours, but you must choose now."

"Does anything happen to me or my family in the future that is worse than this?"

"That's information I can't give you, Frank. You have 30 seconds to decide."

"Why only 30 seconds? I thought you said you could stop time?"

"Imagine time as a flowing stream. Now imagine a stream the size of the entire universe, and you'll get a sense of how much energy we're expending here to dam it up, let alone push it back. You have 25 seconds to give me your decision."

"How I can know what the right choice is?" Frank protested. "What if I need to undo a greater tragedy someday?"

"How to make present choices that shape an unknown future is the fundamental quandary of human existence, Frank. There are no guaranties we, or anyone, can offer. You have 18 seconds."

"Wait!" Frank protested. He stepped forward and tried to grab the figure's arm. His hand passed right through--or rather in front of--the seemingly solid object, like a child grasping at an image from a 3D movie. The figure started to fade.

"You have 12 seconds. Decide quickly, Frank."

"No, please! Don't make me do this! I... I'm not sure. I don't know what's right! Help me make the choice! Please!"

"10 seconds."

"Wait! Please!"

"9, 8, 7, 6...."

END