

Time Again

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Time Again

by [muffin_song](#)

Summary

Rita Hanson is also experiencing a time loop on February 2nd, 2017 in Punxsutawney. But it's not quite the same.

Notes

Follows the chronology and characterizations from the 2017 musical by Tim Minchin and Danny Rubin, but it's similar enough to the 1993 movie that I tagged both.

Note: When originally posted, I accidentally left out a large chunk of the beginning of Chapter 2 - it's back now!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Day One

The door to the Burrow Bar clicked shut with Buster's departure. When the rush of cold air was gone, Rita took a deep breath and lifted her pen.

I am writing something here. It is going to stay here until tomorrow.

(Which will happen).

There. Proof of physical permanence. Or lack thereof come the next day.

The text looked lonely on the page. If this was her litmus test, might as well go for it.

Writing something here. "Here" being my journal with the black and white cover.

Which is supposed to be at the bottom of my sock drawer. Along with the Lisa Frank journal, the inspirational quotes journal, the Fuck the Patriarchy journal, the custom journal Phil got me that I never finished, and everything else I've written in real time.

Which is a good six years or so from 2/2/2017. The day I'm apparently reliving over and over.

Rita checked her watch. It was only 8, she still had time to kill. Ironic, given the situation. She doodled a few shapes below her text. She knew people whose doodles looked like they belonged in the Met. Rita's wouldn't pass muster in a 2nd grade classroom. She put down her pen and sighed.

Please don't let me be crazy. Things have really sucked lately, but I never thought I was losing it.

She bit her lip in an attempt not to cry. Billy the Bartender, the room's only other occupant, seemed nice enough. But there was no way in hell she was letting Phil see her like this. Especially the over-the-top asshole version of Phil that haunted this bizarre, sideways world.

Please just let this work.

The Burrow Bar's front door closed with Buster's cheerful exit to the Groundhog Banquet. Rita took a long swig of her sweet vermouth on the rocks with a twist. At least there was no chance of running out of alcohol.

She looked down at her journal, the pages once again blank.

Well, so much for that.

Today is still February 2nd. Yesterday was also February 2nd, and at this rate next week will be too.

There won't be any record of this the next time today rewinds. At least any hand cramps will also disappear? But my grandma was right. Writing stuff down always makes me feel better. And I always journal, so that's consistent, even if the flow of time isn't.

I know I've been saying I want a change of pace, but what the hell?

"You want another drink, Miss?" called Billy the bartender. Rita set down her pen. "Sure."

"What'll it be?"

Rita loved sweet vermouth on the rocks with a twist, a drink she discovered on study abroad as an undergrad. They always made her feel indulgent. Lately it was too much of a good thing.

"Bartender's choice," Rita said, ready for a change of pace.

"You sure?"

"Just surprise me."

Billy gave her a sly smile and went to make her drink. It occurred to Rita this was probably flirting. A few minutes later Billy put a tall glass of something bubbly in front of her. "Got to finish off a few things we don't usually use. Let me know if you don't like it."

It tasted like an alcoholic version of Peppermint Patti's, but in a good way. Rita raised her glass in approval. Billy grinned.

"Hey Billy-" She stopped herself. Had Billy introduced himself in the current loop? "You said your name was Billy, right?"

"Sure," offered the bartender, who probably got weirder things on a regular basis.

"Do you remember those...I can't remember what they were called, but they got taught in Geometry. You had to put together a couple of statements about acute angles to prove...something..."

"Uh...sure?" Billy grabbed a few empty glasses. "Oh wait, I remember this. Proofs, right? You wrote down those postulate things in columns that would prove a theorem." He gave what could only be described as an eyebrow waggle. "Geometry was one of the few things I was good at."

"You remember more than me." These days Rita's math skills were solely used to calculate the department budget, or lack thereof.

Billy returned to the kitchen, and Rita to writing.

Here we go. Postulate Number 1 (look at me being fancy): Today is February 2nd, 2017, at least in my lived reality. I know that's not right, even if I don't remember what day it's supposed to be. I think sometime in winter, but we weren't up to February yet. And it definitely wasn't 2017.

Maybe I am going crazy. But if that's in the equation (ha ha, get it, equation?), then all bets are off anyway and there's no way I can figure this out logically. I'm not ready to go there yet. I have memories of things happening after 2023 - world events, celebrity scandals, things in my life. I have to trust those memories are real.

As illogical as it sounds, I experienced 2023 before I experienced today, which is February 2nd, 2017. New Theorem: Time isn't going in the right order. If I-

The bar's door opened with a blast, followed by Jack, the town's sheriff, and his trusty deputy, Wilbur. Strange. They were usually at the Groundhog Banquet by this time. Rita had a bad feeling about this.

'Well, that's a first,' said Jack as he sat down at the bar.

"What is?" asked Billy, clearly accustomed to being the first in the know around town.

"That a would-be car thief would go after the town's snow plow," said Wilbur, joining them.

"How does that even work?"

"Eh, Ralph left the keys in the ignition. I don't think he realized how slow snow plows are."

"But Ralph was practically born in that thing."

Rita prayed silently for this conversation to go another way.

"Not Ralph, that weatherman."

Apparently God wasn't listening.

"You're saying Channel 5 forecaster Phil Connors tried to steal our snow plow?"

Rita finished the rest of her drink in one gulp.

"So if you have a bonafide criminal, what are you two doing here?"

"Eh, he's not going anywhere for awhile. Figured we might as get something to drink first."

She hastily scribbled one last line in her journal before bolting out the door.

Postulate Number 2: I'm repeating this day with the embodiment of Chaos.

Rita couldn't justify why she was at the Punxsutawney sheriff's office at 11 at night. Given the scene before her, it could only be for her professional pride.

"I can't even begin to apologize for this," she told Wilbur, who had somehow managed to beat her to the office. "I have no excuse for his behavior, truly." For once she was thankful the day's reality wasn't sticking, because if it did there was no way in hell she could show her face at the station (or maybe on the planet) ever again. This kind of shit did not happen on her watch.

"Eh, it happens more than you'd think," Wilbur replied, handing her the bail paperwork. Rita winced at the number written at the bottom. Even if her money was infinitely replenished, this was insulting. "People sure get crazy in the winter. That one just went quick."

"I told you," came a loud, irritated voice from the back. "I need to get out of here."

"The only place you're going is a nice cell," replied the sheriff. "Now could you tell me if you've consumed any alcohol tonight?"

"If you have to ask if I've been drinking, I am definitely not going to tell you, buddy."

Rita looked down at the paperwork, and then back up at Wilbur. "You know, I'm not really in any rush."

"Please, ma'am," Wilbur said a little too quickly. "I know it's not fair to ask you, and I know our little party must look silly to you out of towners, but the Groundhog Ball really is the highlight of the year for us."

"Were either of your parents 1970s porn stars?" came Phil's disembodied voice. "Because that would explain the mustache."

"Why, you little-"

Rita nodded slowly, and picked up the pen. Wilbur seemed like a good guy, he didn't deserve this. "Just know that I'm only doing this for you."

"You want anything else, honey?" asked Doris.

"Just more coffee," Rita said. She found herself shielding the journal pages from view, which was ridiculous since there was currently nothing on them.

And now I have to start over from the beginning. At least it's a new day, doesn't mean much, but it's nice to be out of the hotel and with other people. (No offense, Billy, you know you're still my number one).

Or maybe it's that I can get coffee at the diner. Coffee makes everything better.

So, Unsolved Riddle Number 2: What the ever loving fuck, Phil.

Phil Connors and I met once before Groundhog Day 2017, when we worked on a story about melting snow banks flooding the suburbs. It was hectic. I don't think we exchanged two words not about camera angles, and what words we did were blunt. When I asked Phil about it (after we started dating), he insisted that day was so crazy he hardly remembered any of it. I took him at his word. I really was just grateful that we got a second chance. I can say a lot about Phil, but he's never been anything close the rumors I heard when I first started at Station 5.

But back to Groundhog Day 2017. The truth is that day was fantastic, blizzards and relationships that didn't last and all. I've always said people don't just fall for each other in just one day. Looking back on it, who knows if it was "love," whatever that means. But I know something was different that day. It was one of those days that made you feel like there's more to the universe than you'd think.

Even if I'm bitter about how me and Phil ended, I want to hold onto that.

(I'm trying to hold onto that. I don't think I'm doing a good job lately. Whatever lately is).

I haven't talked to Phil in at least a year, not since he left Channel 5 for that travel show gig. My head hurts whenever I think too hard about the present, but I think they just wrapped up the second season? I caught it once when I was flipping through channels. Turning it off would just prove there was anything to bother me. The whole thing was very Anthony Bourdain Meets Weather Phenomena. Kind of cheesy, but also charming.

Phil's good at fooling people, but he looked genuinely happy interviewing those four generations of corn farmers in Indiana. I don't think that was just for the camera. Maybe Phil's figured some stuff out. That's a good thing. Really.

I can hold two things at the same time. Both that my first date with Phil was something special, and that it hurts to think about it. That in of itself would make my current situation awkward. The thing is, I'm not reliving that perfect day with Phil when we watched drunk people hurling from the top of the utility tower.

No, I'm doing it with Phil's evil twin.

"Hey Phil," called Larry. At least Larry was always happy. "We're about ready to get started,"

Phil didn't so much as look up from his spot on the bench. Gobbler's Knob was crowded at this time of the morning, but there was a 10 foot radius around Phil. Anyone who breached it

was instantly cut down by a dirty look. Or maybe lasers shooting out of Phil's eyes, at the rate this was going.

Maybe it was best to cut their losses and run. Professional pride, Rita reminded herself yet again.

"Phil?" called Larry again. Still no response. Gingerly, Larry sat down on the bench and waved his hand in front of Phil's face. Without looking up, Phil caught Larry's arm and twisted sharply.

"Ow!"

"I will not do the broadcast," said Phil, his words clipped but firm.

"Phil-" Rita wasn't sure if Larry was more alarmed by the pain in his arm, or the thought of being a cameraman without a subject.

He lowered his tone to a whisper, finally meeting Larry's eyes. "Try that again, and I will destroy you."

Okay. Time to do some producer magic.

Rita cleared her throat and put on her brightest smile. "Phil Connors. I'm Rita, your new producer-"

"-Associate Producer," Phil cut in.

When did he have a chance to figure that out this loop? "And I thought maybe we could chat about how things are going, what your vision is for the segment-"

"No force in this universe is going to get me to go near that rodent." Maybe looks really could kill.

Okay, time for a different tactic. "I should remind you that unless you're physically unable to do the job or have a qualified family or medical emergency, your contract does require you to give 24 hours notice..."

He wasn't listening. Impressive given that Rita was only two yards away.

Plan C, then. Phil had considerable size and height on Rita, but she had years of experience with older brothers. And the element of surprise. Coming around the other side of the bench, Rita yanked upwards on Phil's other arm. He scrambled out of her grasp, only to stumble forward and narrowly avoid falling flat on the snow in front of them.

"This is employee harassment," Phil said, still braced on his hands and not getting up.

"And this is me not caring." Rita's tone held no mercy.

Larry looked terrified. Rita promised herself she would make it up to him later.

There were upsides to a world without consequences.

People make fun of Twilight for many reasons, and a good chunk deservedly so. My college roommate would always ask, "Why do the vampires go to high school over and over? Really, you're an ancient immortal, and you spend eternity going to high school?"

I think I watched one of the movies once, and there was probably some plot reason why Edward and Bella repeat high school over and over.

I never really thought about it. And yet here I am.

You gotta hold onto something.

"I'm going to pretend I don't smell the alcohol in there," Rita said at Gobbler's Knob the next morning. She looked straight ahead so as to avoid Phil's eyes. Even if yesterday didn't happen and Phil didn't remember a thing, things still felt awkward.

"You're the one who keeps saying it's a party," Phil replied, deadpan. (Had she said that? The days were blurring together). "I'm getting into the festive spirit."

Rita had long since accepted that this was Dark Phil, but this was still too much. "I take it that's the reason your shirt is on backwards?" Rita tried.

"It's not," Phil said without so much as blinking. He took another swig of the sludge in his coffee cup.

"Are you okay, Phil?" Rita asked. It was so easy to fall back into caring about him.

He gave her a blank look and took another sip of the slime/booze combo. "Are any of us ever okay?"

That was too close to her Phil. The one that she couldn't help but worry over, no matter how frustrating he became. "You just seem kind of..." Off? Demented?

Phil beamed a smile, the expression out of place on his stoic otherwise face. "Too pretty for this hellscape?"

So much for that mental image. Rita put her hands up. "You know what, forget it."

Another thing I should mention, if you haven't already figured it out, dear Journal. Phil is the one thing that always changes around here.

And yes, I've asked him questions about 2023. Even a few about us, and he just seemed confused. This isn't Modern Day Phil, but it's not the one I met on Groundhog Day 2017 either.

I don't know where that Theorem fits into all of this.

Apologies Journal, I've been neglecting both you and Billy. I've missed you both. But I've been putting my energy lately into figuring out what the hell is going on here.

This week (series of loops?) I've been busy checking myself into Punxsutawney First Clinic for a medical/psychiatric/karmic/whatever evaluation. Gotta tell you, I was scared shitless. Too many bad horror movies. And let me tell you, it's awkward telling a medical professional that you're looping in time.

I know what you're probably thinking: Um, Rita, wouldn't any sane person start by making sure they didn't have a brain tumor? And you're right.

The thing is, everything around here feels...slippery. I don't know how else to put it. I can't pinpoint when I first started living This Day in History over and over. No moreso than I can remember what led up to this. When I try to go through it logically, I always drop one of the pieces and have to start over.

Let me put it this way: When you're dreaming, you never think about why you're walking around without shoes. You just do.

I have to give credit to the people of Punxsutawney: I don't think any of them believed me for a second, but they have always been kind. The alternative therapist even offered to lend me his spare sweat crystal (yes, you read that right).

The good news is that there's nothing wrong with my brain, I'm not going insane, and my aura looks great. Unfortunately, I'm still reliving Groundhog Day 2017. (Oh, and apparently I have a cavity, or I did six years ago).

Just one last thing to try.

“You wanted to talk, Rita?” Larry asked.

Rita could feel her heart hard in her throat. She could make this go away just by making an excuse, or finding any other subject to talk about with Larry. But she needed to give this a shot.

So she told him. About being from the future. About living today over and over. About not remembering how it had even started.

Larry gave her his full attention. His eyes creased with concern and care.

Rita knew without asking that he didn’t believe her. He was just too kind to say so.

“I’ll stay with you until tomorrow, okay?” Larry looked briefly alarmed as he considered the implications of that. “I mean, not in a creepy way. I’m just saying that I can keep you company if you’re worried.”

Rita knew that he would stay with her. She wanted that, badly. As if the comfort of a good friend would end this bizarre dream.

But it wouldn’t, and Rita knew that witnessing that would break her heart.

Instead, she squeezed his hand before heading back to her own room. “Good night, Larry.”

I’m scared to write this down, but I might as well admit it: I don’t remember what I was doing before I started reliving That One Groundhog Day. I know the general stuff. My name is Rita Hanson, I’m 42, Blood Type A, etc. I could even tell you specifics, like how I need to renew my renters insurance or plans for my niece’s birthday. But when I try to grasp onto what happened before Groundhog Day: Infinity Version, I just can’t.

Sometimes I can grasp a feeling. That’s about it.

But it’s more than that. Something isn’t right.

Like I was saying the other day, you know when you have dreams where you walk around without shoes all day? (Wait, is that just me? Whatever). That’s how I feel. There’s a part of my brain that questions why I would ever leave the house without shoes. You’re talking to the girl with the world’s coldest feet. But at the same time, Dream Rita is still walking around barefoot.

It’s funny. Sometimes it feels like the days drag on. Other times I feel like everything could happen in the blink of an eye or the snap of a rubber band, and there I would be again, lying in bed and waking to the eternal crooning of Carly Rae Jepsen.

I know I’m missing something.

Today I played hookie from work.

So much for my professional pride, right?

Punxsutawney really is a little known gem of Pennsylvania. The fact that it's "Phil's place" doesn't take away from that. My issue isn't around replaying this particular day over and over.

The truth is, I'm really tired right now. Of producing, aka dealing with frustrating people with a smile.

I pride myself on being able to put up with it all, to bring out the best in people, and doing it all with confidence and a smile. That's what a producer is supposed to do. But sometimes I think we get so caught up in Fixing Things and Making Sure Everything Is Fine, Dammit, that we refuse to see any other reality. It's one thing to make a project work through sheer force of will. It's another to make everything okay.

(Confession: That's something Phil - the real Phil, said a few times when we were fighting. That I was always trying to produce everything, including us. Which I always thought was unfair, especially coming from a guy who was so God awful at talking about the serious stuff. Sure, I'm stubborn, but at least I deal with the facts and situation at hand. Phil could teach a masterclass in avoidance).

I went to the other side of town, a feat given the weather. In the future - ha - I need to find out who has snow shoes I can borrow. There's not much to Punxsutawney, at least in terms of geography and distance. A few businesses and the town center, then some houses, and then a bunch of fields. Nothing is growing right now, but they're pretty anyway.

I was better at crying when I was a kid. I wasn't a drama queen, but the waterworks would come when I was really upset or when I just needed to get something out of my system. I'm not sure when it got hard. These days, even when I'm alone and I want to, it's hard to cry.

The truth is that sitting there and being miserable for a while made me feel better. In all the time I've been in Groundhog Day 2017, I've never really been alone. I mean, I could be in my room at the Punxsutawney Hotel. But the place is always hopping throughout the day and I've practically memorized the morning conversations from the family staying in the room next door.

I really do love this holiday, association with my ex be damned. Everyone is so happy to be here, no matter what else in their life is happening. It's like a way of saying, "Screw you, world. You give me a blizzard and we will fucking make snow angels out of that shit." Or something.

But today I needed to Grinch a little and feel sorry for myself.

You wouldn't think so, but it felt really good.

So here I am a few hours later, having a late night drink and maybe feeling a little better.

Billy has come up with some really fun mystery drinks the last few loops. I hope he knows that he could have a future at a fusion bar somewhere. Then again, he seems happy in Punxsutawney.

I don't know how to deal with a world that doesn't make sense, with a forever that never changes. But tonight I feel okay, and that's enough for now.

"Is anyone sitting here?" Rita asked, indicating the empty diner counter stool. The place was packed.

"Nope!" said Debbie, motioning for her to sit down. That's right, she was Debbie Johnson, not Kleiser yet. Didn't they get engaged on the real Groundhog Day 2017?

"Thanks." Rita took the seat next to them.

Fred cleared his throat. "Um, so you really work for Channel 5?"

"I do!" Rita said, straightening her posture.

"Not to fangirl all over you, but Fred and I are total addicts," Debbie confessed.

"She's not wrong," Fred agreed.

"Hey, you're talking our brand here, I'm not going to complain. Anything to get ahead of those jerks at Channel 3."

The couple exchanged a look.

Rita laughed. "Just kidding, a lot of my friends work for Channel 3. I just saw Alice Russell last Thanksgiving-"

Rita stopped. "Last Thanksgiving" was years in the future. She took a breath and reminded herself she hadn't yet said anything out of the ordinary. Fred and Debbie waited for her to continue.

They won't know the difference, Rita realized. I could just talk to them. Like regular people.

So she did.

In between, Doris brought out sandwiches, pie, and was just delivering more coffee when Rita made the mistake of telling the pair about the winter she spent in Switzerland.

Fred laughed. "Whoa, someone's fancy."

“It’s not nearly as pretentious as it sounds. I had a few weeks off after my study abroad and I worked at a Swiss ski resort in exchange for a room and a mountain pass.”

“Study abroad,” teased Debbie, not unkindly.

“Hey, not all of us get to live with prophets of the future, we gotta do something to keep it interesting.”

Debbie gave Rita a reassuring clap on the shoulder. “Oh, it’s not a competition. Besides, I wanna hear about your fancy resort life.”

“I mean, I got in some good skiing, but I also cleaned things in the resort bathrooms that would make lesser men’s hair turn white.”

“Like what?” Fred asked, eyes wide with innocence.

Debbie gave Rita a knowing look. “Trust me, if you don’t know already, you don’t want to. Besides, Rita gets to work with the stars, I don’t want to ruin your image.”

And time to get away from that conversation. “Well, there was the time I had to get flown off of the mountain.”

Doris took their plates as Rita recounted the tale. “I was pretty stubborn in my twenties. I had a crush on one of the mountain staff, so there was no way in hell I was going to get myself flown off the mountain with him there. So I tried to go down the triple black diamond course on my own, even though I was so out of my league.”

“And?” asked Debbie, taking a fry from Fred’s plate without so much as blinking.

Rita laughed. “I was scared shitless. Trust me, you have never seen a hill like that.” The instant she said it, Rita knew she was in trouble.

An hour later, Rita was at the top of Mount Motherchucker in a pair of borrowed snow boots.

“Are you sure this thing can hold three people?” she asked her new best friends.

Fred dismissed the notion with a wave. “I once got me and all four of my cousins in here,”

“Yeah, when you were eight,” countered Debbie. “Don’t worry, Ms. Hanson, I’ll take the front so you can have your legs all the way in.”

She snorted. “If we’re doing this, I promise you can just call me Rita.”

The snow crunched with the first few inches. “Sorry,” said Fred. “Just gotta get ‘er going.”

They hit the beginning of the incline, and the sled began to gain traction. Soon, they were heading down the hill at a decent pace. Gave you a nice view of the town.

“Careful, curve!” shouted Fred, his voice muffled by the wind.

“On it!” Without warning, the sled veered sharply to the left. Debbie caught Rita’s eye and grinned. “Okay, this is where it gets good.”

Rita couldn’t see where the dip came from, but the sled bumped, and suddenly their speed doubled. “Are you sure we shouldn’t-”

“No way!” shouted Debbie from the front of the sled.

Fuck, that was a tree dead ahead. “Break! Break!” yelled Fred.

“What’s a break?” called Rita, even as she tried to do something to slow down the sled down.

They skidded to a stop, only feet away from the tree line.

“Woo hoo!” Debbie whooped, waving her arms in triumph.

Rita lifted herself upright, beaming a grin as she met Debbie’s hands for a high five.

She couldn’t remember the last time her heart beat so fast.

The next morning, Rita entered the diner and walked straight to the empty stool. “Hey, mind if I sit here?”

Of course, Fred and Debbie didn’t recognize her. But they would soon.

This time, she took the front of the sled.

I have a new job as of today, Journal. Not Executive Producer, although I’m still hopeful that’ll happen if I ever get back to the future.

No, as of today, I am Nancy Taylor’s bodyguard, with a specialty in PCC (that’s Phil Connors Cockblocking. Thank you, I came up with it myself).

It started this morning. Said hi to the marching band, told Larry where to find his spare power cable, and went to face our resident agent of Chaos. I’ve made an art out of saying just enough to Dark Phil to get the groundhog story done, and then bee-tailing it in the opposite direction for the rest of the day. I’ve got a time on Mount Motherchucker to beat, and I’m still trying to get Debbie to tell me whatever “the hamster story” is.

(I sometimes wonder, is it possible to be friends with people you meet for the first time every day?)

Nancy Taylor is a local around here. I've interviewed her a few times for Groundhog Day. Never about anything deeper than "Spring or more winter?", but she seems nice.

This morning, Phil actually showed up for work sans my manhandling. I should have known something was wrong by his very, very good mood.

"Nancy?" he asked. "Nancy Taylor?" There's no way Dark Phil would remember anyone from Punxsutawney. He barely remembers my name or how to tie his shoes.

I'll spare you the gory details, but Phil had a whole story about how he and Nancy were in the same high school English class. (Which is hilarious. Even I never knew that Phil was still going to high school in his late twenties).

The weird thing was that Nancy kept buying the bullshit spewing from Phil's mouth. He kept talking about names and events, and they kept clicking for her. I know I should give up on reality checks by now, but since when is Phil psychic?

Needless to say my eyes nearly rolled out of my head, food for the rodents scurrying nearby.

The last few days I've been catching up on my industry reading. The selection is limited given this is six years ago, but there are some good journalism classics available at the Punxsutawney Library. The hotel lobby is cozy, the chatter is soothing. I've even discovered that the hotel manager is willing to start up the fireplace if I ask.

So you can guess how much I enjoy getting interrupted by Dark Phil and Nancy on their way to "alone time."

Look, Nancy is a grown woman, she can screw whoever she wants. So can Phil. But Dearest Journal, I have heard things that I can never unhear. Though time (loops) heal all wounds, my ears still bleed from the memory.

Certainly I'm entitled to some peace, right?

"Thanks for the drink," Nancy said.

"No, thank you for the interview," Rita replied. She felt guilty - Nancy seemed so touched that someone wanted to talk to her. You would think a girl like that, she'd have her share of conversation partners.

If for some reason tomorrow stuck, Rita promised herself she'd get one of the reporters to run with this story. Hell, if she got back to the real world, she'd make a trip out to Punxsutawney just to interview the 2005 Most Promising Western Pennsylvania Young Chalk Artist.

"You sure you're okay getting back to the hotel by yourself?" Nancy asked.

“I’m fine. Besides, this seems like the kind of town where even bank robbers hold the door for you.”

“You should come back to Punxsutawney sometime,” Nancy offered. “I promise things aren’t so crazy, and that sometimes we talk about stuff other than marmots.”

The corner of Rita’s mouth quirked up. “Oh yeah?”

Nancy gave a small smile. “Oh yeah. Any one of us could talk your ear off about prairie dogs.” Nancy was able to keep a straight face for approximately two seconds, before they both burst into laughter.

Rita nodded. “You know what? Next time I get PTO, you’re on.”

Another loop, another night out. Maybe she should let Nancy get back to her normal routine. How gross was Rita, policing another woman’s sex life?

“No, seriously, I’ll get the check,” Rita offered when Billy came around. It was the least she could do.

Nancy was the kind of girl who would have intimidated the shit out of Rita in high school. Hot, popular, always had the perfect comeback. But when Rita admitted so, Nancy outright snorted. “Opposite direction, girlfriend. Sounds like you were smart and actually did shit. My high school extracurriculars were just drinking beer with my friends by the bridge.”

“What about chalk drawing?” Rita got out her wallet. It was a cheap gesture to pay for Nancy’s drink when her money would reset, but Nancy seemed to appreciate it regardless. “It sounds like you were really into it when you were a kid.”

Nancy smiled sadly. “I was. I’m not sure what happened. I mean, I wasn’t ever going to do anything fancy like college, so after a while it felt like what’s the point. I still do it sometimes, in the back of my daddy’s house.” Something glimmered in her eye. “It’s funny. I won’t do it for a while, but when I do, I wonder why I haven’t. I know it makes me feel good, makes me feel smart, even though it’s just dumb-”

Rita swatted at Nancy’s arm. “I’ve told you about my stick figures, right?” (Had she this time? Maybe it didn’t matter) “Seriously, art is art.”

Nancy stuck out her tongue. “Fine. Seriously. I just...don’t know why I don’t do things sometimes. And then I realize that I’m just waking up every day, checking people out at the drugstore, and then going home and falling asleep to Netflix. And I don’t know why, but I do.”

“I think I get it.”

I think chalk drawing is out of the picture with the weather, but there are other possibilities.

I hope you don't have any plans tomorrow, Nancy, we're going to Paint Night.

Update: Paint Night was awesome, Journal. I wish I could show you my groundhog, but know that it lives on in another reality.

In the meantime, we have more serious business. I'm saddened to report that PCC hit a serious snag today.

I did my usual chit chat with Nancy this morning.

Usually if I hang around Nancy for long enough, Phil can't get a word in. I mean, who wants to try to pick up a girl when she's on a nail date with her new BFF from Channel 5? (I got my toes painted fluorescent blue the other day, and they looked awesome). Phil's persistent, but I'm a producer.

But today, no matter what I did, Phil was one step ahead of me. Larry couldn't find his power cable and I had to help him. The next thing I know, Phil's started up a conversation about high school English teachers. I'm about to interrupt when a loud sound comes from the van, and smoke starts spewing from the exhaust pipe.

By the time Larry and I return, covered in God knows what, Phil and Nancy are nowhere to be seen.

Once again, I have to repeat my daily mantra: Nancy is a grown woman who can make her own choices.

There's just something...eerily purposeful and precise about the way Phil gets to her.

*I spent most of today reading Mrs. Cleveland's copy of *The Modern Witch's Guide to Sex Positive Living*. (Yes, her last name is actually Cleveland. Yes, she and her husband are from Cleveland. I have no idea about the witch thing).*

I laid back on my usual couch. Phil had the right to screw anyone who would consent, but this couch was mine, dammit. (And why did he insist on having so much sex outside of his own B&B room anyway?)

I didn't look up when Phil came by with a giggling Nancy, but I'd like to think the eyes in the back of my head did some damage.

I breathed, and reminded myself that anger just led to the decay of everyone's aura. (I'm still not sure what an aura actually is - apparently that's in the next book).

They were followed by a leggy brunette a moment later. And then...Fred Kleiser and Debbie Johnson.

In my innocence, I assumed that maybe they would play board games. Or shoot cocaine, or some other mental image I could live with.

And then the noises began.

I gave up and left the lobby after about 15 minutes. There's being stubborn, and then there's being masochistic.

An hour later, a fire truck pulled up to the hotel.

I draw the line when other people start getting hurt.

I'm just saying, Journal, two can play this game.

Philandering (Some Day, One Day)

“Hey, what’s going on?” Larry asked as he ducked under the CAUTION tape to join Rita on the green of Gobbler’s Knob.

“Bomb threat,” said Jack, even more grave than usual. “We’ll be letting everyone back in shortly, just as soon as we’re done taking statements.” He bowed his head. “Ms. Hanson, you’ve done the people of Punxsutawney an invaluable service. I know city folk crack sometimes, but who would’ve thought it would be the weatherman?”

Rita gave her best news producer smile. “I’m just glad everyone’s safe and get back to celebrating.” That statement was technically true.

“You can’t do this!” shouted Phil as he struggled in Wilbur’s handcuffs. “This is unfounded bullshit, you have no proof!”

“Oh, we’ve got everything we need right here in this note, Mr. Connors. I know you think you’re some big city hotshot, but we take the welfare and safety of Punxsutawney Phil very seriously.”

“I’m a celebrity, I have rights!”

Rita smiled, satisfied at her work.

It had been a good day after all.

Rita felt bad the next day. Surely even Dark Phil must be capable of small amount of feeling, and he probably was genuinely scared to be handcuffed for a crime he never committed. She picked up an extra cup of coffee on her way to Gobbler’s Knob. Dark Phil always liked having his ego stroked, and being treated like a real VIP should help. Rita even got him a fancy drink.

For once, Phil was where he was supposed to be, already on the green and fully clothed. She waved to get his attention. “Hey, I’m Rita Hanson, I’ll be working with you on the story today.”

Phil actually shook her hand. “Oh that’s right, we did the flood story together, right?”

Which alien species abducted their weatherman and replaced him with a pod person? “You remembered!”

“It’s always great whenever we get new creative perspectives.” Rita waited for the irony, for the sarcasm. It wasn’t there. “I look forward to collaborating with you today, Ms. Hanson.”

And he remembered her name. Okay, it was a new day, maybe it was time to start over and give another chance. “You can just call me Rita. And I’m looking forward to it too, Phil.”

Rita had an extra skip in her step as she waved to Larry. “Hey hey!” she called.

Larry froze. “Oh uh, hey Rita.”

“Hey, you need any help from me to set up the equipment?”

“Y’know, I think I’m okay.” Larry spotted something on the other side of the green. “I think I’m going to check the cables again.”

“I can-”

“Talk soon!” If he moved away faster, Larry would be sprinting through Gobbler’s Knob. Impressive given the crowd.

Well, that was weird. Maybe she could get a head start on the rest of the day’s work. She spotted Debbie Johnson. “Hey, I’m looking for people to-”

Debbie was short, but the flames of Armageddon burned brightly in her eyes. “Not cool, lady. You don’t just start making plans for that kind of thing without checking in with everyone first. And why do you assume anyone would have that much whipped cream?”

What? “I’m sorry, I didn’t...” But Debbie was already walking away.

“Ms. Hanson!” A man was waving enthusiastically waving at her. Ned Ryerson, Phil’s old high school friend.

“Uh, hi there! What can I do for you?”

“I think it’s more what I can do for you!” His eyes twinkled as he leaned in to whisper. “Baby cakes.”

Rita visibly recoiled. “Excuse me, what did you just...?”

The spell broke. “I’m sorry, Rita, I should have known better than to be so public so early on. That was rude of me, and I really am sorry.” He looked down. “I just got excited, no one has so much as given me the time of day since Susan passed, and...”

“Ned, it’s okay, just back up a minute. What happened?”

He blushed. “Well, when I got that note from you this morning-?”

“What note?”

Gingerly, Ned took a folded piece of paper out of his pocket.

Rita read the contents, numb. Who would fall for something like this? And what the hell was a fursona?

“Ned, how did you get this?”

He told her.

It was unfortunate there wasn't a Sports Authority in Punxsutawney. Somewhere Rita could pick up some pepper spray, or a sword, or a semi-automatic.

Phil was waiting for her when she arrived at the diner. He gave his best patented weatherman grin. “Payback’s a bitch.”

Rita moved to slug him one, then froze. “Payback for...what?”

“Oh, you know, karma. And getting violated while I was in prison.”

“First of all, your homophobia is disgusting, and second...” She stopped, the meaning of her words clicking into place. “Wait, how would you know about that?”

Phil looked equally taken aback. “Wait, how would you know that I knew about...?”

“Um...so this is going to sound awkward, but have you also been...?”

Phil gave a small nod, not meeting her eyes.

Well, this changed everything.

I'm a fucking idiot.

PHIL IS ALSO IN THE LOOP.

PHIL CONNORS IS ALSO IN THE FUCKING LOOP.

This was not the conversation Rita was expecting to have with Phil this morning. Much less come to Jesus than planned.

How long had she yearned for just one person to talk to about all of this?

Phil leaned back in his chair, the leg squeaking loudly against the floor.

“More coffee?” Doris asked.

Phil positively beamed. “That would be fantastic, as would the donuts in your display case.”

“Which one?”

“All of them,” Phil replied, not missing a beat.

Rita shot him a look as soon as Doris left. “I feel sick even thinking about that.”

Phil snorted. “Why, it’s not like you have to count Weight Watchers points while you’re here.” He smacked the table as if to call psych. “Kidding, you always look fantastic.”

So much for not being alone. “You know I’m the one person here who won’t fall for that bullshit, right?”

Phil gestured to his chest. “Rita, I wish it didn’t take you so long to get with the program, but I am finally living my best life.” He leaned his chair back, nearly colliding with bus tray at the table behind them.

“You have pink frosting on your chin,” Rita observed.

In one slow, fluid motion, Phil wiped the frosting from his chin, then took a bite of his next donut, chewing slowly. “We have died and ascended to Valhalla,” he said between bites. “I intend to take my reward for time spent on this wretched earth.”

Rita raised her eyebrow. “So Punxsutawney is some kind of heaven?” It wasn’t the first time she considered the possibility.

Phil shrugged. “Well, maybe I screwed up a little on the way. If you’re really good, you get to go to Vegas or Disney World.”

“Under that logic, it makes sense this is where you’re stuck.”

Phil laughed. “C’mon, Rita, you’re Pollyanna about this place half the time. Why aren’t you getting more into the spirit?”

“I’ll have you know that I have survived Mount Motherchucker fifteen times,” Rita said proudly. Phil’s expression was blank. “Really awesome sledding hill.” She gestured at Fred and Debbie. “The couple over there showed me, you should try it sometime.”

“No thanks, I think I have some marmot hunting on my schedule today.”

This couldn't be her Phil, even if he was aware of the time loop. There was no way this version of Phil Connors could have lasted on Unexplored Weather Phenomena without a big public lawsuit. But she had to know for sure. “Phil, it's me,” she tried. “Please, I know that this is really weird, and that things didn't end well with us. But I need you to work with me. I have no idea what's going on, what's happening to me...”

“What are you talking about?” For the first time he looked not smug, but genuinely confused.

Rita closed her eyes and breathed. “What year is it?”

“2017. I mean, it's been at least a few million days worth of 2017, but Punxsutawney Phil over there-” He gestured to a groundhog calendar. “-Never lies.”

“And the last album Beyonce released?” Don't fuck with me Phil, she thought. I know all your secrets.

Phil raised an eyebrow. “Lemonade. Duh.”

So this Phil wasn't like her after all. Wasn't her Phil. Rita didn't know if it was a relief or a disappointment to know it.

Well, she sure wasn't giving him any ammo to scam the residents of Punxsutawney out of sports bets a la Biff Tannen. Not that either she or Phil would proceed far enough in time for that to have any bearing.

“Hey Porkchop,” Phil called to one of the tourists. Rita glared. “What, he's my neighbor, I'm just being friendly.”

“Do you really just not care that we're stuck in a never-ending time loop?”

Phil shrugged. “I mean, it's not that I don't care, it's that I can't do anything about it.” He stretched his arms back behind his head, narrowly avoiding hitting Jeff the waiter. “What's weird is you.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. Like, half the time you're normal Rita...I'd say a 6 out of 10. Would be higher, but you're too damn perky. And then on days like today you turn into Hell Rita.”

And the punches just kept coming. So much for Rita being the expert on all things 2/2/17. “What exactly are you saying?”

“You're like...constant most of the time. Way too excited about the beach balls, funny hats, and rednecks. And then on days like today, you're all Debbie Downer.”

“Thank you?”

“I’m just saying, when you’re the Rita that actually realizes we’re in a time loop, you’re really boring.”

“So who is your producer the rest of the time?”

Phil gave an exaggerated eye roll. “I told you, it’s Perky Rita. I guess her ignorance really is bliss.”

If Phil were to be believed, there were loops she didn’t know about or experience. Loops where 2017 Rita took the wheel. 2023 Rita could only pray her past self was strong enough to defend Punxsutawney from the Weatherman of Anarchy.

Phil, on the other hand, was clearly less interested in the ‘why’ of multiple Rita Hansons. “I’m just saying, you just gotta live it up a little.”

“By being the first weatherman to give a forecast in the nude?”

“As opposed to you, who spends eternity making sure union regulations get followed?”

Rita was getting a headache. “This is pointless.” She signaled for the check. “I really, really should have known better than to think you’d have anything to contribute. Just...keep away from the people here, okay?”

Phil brought a hand to his chest. “I will have you know that everything I’ve done has been consensual.”

“You’re gross.”

“I’d like to see you live your best life, Hanson,” Phil called.

Well, this changes everything and nothing.

God dammit.

You know I love you, Journal, but it really would be nice if your pages retained what I wrote, so I could really start to parse out the facts. As it is, I would have to set up my crazy conspiracy den over and over every day.

Time to see if I can get some help.

Nancy looked surprised. “Science fiction, huh?”

“Well, less science and more bizarre stuff, but that’s where I’m going with it.” Rita indicated the sparkly green nail polish sample to the manicurist.

“And you want my thoughts?” Nancy blushed a little. “It’s the first time I’ve been asked for feedback by a real author.”

Rita laughed softly. “It’s more an idea I’ve been floating around, but if I ever get published, I promise I’ll write you into the dedication.”

Nancy’s eyes twinkled. “You say that to everyone? Anyway, so, the main character, Rhonda, is reliving her first date six years ago with the guy who would go on to break her heart.”

“Right, but the events aren’t playing out the way she remembers them.” The manicurist rubbed something smooth and cold over Rita’s hands. “And then she figured out that the guy - her ex - is also living the same day over and over.”

“Figured out how?”

“Trust me, you don’t want to know. And the guy doesn’t have the memories of the last six years like Rhonda has.”

Nancy nodded slowly. “Okay, I think follow where you’re going. So, you’re stuck on where to go next? My brother always says put a zombie in the plot if it’s not moving.”

“I just don’t understand what’s happening in the story,” Rita confessed. “How do I...I mean, how do I get Rhonda out of it?”

Nancy shrugged. “Maybe she doesn’t.”

Rita slumped back in the salon chair. “Well, that’s depressing.”

“I mean, depends on how you look at it.”

“Well maybe I...I mean Rhonda doesn’t want to be living the same day over and over.”

“I get it,” said Nancy. “It would really suck. But sometimes you gotta roll with the punches life gives you, right?”

Rita shook her head. “Not me.”

Okay, new rules of play, Journal. Sledding and Paint Night and getting my nails done have been fun, but I have better things to do than spend the rest of my existence in Punxsutawney

with an evil version of my ex-boyfriend.

Why didn't I start keeping track when this started? (When did this start...?)

I can do this, Journal. I know I've been trying to keep up with the broadcast, but Larry can do this on his own - he's better at this than he thinks, he just needs a confidence boost. I'm taking the training wheels off.

Good news, Journal! I've secured us a quiet place on the edge of town, and I've escaped Larry. (I'm sorry, old friend. I promise when I get back to the future, I'll buy you a drink). Time to bring out the rubber bands, colored tape, and start making some conspiracy theory charts.

I present to you a timeline:

1981: Rita Hanson is born, much to the dismay of her older brothers.

1981 - 2017: Normal, boring shit (minus that one time I saw Prince in concert). And by boring shit, I mean Rita Hanson lives a normal life.

2/2/17: Rita accidentally has her first date with Phil Connors when they both get snowed in during a broadcast.

Summer or fall 2020 (depending on your definition of "breakup"): Phil and Rita mutually decide to end their relationship.

Spring, 2021: Phil leaves Channel 5, despite a beautifully negotiated set of professional boundaries created to make working together post-breakup bearable.

(Ugh, well this is already really Phil-centric. Am I going to fail the Bechdel test in my own conspiracy theory timeline?)

Summer, 2021: Rita has a lovely time in the Caribbean with her mom and aunts. (Good. The more small, inconsequential stuff I list, the closer I can get to pinpointing whatever it leads up to).

Winter (?), 2021: Rita gets promoted to Senior Producer. This ends up being the same amount of pay and a lot more work.

December, 2022: It's announced that Phil Connors will be honored for Achievement in Weather Journalism. Shit, I had forgotten about that. The fact that the segment was so thoughtful and well done made me pissed.

January, 2023: There was...something about a promotion with one of our out of state station partners. Was it WEWS in Cleveland, or was it that Chicago station?

Rita put down her pen. Fuck, lost that train of thought.

It helps to write everything down, Journal. Things don't feel as slippery when I do. But eventually, I hit a wall. I try to get to the next bit, to the next week, to the next day after whatever little tidbit I can remember. I even try the same day.

I just don't remember.

At least Phil was (for the moment) holding to his terms of their ceasefire. This translated to a strict script of the Punxsutawney morning that allowed Rita to get through the broadcast with her sanity intact. There may have only been one conscience between the two of them, but that conscience felt bad about abandoning Larry to Phil's mercy day after day. And if Rita had to be here, then Phil wasn't getting out of it either.

"Why am I doing this again?" Phil asked one morning.

"Because if you don't, then I have to," grumbled Rita.

"You know that's not true. Plus I know you've played hookie a few times."

"Those who start flash mobs should not throw stones."

"I would call it 'choreographed modern dance myself.'" Rita could no longer tell whether or not Phil believed his own bullshit.

"Just...don't do anything to actually hurt anyone, okay?"

"Your wish is my command."

Rita decided to keep an eye on him the rest of the day anyway.

Rita was on her way to the outskirts of town post-broadcast one morning when she spotted Phil again. If wishes could make the bad stuff go away, Darkest Phil would be a pile of ash and smoke. That was the problem with having one element of chaos in a time loop - you never knew what time to leave the house.

"Well well well, if it isn't Amazon Princess Rita," called Phil.

"Don't you have an orgy to attend or something?" Rita asked, not stopping her stride.

Phil shrugged. "Believe it or not, my plans for today got interrupted." He kept up with her pace. "I haven't seen you around lately, are you okay?"

"Just...great, Phil. Unlike you, I'm trying to get some work done."

"You mean you haven't figured out yet how to fund the department through beaver meat sales?"

"You come near that groundhog, and I'll cut off your balls."

"Okay, okay, glad to see that you're actually fine. Seriously, what do you do all day? I could use some inspiration."

"I'm trying to figure out what's happening here."

Phil's eyes narrowed. "We are Asgardians."

"What?"

"You know, the regular mortals think we're gods, but actually we're just aliens with superpowers. The Thor movies. I finally had a chance to watch them. You should try it sometime." He rolled his eyes. "C'mon, I'm allowed to watch movies, right?"

"If it keeps you out of trouble." But Rita smiled despite herself.

"Look, I'm just saying that if we're going to be neighbors, we should be able to at least talk to each other, right? We don't have to be at war." Behind them, the sounds of the crowd were punctuated with strains of music and laughter. "It's not like there's anyone else in this."

"You know what...fine. But I'm not doing anything illegal."

"It's only illegal if you get caught. Ow, I'm kidding!"

"Come right on in," Phil offered, opening a unlocked door for Rita into a suburban family game room. Normally Rita would be creeped out going anywhere with Phil alone. Desperate times, desperate measures.

"Phil, do you even know whose house this is?"

"Yeah, it's Buster and his daughter's. Trust me, there is no reality in which they come home at any point today."

Rita scanned the room for anything that could be used as a weapon. "Because you murder them first?"

“No, because Buster always gets wasted at the Groundhog Ball, and Debbie spends the whole time canoodling with her boyfriend.”

So Debbie was Buster’s daughter. Rita added it to her repertory of Punxsutawney facts.

“So what exactly are we doing here?”

Phil dug under the cabinet until the TV screen lit up. A moment later, a title appeared.

“Super Smash Brothers, huh? I hope you know what you’re getting into. My college roommate played competitively for a while.”

“I didn’t know Your Highness did anything so lowbrow.”

Rita found a pillow on the couch, and promptly aimed it at Phil’s head.

He ducked and grinned. “Pick a character, any character.”

Two games later, Rita was feeling pretty good. There was something nice and mindless about the video game adrenaline rush. Phil wasn’t wrong - she had been working too long lately.

“You know, Phil, I’m impressed. You are not awful at this.” As Rita was the victor of the last two rounds, it only felt appropriate to stroke the loser’s ego.

“Oh, that was the warm up,” he warned. “Now we really get started.” She looked over, waiting for him to crack a smile. None came.

“Um, Phil, you know that Magikarp was put in this edition as a joke, right?”

“Nothing around here is a joke,”

Rita had to hand it to Phil, he was uncannily good at turning a literal fish into a decent fighter. Still, Rita beat him two out of three.

Phil let his arms drop to his knees in frustration, and took a deep breath. “I can do this.”

“Are you okay?” Rita asked. It’s a trap, her mind tried to warn her. It’s a trap. But something in his eyes all too familiar.

In an instant, Phil was once again all weatherman charm. That too. “I’m so sorry.” He laughed. “Competitive streak!”

“Come on,” Rita suggested. “Let’s get out of here and get some food.”

Punxsutawney had exactly three restaurants: Chuck's Diner (her usual go-to), a questionable Chinese place, and then a restaurant attached to the hotel.

"Don't worry, I'll pay," Phil offered.

"You know how little that means, right?"

Phil put his hands up. "You're more than welcome to--"

Rita put a finger on the wine menu "No, since you so generously offered...." She scanned the list, finally selecting the "Chateau Mouton Rothschild Pauillac Bordeaux", which had a price to match the name. Phil didn't so much as blink.

It was nice to let her guard down just a little. When Dark Phil actually tried, he could be surprisingly decent company. Well, for the most part. "Are you really saying that you've been trapped here all this time, and you haven't been with anyone?"

"Um...no?" So sometimes she had 'alone time.' Not that it was Phil's business.

"Why not? I always see you making eyes at the bartender."

"I dunno, I figure he has to work?"

Phil wagged his eyebrows. "Plenty of time afterwards."

"Since when do you care anyway?"

"As your neighbor, I'm just trying to look out for you. You really do seem lonely, especially with the amount of time you spend in your bomb shelter."

The thing was he wasn't wrong.

"So...what do you look for in a guy?"

Rita smiled ruefully. There had been a few flings things after Phil (her Phil), but nothing that had stuck. Always pleasant farewells and staying friends on Facebook.

"Well, he would be funny. And good looking, but not full of himself."

Phil nodded.

"And...would make me laugh. Would get me to not take myself so seriously. Would challenge me without being aggressive. Would like reading, and playing piano, and going new places."

"This is all very specific, Ms. Hanson."

"Hey, you asked."

“You two want any dessert?” asked the waiter.

Ah, yes. The same selection of the same five pies. “I got a better idea.”

The late night Punxsutawney air was crisp. Rita didn’t ask how Phil knew where to get ice skates. (At least he didn’t know her shoe size - apparently her other self wasn’t giving up too much). “I haven’t ice skated since I was in high school.”

“No worries, eight hours a day of practice and you’ll be an expert in no time.” Phil spread his arms out in an exaggerated motion. “I for one am getting ready for the Olympics.”

It had been a while, but Rita thought she remembered how to do this. She took a slide backwards, bending her knee and extending her arms. Left leg back, toe extended and pointed down and- Rita launched herself into the air, turning 360 degrees before landing. Ha! She still had it.

The expression on Phil’s face was more than worth the near death experience. “What happened to not skating since you were in high school?”

“Yeah, and in high school I took private lessons every week.” She skated back over to where a snowbank bordered the frozen pond.

Something white landed near her feet. Snowball, huh? What a pathetic revenge. “You know your aim is as good as-” The next one hit her square in the chest, and Rita lost her balance and fell. “Fuck,” she grumbled, getting to her knees.

Phil took a few steps closer to her, genuine concern in her eyes. “Rita, are you-”

Two could play this game. Phil extended a gloved give her a hand up. Rita took it, began to rise, and then pushed her weight against Phil. He fell straight back into the snow. Rita descended into a fit of giggles.

“I guess I deserved that.”

“Did you ever study kendo? Cause you are way too good at that.”

“Nah, just a natural. Come on, let’s get off of the frozen water.”

“Do you miss it?” Rita asked. The moon was high and only faintly visible from behind the clouds. ‘It’ was both unspoken and painfully obvious.

Phil snorted. "Having to suck up to people I hate and wearing pants on a daily basis?"

"Please don't tell me you regularly streak when I'm not around."

"Not regularly. I did that once, and it was not a pleasant experience. Maybe if we end up in a tropical timeloop."

"Fair."

Phil's voice went quiet. "Of course I miss it."

Rita couldn't meet his eyes. "Yeah. Me too."

"Is that why you spend all your time scribbling notes? Cause you're trying to find a way out of this?"

"Ding ding ding." Rita closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and opened them again. "There's people I would have said stuff to if I knew this is what was coming up. My folks, friends I haven't talked to in forever, my brothers, you-" She stopped herself. In the dim light, it was easy to forget which Phil you're talking to. She cleared her throat. "You must have people you miss, right? You seem pretty popular at the station."

"Oh, yeah, definitely." Phil didn't elaborate, nor did he meet her eyes.

For the first time, Rita wondered who the man in front of her really was. Not her Phil, but maybe not a cartoon villain either. Then who, exactly?

Maybe it was too many nights alone, either in her room at the Punxsutawney Hotel or apartment six years now in Pittsburgh. Maybe it was how in the dark she could no longer tell the difference between her Phil and the man inches away from her. Maybe it was desperation for something, anything, familiar.

Or maybe it was something else, something she was scared to admit she missed.

Against her better instincts, Rita moved her hand the distance between her leg and where Phil's hands rested against his knees. Phil didn't flinch when her fingertips brushed over his palm, and she let her hand relax into his own.

She angled her head and closed the distance between their lips, brushing feather light. She could smell his usual cologne, cool with just a hint of clove and achingly familiar.

Above them, the snow fell. Rita pulled back an inch and searched Phil's eyes, looking for a response, for recognition. Phil's fingertips came to her cheek, tracing it reverently. He paused, meeting her eyes. She brought their lips together again, and this time he met her. She opened her mouth, allowing Phil access. He ran his tongue over her own, bit her lip just enough for sparks to move down her spine.

In the distance, a bell began to chime. One, two, three, four..

How long had it been?

Eight, nine, ten..

Phil grinned when they broke finally apart. “Well, if only I could get other you to do that.”

The world abruptly snapped back into monotone, and the lines of the world came into sharp, painful focus. Rita once again was aware of the deep cold. She stood up.

Phil's face dropped as the implications of his words hit him. “I didn't mean it like-”

“Then what did you mean?”

“It's just that-”

“Has this been your plan all along? To make me feel sorry for you? To get enough info that you can give the other me perfect pickup lines?”

The scenarios raced through her mind like a car without brakes. “Have you also played games with your Manic Pixie Girl Rita? The one where you ask me about my high school English teacher so you can sweep in as my knight in shining armor?”

“Rita, that’s not what I meant, I-” For a moment, she could see her Phil in the familiar features.

“Tell me you haven't tried anything with your other Rita.”

Phil was silent for a long moment. Finally he spoke. “Nothing ever happened.”

“Did you try?”

“Yeah.”

“How much?”

“...a lot. But Rita, I never-”

“You know what, fuck you. You’re a creep, you’ll always be a creep, and you were probably one even when I thought otherwise. Just stay the fuck away from me.”

Well, that was the worst use of a loop yet. I can't believe I went for that bullshit.

You know what, Phil? You can have the rest of Punxsutawney. I trust those guys to fight you off if you try anything too weird. Nancy, I'm so sorry, but you're on your own.

I haven't so much as left the hotel room this morning. (Thank God Larry isn't the type to insist on coming in when his co-worker says she's sick).

I have to get out of here. Time to focus.

Phil is good for one thing: I remembered something, that stupid journalism award ceremony (and how the fuck does a weatherman earn a journalism award anyway?) That's

That awards ceremony, it was on NPR. Cold, it was cold. Right, January, I'm onto something. January, January, January.

Something about the radio, something about...driving, that's right, I almost-

The first thing Rita knew was the duality of piercing cold and hot, searing pain. Blinking, she opened her eyes. Cars weren't supposed to go this way. You were supposed to look forward and see through the dashboard, not the roof of the car, which wasn't supposed to be so twisted.

This was her car, lovingly maintained since 2006.

Images flooded her brain. Wishing her cell notification had a different ring, because while it was cute for her niece to change it to a horse whinnying, it was a lot to hear that over and over again for an assignment that definitely wasn't supposed to be on your plate.

Hearing about the Achievement in Journalism awards on WESA, and shaking her head that Phil of all people was getting one. Smiling despite herself at the quote from Phil, even if it was in the broadcaster's voice.

Making up words to the All Things Considered theme. Crunching down on Altoids to stay awake.

And then, in less than it took Ari Shapiro to take them to the day's headlines, she was flying. No, she and Honky the Honda were falling, tumbling. Rita always thought she was one of those people who would force her muscles to relax, because that's why only drunks always survived crashes, and...and...

Her right leg was bent at an unnatural angle. Gingerly, she tried to wiggle her toes. Nothing. Okay, next joint up, try moving her hip just a little bit, that's right, just an inch, and then-

Pain like a hot poker. Rita screamed. Made herself breathe, first one, then another, just avoid that angle so the pain wouldn't start again.

The contents of the passenger seat were more bad news. Even if she could get signal out here, her phone was smashed to pieces. "Anybody!" she croaked out. What turn had she passed last, why the hell did she let the GPS take her the back way, why did-

No, no, no, no. Not, like this, not fucking like this. Rita Hanson had things to do. Not without talking to her mom again, and she had the best idea for her niece's birthday present next year, she wasn't going to...

This couldn't be real, this wouldn't be real, Rita wouldn't-

Rita blinked her eyes open to the crooning of Carly Rae Jepsen. The pain was gone.

She took one deep breath, and then another. Sighed in relief as she found she could flex her toes. Her counting sheep pajamas were never such a welcome friend.

In the distance, she could feel the piercing cold, could feel the indent of the the seat back pressing into her cheek hard enough to cause bruising.

Not going there, she promised herself. Not any time soon, at least. She had infinite time here, she would fix this.

Maybe Phil was right all along. Maybe they had died, and this was the hereafter. Mr. Dawes Senior of Fidelity Fiduciary Bank laughed as he died and floated up to the ceiling, why shouldn't she her dying process send her back in time? It just proved what they all said about death being a funny thing.

"Morning!" called a tourist cheerfully. Rita raised a hesitant hand and waved. It was ridiculous to think about dying when it was Groundhog Day in Punxsutawney, an occasion second only to Christmas. The cold wreckage of the car was an illusion. Rita was safe here. Maybe that didn't mean anything, but she wasn't going anywhere soon.

It would be okay. She would figure out...something.

She spotted a familiar black coat in the distance.

“Oh, hey Phil,” she called out. Even her old nemesis was a welcome sight. Okay, they had left things in an awkward place last night, but surely there was-

“Which one are you again?” Phil's eyes were dead, his words clipped.

“Um...excuse me?” she asked.

“Are you Perky Rita, or Looping Rita?”

“Um...well, I guess I’m Looping Rita?”

Phil nods solemnly. “Maybe it’ll work this time, then.” He stopped mid-stride, and then turned in the other direction. “I’ll be just a sec.”

“Uh...okay.”

“Larry! She called out at the Knob, giving her co-worker a hug.

“Uh, hi there, Rita,” he laughed nervously. Right, they had only first met in 2017. “Have you seen Phil at all?”

“I thought I passed him on the way over here.”

“Are you Rita Hanson?” called a familiar voice. Nancy.

“Yes?”

“Your co-worker asked me to give you this.” She handed Rita a crumpled piece of paper.

Dear Loop Rita, it read. You don’t actually suck at Super Smash Brothers.

And then, at the bottom. Sorry you’ll have to remember.

Something in the pit of Rita’s stomach dropped.

She bolted towards the bed and breakfast.

“Can I help you?” asked Mabel Lancaster.

Rita wanted to push past this woman, and she wanted to cry, pleasantries were bullshit and- No, she needed information. “Phil Connors, what room is he in?”

“First one on the second floor, can I-”

Rita was up the stairs before she could finish the sentence,

“Phil?” she called out. No answer.

Someone was running water nearby. The lights flickered, fizzled, and then faded.

Rita opened the door to the bathroom.

No no no no no no no no no-

Fully clothed, posture slumped and half submerged in the water, it didn’t matter that this wasn’t her Phil. Rita yanked the toaster out of the electrical socket so hard that the toaster came with it, crashing into the bathroom wall with a clang.

For a long moment, the world was silent. Rita slowly lowered herself to the floor. Brought her knees to her chest.

Fibonacci? Butterflies in her stomach, the world a little brighter than before.

He laughs nervously, which is ridiculous because she’s the one who is terrified of screwing this up. Yeah, I know, it’s sort of a flawed analogy, but I’m working on it.

No, it’s just they all told me you would...I mean it’s just not what I expected.

The toaster rocked back and forth a few times before finally coming to rest.

It’s very romantic. (She’s not the type to get tingling palms, not over someone she barely knows, and yet here she is).

Yeah, well, I wanted you to get your money’s worth.r It’s really, really nice. (You’re really really nice, and I didn’t even put eyeliner on this morning, how are you looking at me like that?)

It is...beautiful. Though it’s not entirely-

Somewhere miles away, Mabel Lancaster called for her.

Hey pretty lady, you looking for a little sunny weather?

You really have the world’s worst pickup lines.

It’s why you like me.

Always had bad judgment. (Grinning and taking his hand despite herself.)

The stairs creaked with footsteps. The running water crept up the bathtub another inch. If Rita could breathe, she would cry, she would scream, she would puke, but instead-

Jesus.

Sorry, Phil. It's just me. You sure everything is okay?

I'm fine, just a little on edge lately.

Phil-

I promise, it's fine.

The door opened.

I love you, you fucking idiot. I wish you would just let me-

You can't just produce everything into working out, Rita.

You're not even letting me try. I won't judge whatever's happening with you, I just-

"Rita?" Mabel Lancaster put her hand on Rita's shoulder.

So this is really it?

I guess so.

(Objects at rest, finality). I'll um...figure out something with the...I mean...

"Rita, we have to go, sweetheart."

Hope

Well, game over, Journal. I don't know how to do this anymore.

I have no future. I will never have a future. I'm just here.

Phil does come back to life every morning. I should be relieved but if, but I'm not. I don't watch any more, not after the first few, but more often than not Phil doesn't make it to the end of February 2nd.

I was able to get him involuntarily committed a few times. Learned exactly where Jack and Wilbur were in the morning, how to get to them to the B&B in time so they can drag Phil somewhere safe, even as he spewed about how I was a motherfucking busybody.

Eventually, he learns his way around all my tricks.

I could learn how to outsmart him.

The truth is I'm a fucking coward, and I don't know how I've fooled the universe otherwise for this long.

I'm not brave. I don't solve problems. I certainly don't "have it all."

Do you know what I was doing before this started, Journal? I was chewing out some 20-year old on the other end of the phone because my credit score was down ten points, and he couldn't figure out the reason why. Here lies Rita Hanson: At least her credit score was accurate when she died.

Phil calls the me from 2017 Perky Rita. I remember that year, I remember the things that happened. I don't know why I don't remember that Rita.

When did I stop going out with friends in favor of watching crappy shows on Netflix? When did one one late night a week turn into four? Fuck, when did I stop caring about doing a good job in favor of just finishing stuff?

I don't think there was a moment. That just makes it worse.

I want to live again, George Bailey. I want to take that dance class. Finally get lunch with our new weather forecaster - when did I stop putting into practice that we ladies have to stick up for each other? I want to get around to calling my brothers.

I don't get any of that. I get Groundhog Day 2017.

Rita was running out of time.

Rita had infinite time.

As if she could do anything about bleeding out from her hotel room in a snowed-in town six years in the past.

Some days she watched Jeopardy. Others she ate donuts, or got tipsy, or slept.

The residents of Punxsutawney were still familiar, still exhilarated to be experiencing the best day of the year, still warm (even to strangers). None of that was their fault, but Rita kept to herself most of the time. It was hard not to feel jealous of people who actually had a future six years from now.

Maybe it would be better to go back to her real body, broken and bleeding out in 2023.

Rita was nothing if not stubborn. Sometimes she passed Phil on his way to his daily destruction. They never spoke, but sometimes she could see the challenge in his eyes, the invitation.

If staying alive was her last fuck you to Phil Connors, Rita would take it.

The problem was that it wasn't living, either.

Rita had to be increasingly careful. Once you saw your own death, you couldn't exactly close that door. Rita didn't know how else to explain it.

The irony was that time did move. Not fast. Loop upon loop upon loop in the amount of time it took for her real self to blink. It was too easy to let herself slip.

That was how one morning she found herself one instant turning the page of a book, and the next bringing her hand up to her face, the blood half-frozen.

Fuck, no, no, no, okay so she'd been feeling emo lately, that didn't mean she wanted to, she still had to-

Punxsutawney reappeared in the distance, glowing softly. Rita's consciousness tugged on it as hard as she could. 2023 Rita was still bleeding, still looking at her half-frozen hand with a combination of awe and horror, but it was slowing.

This time, Rita didn't return to her body. Instead, she floated above the town. Her ghost self smiled as she recognized familiar faces - Doris, Fred, Debbie, Nancy. It was so easy to become a shut-in and sulk. The truth is she missed them.

It was nice for once, to just watch the loop and not be a participant. Maybe she'd stay here, and float forever as the silent guardian spirit of Punxsutawney. It wouldn't be a bad way to exist, maybe she could do some good.

It was strange, to think that another Rita lived in this world, that this was Phil's loop when she wasn't around.

Phil entered the diner. At least he was fully dressed today, but his eyes were still sullen and dead.

A young woman entered, purposeful in her stride. Oh - that was her. How strange, that Rita had been looking at this six-years-younger face in the mirror every day for eternity, and only now could she laugh affectionately at her old haircut.

"There you are! Phil, I'm Rita, I'm producing this, are you-"

She stopped. Phil was oddly intent on the movement of his own hand.

"Are you okay? What are you doing?"

"Just thinking." This Phil was unused to interacting with the world around him, was long lost to thinking of it as reality.

"What is going on with you?"

"You won't believe me."

"Just give me a chance." No, Rita wanted to say. You don't want to watch this, I can't let you watch this-

"Alright. I am a god."

Well, that could have gone a lot worse. In another time and place this would be hilarious.

Rita watched the scene play out before her. Watched Phil repeat conversations verbatim at a rate even she hadn't memorized. Watched the disbelieving look on her younger self's face turn into something else as she followed him outside.

She kept waiting for something horrible to happen. For Phil to make Other Rita watch things she desperately wished she could unsee.

It's a surreal experience, watching your past self experience something you yourself never did.

Before her eyes, she watched Phil bare himself in a way that made Rita feel oddly jealous of her doppelganger. About the things he missed, and unspoken how little most of them meant, how empty it all was.

You tried to tell me that night, she thought. I didn't listen, I'm so sorry.

Maybe this was when she should go. Say goodbye to her other self, to Phil, and accept her fate sealed long ago.

And then Other Rita crossed the distance to the bench. Sat down without pretense, without fear of the either the mess in front of her, or the one floating above them both. Made rubbing motions over Phil's arm, as if she could will the life back into him.

Told Phil about all of the stupid things she would do if she lived in his world. Punching all the assholes, painting, running uphill. Loving as fiercely as she could.

What happened to us, Rita? She wondered wordlessly. When did I lose you?

Rita didn't think her younger self would appreciate having someone loom over them, unseen or not. Well, sometimes things just went like that and you were stuck with the Ghost of Groundhog Future whether you liked it or not.

Rita couldn't remember the last time she rode a tilt-a-whirl.

From the next car over, Phil stared at her younger self with cautious wonder, and then something else that Rita recognized like a bullet to her chest.

Tea, with a teeny bit of vanilla and still steaming brought to their bed in the morning, even as Rita swatted at Phil and playfully cursed the world for the early hour. Fingertips brushed gently over cheekbones. Whispered "I love you"s when he thought she was asleep.

Oh.

It made sense now. The way Phil's hands would grip the table when he was startled, or the wider than usual distance he would keep from the train tracks. The mastery at which he would dance around conversations about how he learned French. How he would never quite meet her eyes when they talked about some things.

You're not even letting me try, came memory again. I won't judge whatever's happening with you, I just need you to-

Rita floated in the place between grief and reverence. It's been you the whole time, Phil.

I've missed you.

Everything About You

Hey Phil.

(Er...sorry, Journal, I hope you don't mind if I use you for a few letters I'll never send. You know I love you).

You used to say that I had too much faith in you, that you never really understood why I would bother with someone like you. I assumed you were just doing the usual self-deprecating thing. I never asked the right questions about where that came from.

I can't promise that I would have believed you. But I wish you would have told me.

“Hey Rita.” Phil’s voice was so soft that Rita barely heard him. She looked up. He buttoned his shirt today. That had to be a good sign.

“Yo,” she offered. Giggled, because it sounded stupid and she was simultaneously dying and at a festival celebrating magical rodents.

“How’s it going?”

She gave a little shrug. “You know.”

He nodded in understanding. “Yup.”

A moment’s silence. “You um...you wanna go for a walk somewhere?”

Well, it wasn’t like she was doing anything else today.

“Why not.”

There was a definite peace to knowing her future ex wasn't currently bashing his brains out. “So you’re um...okay?”

Phil laughed mirthlessly. “I mean, I don’t know if I’d go that far.”

“Fair.”

“Oh, watch out, bicycle-”

Rita stepped out of the way just in time to avoid getting run over by Ned Ryerson’s eldest, followed by one insurance agent turned sprinter. Sorry, mouthed Ned as he shot past them.

“Since when does Jasper have a bicycle?” Rita asked.

“Since last Christmas,” Phil answered.

“I thought you two hated each other.”

“I’ll have you know it has been...a lot of days since I last punched Ned Ryerson.”

“Nice job keeping off the sauce.”

“Eh, going through the motions or whatever.” Phil gestured to a bench. Funny, wasn’t this where Phil and Other Rita had their moment of truth? “You wanna?”

“Sure.”

He sighed. “Look...I know we don’t actually know each other that well. I’m just some asshole you’re stuck with.”

“I mean, you’re not entirely wrong.” The familiar rhythm of the match felt good.

“Look, I’m sorry I made you...it wasn’t fair to draw you into...that.” The last word was heavy, and it left no doubt as to its subject.

“You probably saw, didn’t you? When it worked?”

Her heart was in her throat. “Yeah.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You could have talked to me, you know,” Rita said regretfully. “I know I was mad, but I would have listened.” She sighed. “Or at least I’d like to think I’m not that much of a bitch.”

“You’re not. And you probably would have listened. I don’t know if it would have done anything, but I’m sorry for that too.”

Rita smiled wistfully. “Now only if you’d remember how to do this in about four years.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t worry about it. Uh...as long as we’re putting things out there, I’m sorry I kissed you and then yelled at you about it.”

“I may have deserved it.”

“You’re not wrong.”

Rita knew she could press further. Phil made no excuses for his behavior, but he insisted there were lines that were never crossed. She could either believe that or not. "So...truce?" she asked. "For real this time?"

"Just so long as you don't frame me as a terrorist again."

"Hey, I worked hard on that setup. I gotta ask, though, how exactly did you learn my handwriting? I would have thought that was me."

"Which time was this again?" He gave a puckish smile. "Kidding. You left a bunch of your notes in the van. Eight hours a day of practice, and I was able to learn your handwriting."

"Huh."

"Just so you know, your cursive Ls look like penises."

"What would you guys like?" asked Billy.

"Just a Sprite for me," said Phil.

Phil wasn't into "getting drinks", and under the circumstances Rita didn't blame him. Still, he was strangely lucky - how many other people got to drink themselves to death (literally) and come out the other side without a bad case of alcoholism? For a second Rita considered downgrading her vodka screwdriver to an orange juice, but something in Phil's eyes warned her not to coddle him. And isn't that just like you, Rita thought wistfully. Some things would never change.

"So what does Regular Me do on this day? Anything good?"

Phil smiled. "She has usually has a good time." His brow furrowed. "So this is going to sound weird-"

Rita crossed her arms. "Try me."

"Fine. So, you." He gestured to her. "Grumpy- I mean Other Rita, whatever you want to call yourself. I don't actually remember you when you're not here."

"Wait, what?"

"I don't know how to explain it. Okay, so Looping Rita is constant, her behavior only changes in reaction to whatever I do that day. You're...well, different. The biggest thing being you remember the other loops."

"Right, I'm with you so far. What's the catch?"

“I don’t know how else to put this. When you’re here, I remember it. Getting booked as a terrorist and getting locked up-”

“Phil, that wasn’t getting locked up, that was being thrown in a janitor’s closet. They just put a bunch of broken metal folding chairs in front of the door.

“Seriously?” Phil shook his head. Rita couldn’t hold back her smirk. “Hey, it was dark in there. So yeah. I remember that right now, because I’m sitting here with you. But when you’re not here, and I’m with the Other Rita, I don’t remember any of that.”

“So then...?”

“I only remember the Rita that doesn’t change.”

“Well...that’s um...weird?”

“Yup. Look, I don’t know how else to put this, but who are you?”

It’s good to know that my bullshit is still top quality. Maybe you believed me, but you’re usually better than that. Maybe you’ve just long accepted the lack of answers about any of this.

This is going to end for you one day, Phil. I promise. You get out of Punxsutawney, you eat your weight in Chinese food, you even grow a beard for a short, very unfortunate period of time. You get to be the next Anthony Bourdain (at least of public TV in the midwest). You seem genuinely happy.

I don’t think I’m supposed to spoil the ending. Or maybe I’m just a wimp, because I don’t want to talk about the sad cliffnote of Rita Hanson that comes along with your future.

“No, no, the trick to fighting with Magikarp is you have to start with a Flail, and then go to Fireblade. You start with the special attack, and it’s way too easy for me to disrupt you.

“You know, I’ve played this game before, and I never remember Magikarp having Fireblade.”

“Ah, Ms. Hanson, you have not discovered how to exploit this game’s many glitches.”

“You sure you kids don’t want anything?” called Buster from upstairs.

“We’re good!” replied both Phil and Rita, nearly in unison.

“Apparently we’re both 14 again,” mumbled Phil, who looked like he wanted to disappear into the couch.

“Hey, that’s less far back in time for me than it is for you. I’m just saying, this arrangement is a lot less creepy than breaking into the Johnsons’ house while they’re out.” She took another bite of the Rice Krispie treat. “Besides, these are awesome. Who knew Buster was such a good cook?”

The round came to an end.

“You wanna do another one?”asked Phil.

“Nah, I think I’m going to get carpal tunnel if we go on any longer. Can I ask you a question?”

“You already have.”

Rita rolled her eyes, even as she winced inside. The distinctions between this Phil and her own were blurring more by the day. It was easy to forget who she was talking to.

“What changed?”

“Ha ha, very funny.”

“No, I mean...” She gestured to the plate of Rice Krispie treats, to the den, to their small piece of relative contentment.

“I mean, it didn't really. I just got sick of the alternative. This at least sucks less.”

He wasn’t wrong.

One thing could be said for the Johnson household: they had an amazing selection of movies. After some negotiation, they settled on Thor.

“You’re not allowed to fall asleep before we get to the third one,” Phil insisted. “That’s where he finally gets a sense of humor.”

“By having his homeworld slaughtered?”

Phil tossed a piece of popcorn at her.

There was nothing good that could come of a mid-credits scene like that.

Rita looked at the time. 4:30 AM. Next to her, Phil was snoring softly. Rita smiled and poked him gently with her foot.

“Ow,” he whined.

“Hey, I stayed up. And we should get back.”

Phil groaned. “I don't know about you, but I prefer to take the magical time loop back home when I can. Walking is for losers.”

After a few minutes, they both were dressed and walking outside. Rita didn't usually stay up this late, but the quiet was nice. When they reached her hotel, she hugged Phil. “If you ever want to do this again...you’re not actually the last person in the world I want to be stuck with.”

Phil’s lips curved into a smile. “Such a sweet talker.”

“Hey Other Rita?”

“Yes, Dark Phil?”

“It wasn’t that nothing changed. Other You gives a hell of a pep talk.”

“Does she, now?” Rita asked, glad that the darkness concealed her expression.

“She has a good list of stuff she would do in our position. Which I know is ironic, but...it’s nice.”

Ironic indeed. “Huh.”

Other Rita is 36, Phil. She just started at the station and is eager to jump in and do everything she can.

I’m 42. I’m officially an old woman. Do you know that I have to dye the grey hairs?

I don’t know when I stopped trying for things, or why.

I should state for the record that it’s not your fault. I mean, yes, you really broke my fucking heart, but you didn’t cause me to stop giving a fuck.

Maybe you’re right. Maybe after a while, you get sick of stepping into the potholes and go down another street. No, that’s dumb - that’s like saying people choose to be happy, or they choose to stay in really shitty circumstances.

You’re going to fall head over heels for that other Rita. You try to hide it from me, but you suck at it.

I'm terrified she's not real, Phil. That Rita is your only hope for getting out of this nightmare, and I'm not even sure she exists.

Do you remember the time at your dad's funeral, when I told you that you were a good man? And instead of deflecting it or making it into a joke about your ego, you smiled sadly and said you had just gotten good at pretending?

Maybe I'll try pretending too.

"Is there a reason we're walking uphill in a blizzard?" Phil asked some loops later.

"He doesn't know, does he?" giggled Debbie, grabbing Rita's arm. "Your friend, on the other hand, thankfully is a sledding buff and knows the secrets of Mount Motherchucker."

Phil fixed her with a "I can't believe that's your line and they fall for it" look. Rita rolled her eyes.

"You sure you'll be okay?" Fred asked. He clutched his hands in a way that indicated half amazement that he was in the company of his idol, half terror that he would be the cause of said idol's demise by tree.

"Are you prepared?" asked Rita, her voice purposefully dramatic.

Phil snorted as he started to descend the first few feet. "I'm from Pittsburgh, have you ever been to-oh FUCK."

Minutes later, they were at the bottom of the hill, panting and hearts racing.

"That thing is a deathtrap," breathed Phil.

"Yup," Rita agreed without hesitation. Her eyes gleamed. "You wanna go again?"

"Hey Nancy," Rita called, her own coffee in her right hand, and a specialty drink in the other.

"Uh...hi, do I know you?"

"No, no yet." She smiled. "I'm Rita Hanson."

"I'm Nancy, but um...how do you know my name?"

"A little birdie told me that you're the town's resident chalk art expert." Rita remembered the drink in her other hand. "You want this, by the way? I ordered just one coffee, but they gave me this extra latte with soy milk."

"How did you know?" She laughed, as if at her own private joke. "Are you trying to bribe me?"

Rita pursed her lips. "Maaaybe."

"How about this, you buy me lunch, and you'll have your own private chalk art instructor for the rest of the afternoon."

"You're on."

Nancy says that when it comes to chalk art, you have to make peace with three things: One, that there is a percentage of the population that are dickheads and will make fun of you. Two, that you'll get a lot of Mary Poppins references. And three, that any masterpiece you create is going to last at most a week.

I asked her once if she ever wanted to switch over to a medium other than the sidewalk. There's plenty of stuff drawn with chalk that actually ends up framed and preserved.

"I mean, sure," Nancy said. "I used to have notebooks of that stuff in high school. I kind of like sidewalk stuff, though."

"Even though it doesn't last?"

"Yeah."

Rita lost control of the loop over pancakes and Ned Ryerson's story about the time Phil went to the Debate Team competition while stoned.

"I mean, it's not the worst idea," Ned admitted. "I would never do it, would never let the kids go anywhere near that stuff, but it probably did help you think of a few new-

Cold, pounding heartbeat. Her useless left leg was sprawled over her right, if she could just get traction with her right leg, maybe she could-

"Are you okay?" asked Phil.

“I’m fine,” said Rita. She took a large swig from her coffee cup. Sensation was good, taste was good, kept her grounded, kept her-

-move a few inches that way. The door handle was smashed to bits, but maybe there was enough of an opening in the window to-

“Rita!” called Phil, more alarm in his voice than the occasion seemed to warrant. Something smooth and cool pressed against Rita’s cheek. Oh. This was the floor of the diner. When had she gotten down here?

Phil had his hand on her back, the usual pretenses of space between them lost in panic. Rita didn’t mind, this felt nice.

But she could smell the cold of twisted metal. Not yet, she thought. I’m not ready yet, no when I’m finally getting the hang of-

Her ribs weren’t supposed to move that way-

I threw a wish in the well, don’t ask me I’ll never tell, I looked to you as it fell, and now you’re in my way-

Rita never thought she would be so relieved to hear the dulcet tones of Carly Rae Jepsen.

For a few minutes, she was just content to be in her body, this body, healthy and unbroken and belonging to a woman in her prime.

Her peace was broken by the door flying open, followed by an anxious weatherman torpedo. He came to an abrupt stop when he saw her.

“Oh thank God,” he breathed.

“Um...hi to you too, Phil, please come in?”

He collapsed in her hotel room’s desk chair. “You scared the shit out of me.”

Rita became conscious of her counting sheep pajama bottoms and low cut top.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but what are you doing in my hotel room?” For the first time she realized Phil was still in his boxers. Well, that must have made for an interesting trip over here.

“You disappeared in right front of me, Rita. One second we were with Ned, the next you were just...gone.”

Well, that was different. “That-”

Phil got up again and began to pace. "I don't remember that Other Rita - I mean you, whoever, I don't remember their existence when you're not here. But there's these impressions left behind. I can't tell you how many times since you disappeared that I've been practicing piano or working on an ice sculpture, and I suddenly know that something is really, really wrong, and I don't know what. I woke up this morning and suddenly knew what happened. Fuck, until I got here, I thought you were dead, or had blinked out of existence."

You wouldn't be wrong. Still, Rita didn't envy Phil's experience. His fear seemed genuine. "Can we have this conversation when we're both fully dressed? Maybe over breakfast?"

Phil looked down at his clothes (or lack thereof). "Fine."

"You can, um, borrow my jacket so you don't freeze to death on the way back to the B&B."

Phil didn't dignify that with a reply.

It probably doesn't matter if I tell you or not. When I lose hold for good, I'll die. And then Looping Phil will forget that Other Me ever existed. So it's fine, you'll still get where you need to go.

You're getting better at piano these days. I hate to measure time, but maybe you're a step closer to where you're supposed to be.

So I'm sorry that I'm selfish. I just want to have this while I can.

An hour later, they were both dressed and in line at the hot chocolate stand. "So...anything?"

Rita put on her best cryptic voice. "It'll disrupt the space time continuum if I say too much."

"I have now literally seen every episode of Star Trek, so that's not gonna work." Phil furrowed his brow. "Rita, you can't just-"

"I can," she replied, words clipped. "Come on. We both know we could do stupid things to each other, and eventually the other would figure it out how to get around it."

"Look, this is stupid, I don't want to fight you." Something changed in Phil's eyes. "I'm worried about you."

Rita tried to consider what pieces she could let slip. Selfishness was one thing, but she also had no desire to hurt Phil more than she eventually would. "I don't think I have that many loops left."

Phil's expression was grim, as if he had expected her to say something like that. "Okay. So can we change that?"

"And you're the one who says I'm always says I'm trying to fix everything," Rita mumbled under her breath.

"Why do you always say things like that?" Phil asked in exasperation. "You think I'm not listening, but then you say things that don't make sense."

Ironic that Phil was getting karmic payback now, when his own cryptic mumblings were already scheduled for the future. It didn't make Rita feel any better. "You can't fix this one."

"Bullshit."

Please, Phil, Rita thought. If we're getting to the end, then I don't want to spend it fighting with you. "Look, we can spat, or we can actually do something today."

"What are you thinking?"

An hour later, they both collapsed at the top of Mount Motherchucker.

"You know," Rita panted. "Running up hills would be a lot easier if either one of us was able to build up cardiovascular endurance."

"Anything else to add, Captain Obvious?"

She grinned, getting to her feet. "Race you to the bottom."

"No way in hell-hey, Rita!"

The wind whipped against her face. Her lungs burned.

Rita reveled in it all.

"You know this isn't going to work, right?"

The issue with pulling an all-nighter in Punxsutawney was that even the bars threw you out by 3 AM. Hence how they found themselves in Phil's room at the B&B.

"Yeah, but it makes me feel better," said Phil.

Rita smiled despite herself. "You're sweet."

"Ah, flattery won't work on me, Rita." An earlier game of Thumb War yielded a 3-2 victory for Rita, meaning Rita got the bed while Phil sat against some propped up pillows on the floor. "Okay, it's your turn."

Rita searched her sleep-addled brain for another question. "Worst vacation you ever took."

"Oh, that's easy. Jamaica, spring break of junior year."

"You know I said worst, not best, right?"

"Yes, but 20-year old Phil Connors was so excited about being able to legally drink while flying in international waters that he got alcohol poisoning on the plane."

Rita winced at the image.

"I had to be hospitalized as soon as we landed. By the time I was in the clear, there was only one day left of spring break, and it poured that day."

"Okay, that does suck. Your turn."

Phil closed his eyes. "How old do you think we are?"

Ah, there was a complicated question with more than one answer. "I dunno, when were you born again?"

"1975."

"Okay, so you're 42, and I'm 36."

Phil launched a pillow at her head. It missed its mark and landed with a dull thud on the other side of the bed. "I'm not moving to give that back to you."

"I'm serious."

How ironic. That after so many fights in their future relationship about Phil's avoidance, Rita was getting so good at it. "Well, if we're counting all the loops, then you're...I dunno, up there with the dinosaurs? I get less loops, so I'm more in the time of the cavemen. Do you think Other Rita gets older if she forgets every time the loop resets?"

"That, Ms. Hanson, is something I try not to think about."

Rita smiled sadly. "I dunno, everyone here is living the best day of their life over and over, they seem pretty happy. I'm the one who's turned cynical."

“You know, Rita, for someone who for...space time continuum reasons keeps billing herself as used up, you do a lot better than you think.”

“Yeah?”

Phil’s smile was small, but full of affection. “I mean, who else is going to call me out whenever I mess up the lyrics to Little Red Corvette?”

"I guess you have a point."

The conversation gradually wound down. Phil’s breathing grew steady with the regularity of sleep. Rita looked at the clock on the bedside table. Still another hour to go. Her journal was back in her own hotel room, but there was a pad of paper in easy reach. The words would never stay, but Rita wanted to write the letter anyway.

You also do a lot better than you’d think.

Rita was unsurprised when she woke not to her hotel room, but to the frigid outdoor air of January 2023.

The sharp pain in her stomach hadn’t gone away, but it didn’t bother her as much either. Around her, she could hear the rustling of trees.

In the end it had been a good day.

She smiled ruefully. Just one thing left to do.

Getting back to Punxsutawney was harder this time. There was a coldness here that went beyond the day’s temperature. 2023 kept a hand on her shoulder. I’ll be right back, she told the part of herself in the cold. Just one last thing to do.

She caught sight of Phil coming up to the Knob right on time at 6:30. “Oh, geez, it’s you,” he breathed, crushing her in a hug. “I knew that something was off, I just didn’t know what, and-” Something on Rita’s face made him stop. “Rita?” he asked.

“Let’s go sit for a bit.”

Funny, this was the very same bench where an eternity ago, Phil bared his darkest depths to Rita’s younger self. “So?” Phil asked. Rita almost couldn’t bear to snuff out the hope in his eyes.

But 2023 wouldn't wait forever. She took a deep breath. "I really am Rita Hanson, but um..." Time to just spill it. "I'm from the future."

She might as well have told him that she was an alien from the fifth dimension for all Phil seemed to comprehend the idea. "But that's..."

She took his hand. "You get out, Phil. I don't know why or how, but you eventually get to February 3rd."

His nose crinkled in disbelief. "How do you know this?"

"Because I used to be that other Rita. At least for the one loop that actually stuck. It was a really good day." There was a hint of mischief in her eye. "If you take my meaning."

Phil grinned incredulously. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." Now to the parts that were increasingly less fun to reveal. "We were together for a few years after that. It was nice. I never told the other you this, but I did find that jewelry box in the back of your sock drawer. But things just didn't work out in the end."

Phil appeared to be keeping up with it all, but barely. "Okay, so...this is a lot to process, and I'm following you so far, but I think I'm still missing a piece."

Rita could feel her heart in her throat. "It's six years from now. 2023. Yesterday, I got put on a last minute assignment in the middle of nowhere. I was running late and I took the back roads instead of the highway." She blinked back whatever was in her eye. "And I hit a patch of ice, or I nodded off for just a second at the wrong time. I went off road and crashed."

Phil tightened his grip on her hand. "So how are you...?"

"I can't explain it. My body - my real body, is bleeding out on the side of the road near Lake Erie, but my brain has been here in the loop. With you." It was getting harder to keep the frog out of her throat, but Rita Hanson wasn't about to lose her cool in a tight spot. "Look, I know it was dumb to keep it from you, but I just wanted to..." She had to pause in order to get the words out. "I just wanted the end to not suck."

"Rita-"

"I was really, really pissed at you when we broke up. I knew there was something going on, I just never thought it would be," she gestured to the scene around them with her hand.

"This." She shook her head incredulously. "You are one odd duck, Phil Connors, but I'm really glad I got to know you again."

A cold, unseen hand was pressing on her shoulder. What was there left to say?

Phil, on the other hand, looked lost in disbelief of it all. So she leaned forward and kissed his forehead. "You're going to be fine," she promised.

"Look, that's great," he said dismissively. "But-"

"People die all the time." Rita laughed, but it wasn't bitter. "It's okay. I got to do a hell of a lot more than most people ever do in the last minutes of their life." She brushed an affectionate thumb over his cheek. "I'm glad I got to know you again," she repeated. "You're so much better than you think you are, Phil."

"Where were you driving when this happened?"

Please don't do this, she begged. "It's pointless, you won't remember. You don't remember anything about me when I'm not here, and I'm about to-

"Just tell me," Phil insisted.

"None of this is your fault, you don't have to-

"Please, tell me."

It was the please that did her in. "Contestoga Ridge Road. About twenty minutes from the gas station in Ayer."

And then Rita fell into the darkness.

Seeing You

Rita woke to the steady sound of mechanical beeping beside her. Funny, that had never been her alarm...

This wasn't Punxsutawney, nor was it the wreckage of her car or her bedroom back in Pittsburgh. An IV was held into her arm via tape. Her left hand was bruised, but clean. Florescent hospital lights illuminated the figure of her mother, slumped over in sleep in the chair beside her bed. "Mommy?" Rita tried to ask, but it came out more like a croak.

And then finally, Rita remembered how to cry as her mom crossed the distance between them. "Everything's going to be okay, baby girl," said Mrs. Hanson over and over again, even as she could barely get out the words herself.

For the first time, Rita could believe it.

In between visits from her dad and siblings came a parade of medical professionals with clipboards and stern expressions. Rita's final toll came to a broken leg, multiple lacerations (small miracle that nothing got infected beyond the point of no return), and more broken ribs than Rita wanted to think about. It was hard for Rita to follow everything in her current state, but the one thing phrase she heard over and over was "physical therapy."

Well, she could live with that. Live, ha, that was hilarious. Rita couldn't tell if it was the exhilaration of being alive or the pain meds. Probably both.

Finally, the head doctor convinced Mrs. Hanson to let Rita get some rest. (Ridiculous, given she hadn't moved an inch from the bed but what could you do). Rita's mom squeezed her hand. "I know God and I have been on the outs lately, but I'll give him a second chance on account of you. Or maybe I should be saving all my thanks for your celebrity boyfriend," she teased.

"Is that so?" Rita asked, her voice heavy with sleep.

She faded in and out for the next few hours, but it was a nice feeling. Ironic, given she still couldn't feel her toes, but some nice person in an official uniform promised her she'd get that back eventually. Sleep and morphine made her giggly.

Eyes closed, she could hear the conversations of the hospital staff as they came in and out. It was oddly peaceful just listening to the world around her. "It's not everyday a crash patient gets here in that condition," remarked one. "It would be awesome if we could get them all this early, but usually when it happens in the middle of Bumblefuck, Nowhere, it's way too late when you find them."

"Yeah, well, this lady should thank the psychic weathermen of the world."

Rita stirred out of her haze. “Well, that and Terry Gross or whoever for not cutting him off when things got weird.”

“I guess giving an awards speech makes for a captive audience.”

“He's just lucky someone actually took the whole thing seriously.”

“I think she's the lucky one. How many people flip their car 50 miles from nowhere and get found?”

Rita tried to pull the threads together, but things were slippery again, albeit this time from exhaustion and medication. Instead, she let herself fall back into sleep, knowing this time it was safe.

Rita woke again to the sound of the door opening. She had enough strength to turn her head.

The man on the other side entered gingerly. Grey had crept up his temples in the last few years. Looked good.

He looked nervous, which was hilarious given she was the one with an IV in her arm and doped on morphine. So she smiled.

The man's eyes softened, and he smiled back.

“Hey there, Phil,” Rita whispered.

It was pleasant, drifting in and out of consciousness and catching snippets of conversation between her family or Phil. Her brothers in particular were overly pleased to have their pet local celebrity back, even if just for a temporary emergency that was resolving itself by the day. The company of Present Phil was a nice bridge between the strange, crumbling world she left and the present. Still, Rita insisted that any serious conversation occur when she wasn't on morphine.

The day of her hospital discharge, Phil helped push Rita via wheelchair outside to a small courtyard garden, away from the hustle and bustle. Rita was already getting the hang of using the crutches, but not even Phil was going to let her attempt going all the way from the fifth floor to the courtyard.

Rita breathed in the crisp, outdoor air. It was nice to feel the sun again.

“So.”

Phil smiled shyly, then waggled his eyebrows. “So.”

It had been so, so easy these last few days to fall back into the familiar rhythm between them. It couldn't last, but Rita would take it for now. "I've only heard the gossip. What exactly did you do?"

Phil looked positively sheepish. "I don't know else to explain it, but I couldn't remember anything until...I guess until you were actually experiencing it in real time." He looked down. "You said entire loops passed within the blink of an eye right, right?" The expression on Phil's face was odd, and it occurred to Rita how unused he must be to putting anything about Punxsutawney to spoken word. "Something felt out of place the whole night. And then it was my time for me to go on stage, and I was doing fine until the woman introducing me mentioned the story I did last year in Ayer."

Rita waited for him to continue.

"And then it occurred to me that I had heard that name before. I was just thanking my awesome team and everyone at the network when I remembered how you told me back in Punxsutawney that's where you would be bleeding out in 2023."

"So then..."

Phil smiled out of the corner of his mouth. "I had a mic, and thank God someone who had access to a medical helicopter decided to humor the crazy guy on national radio."

Rita tried to picture it. A small sound escaped her mouth, and then she was full on laughing, until she moved a rib too hard and had to stop before she re-injured herself.

"Easy there, tiger," Phil managed, but he wasn't doing much better. Two laughing idiots in a hospital. There were worse places to be.

"Are you going to have a career after this?"

"I have no fucking idea. I just know that I'm getting our publicist an amazing Christmas gift this year." He rolled his eyes. "Stop looking at me like that, I'll figure something out."

"So it really..."

Phil's expression turned serious. "I've never actually known. I still don't, not really. I take it on faith that I learned piano in a time loop, and that I'm not insane. This is the first time I've had any..." He bent his head. "Rita, I am so, so, sorry. There were times when I would have killed to have someone believe me, but I never meant for-"

She batted at him lazily with her good arm. "You're an idiot." But Phil wasn't taking the usual bait, so she continued. "I assumed you never figured out the why of any of this?"

"Nope."

"I figured as much. Look, I don't think magical time loops, whether they physically happened like in your case, or just happened in the head, like for me...whatever they are, I don't think you caused them. The only thing that caused any of this was that patch of ice on Contestoga Ridge Road."

Phil nodded. Rita couldn't tell if he believed what she was saying, but he seemed to accept the clemency regardless.

The courtyard's clock chimed the hour. Eventually her parents would be here. If Rita could learn anything from her never-ending day, it was to take the opportunity to set some things to rest. "Phil...why didn't you ever tell me?" Her voice was quiet but heavy with years-old pain.

Phil met her eyes this time. "I still ask myself that. I don't really know. That year after it all ended, I couldn't believe I got to be a person again, and that I got to be with you." He smiled fondly. "I felt like I was going to burst out of my skull with it sometimes." Then his expression fell. "But then...I dunno. I'd like to think I've gotten a lot better after Punxsutawney, but I was still a former immortal with PTSD trying to fit back into the life of a reformed chauvinist." He licked his lips. "I did take your suggestion of seeing a therapist, actually."

Rita didn't realize this all could still hit like a bullet to the chest. "Yeah?

"She meant well, she really did, but I should have known better. Should have been more careful about who I talked to about my experiences about time loops and sticking my head in the donut fryer."

Rita could have screamed at the futility of it all, about the chances they lost before she even knew they were there.

Phil took her good hand within his. "It's not your fault. It was a good idea, and you were right for insisting I take care of my shit. Besides, eventually it worked out. I um...have a good therapist I talk to on Skype every Thursday. It's really hard to find someone who is both a qualified mental health professional and doesn't think you're certifiably crazy for this, but they do exist.

Phil in weekly therapy. It was a goddamn Christmas miracle. "So you're..." Rita couldn't find the right word. "Okay?" Rita asked. She hadn't let go of Phil's hand.

"Yeah." he smiled. "I mean, I've got my demons as much as the next guy, but things are pretty good. I wish things had been...different with us, but I think it was good for me to get a fresh start with this new job. Don't feel like I'm living in another man's shoes so much."

Rita was acutely aware of the three years of distance between them, of the experiences and people in Phil's life that she knew nothing about. "Are you seeing-"

"Not at the moment," Phil finished quickly. "There's been a few things, but nothing that got serious. You?"

"Somehow I've been too busy with..." Rita wanted to cry. "I nearly bled out in my shit wagon of a car-"

"Do not say that about Honky, may he rest in peace-"

“-and it would have been for nothing.” There was something hard in her throat. “I’m fucking hypocrite, Phil. All that stuff that Rita-in-the-Loop said about making the best of everything with unlimited chances? I couldn’t even do that with a promotion to Senior Producer, I’m-”

“Human, for God’s sake.” Phil interrupted, annoyed. He brought his other hand to her own, so that her palm was enclosed by his gentle grip. “Geez, Rita. Do you think I liked you because you were some kind of a manic pixie dream girl?”

“Since when do you know that term?”

“I now work with bonafide lesbians, Pop Culture Feminism 101 is part of the work relationship contract. Seriously...that’s what I always loved about you. That you’re so fucking stubborn, and irritating-”

“Thank you?”

“But you don’t stop trying for something, anything, even if it’s just to fall down another hole and wrestle yourself out of it again,” He rubbed his fingers slowly over the back of her palm. “You’re a lot better than you think, Rita Hanson.”

They stayed like that for a long, quiet moment. “So where do we go from here?” Rita finally asked.

“I don’t know,” Phil admitted. It would be so easy, to give Phil a hug and part ways then and there. Add him back as a friend on Facebook. Send the inevitable wedding gift in a few years, wish him well and mean it.

The clock chimed again. “We should get you back, your folks are going to think I kidnapped you.”

Rita nodded.

She could see the future beyond the hospital's swinging doors. Long months of recovery, full of more Hallmark movies than she could stand and loving every minute of it. Phone calls and coffee with friends old and new. As many books as she could possibly read before she died. It would be a fine life.

Rita wanted more. “Hey Phil?”

"Yeah?" he stopped the chair to meet her gaze.

“If you ever wanted to, you know, play Super Smash Brothers sometime...”

“I would love nothing more.”

End Notes

I always wanted to explore an AU where Phil and Rita experience the loop together. The problem is that there isn't really a karmic reason for the loop to happen to Rita, so I played around with the idea of an older, more weary version of her and ended up with this.

Apologies for any Super Smash Brothers sacrilege, I actually haven't played it much. I just thought it would be hilarious if Magikarp was a character.

Thank you to my betas, and to the amazing Yuletide discord group! Y'all are lifesavers.

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