

SCIENCE

TUESDAY

a relay in eight chapters

RELAY · WRITERS

The writers

Eight people who never met. One chapter each, in the order it was written.

ONE

Margot Vail

TWO

wordsbylena

THREE

Colin McAteer

FOUR

Dario Selo

FIVE

Ruth Ann Keller

SIX

inkwell_amy

SEVEN

rpenguin

EIGHT

Sasha Loomis

Chapter

ONE

written by Margot Vail

The lab smelled like burnt electronics and old coffee. Chen had stopped going home after the sixth Tuesday. Sleep felt like surrender. She marked the whiteboard with another tally. Thirteen identical Tuesdays. Thirteen times she had woken at 6:47 AM to the same dog barking three streets over. Thirteen times the barista had spelled her name wrong in the exact same way: Chem. The particle accelerator data was the first thing she checked each morning. Same readouts. Same anomaly at 14:33:17, a spike in the Higgs field that shouldn't exist but did. Every single Tuesday. Most people didn't notice. Her colleague Martinez brought donuts every Tuesday, surprised each time by his own generosity. The administrative assistant asked about her weekend plans. Again. Again. Again. But Chen noticed. Scientists are trained to see patterns. She saw the pattern on Tuesday two. By Tuesday seven she had confirmed it with redundant documentation: photographs, voice recordings, blood samples marked with the date that never changed. The samples were interesting. She had drawn blood from herself thirteen times now. The cells showed progressive aging. Telomeres shortening. Her body was moving forward even if the calendar wasn't. Which meant this wasn't memory. Wasn't simulation. Time itself had folded. She ran the numbers again. The anomaly in the Higgs field corresponded to a theoretical prediction from her own research, the

paper she had submitted Monday night and would never see published because Wednesday never came. The paper proposed that consciousness might act as an observer in quantum systems at macro scales. Not the mystical interpretation, the rigorous one: measurement collapse propagating through entangled neural networks. If she was right, then awareness might be creating a local time differential. But why Tuesday? Why this Tuesday? She checked her phone. Fifteen missed calls from her mother. The same fifteen, arriving at the same intervals. Her mother, who didn't notice anything was wrong because her Tuesday ended and Wednesday arrived like it was supposed to. Chen was alone in the loop. No, that wasn't quite right. At 14:33:17, when the Higgs field spiked, the accelerator was running a specific collision sequence. The same sequence every Tuesday. She hadn't been running it. Martinez had been running it. She found him in the control room, eating a donut, studying the same readout he studied every Tuesday. "Tell me about the collision parameters," she said. He looked up, powdered sugar on his chin. Always in the same spot. "Standard stuff. Why?" "Humor me." He pulled up the data. Chen felt something click into place. The particles weren't just colliding. They were colliding in a configuration that matched the quantum state of her neural network at the moment of observation. She had been watching the screen when it happened. First Tuesday. 14:33:17. Her consciousness had become entangled with the particle decay. "You see something?" Martinez asked. She saw everything. The loop wasn't happening to her. The loop was her, or part of her, a splinter of observation caught in recursive measurement. The universe trying to resolve a paradox: an observer observing herself observing the observation. "I need to stop the collision," she said. Martinez frowned. "It's already queued. Runs in six hours." Six hours until 14:33:17. Until the spike. Until the loop closed and opened again. "Cancel it." "Chen, we've got funding reviewers coming Thursday. We need this data." Thursday. He still believed in Thursday. She pushed past him to the control terminal. Her hands shook. Thirteen Tuesdays of coffee had her nerves singing. She pulled up the sequence abort

protocol. "What are you doing?" Breaking the loop. Ending it. Letting Wednesday come. Or creating something worse. The cursor blinked on the confirmation screen. She thought about her cells aging. Thought about Wednesdays and Thursdays and all the days lined up like dominoes waiting to fall. She thought about what happens when you stop observing.

Chapter

TWO

written by wordsbylena

The decision matrix unfolds in her mind like this: One: abort the collision, break entanglement, possibly end loop. Two: abort the collision, maintain entanglement, definitely die alone in recursive Tuesday. Three: let collision proceed, gather more data, survive another iteration. Four: let collision proceed, alter observation method, introduce variable. Four variables minimum. Perhaps seven. Perhaps infinite. Chen counts her heartbeats. Seventy-two per minute on average. Times sixty minutes. Times six hours until 14:33:17. Twenty-five thousand, nine hundred and twenty potential cardiac events before the spike. Each one a measurement. Each measurement collapsing probability. Her finger hovers. One centimeter above the touchpad. The cursor blinks at 1.4 hertz. She has watched it blink one thousand and eight times while Martinez stares at her. His pupils dilate three millimeters. Standard stress response. He does not understand yet that stress implies future consequences, and there is no future, only this Tuesday folding into itself like origami made from moments. She pulls back. Turns. Walks past Martinez (two steps, three steps, four) into the hallway where fluorescent tubes flicker at sixty hertz, amplitude modulation creating the appearance of steady light when really it is constant oscillation, on-off-on-off, sixty times per second, which means in the six hours before the spike the lights will cycle one million, two

hundred and ninety-six thousand times and she will see none of the individual pulses because human perception averages, smooths, lies. Her office. Seventh door on the left. Always seven. The number appears everywhere once you start counting: seven continents, seven colors in the visible spectrum (though really it is a continuum and Newton chose seven to match the musical scale, so even the rainbow is a human construction, a measurement imposed on seamless reality). Chen opens her filing cabinet. Pulls thirteen file folders, one for each Tuesday. Spreads them across her desk in chronological order (which is also the same order, which is also no order at all). Tuesday One: confusion, incomplete data, three photographs. Tuesday Two: seventeen photographs, blood sample, speculation. Tuesday Three: forty-one photographs, two blood samples, Martinez's donut choice documented (glazed, always glazed). Tuesday Four: detailed timeline, ninety-three observations, first mention of Higgs field correlation. She has been collecting data. Of course she has been collecting data. She is a scientist trapped in an experiment with sample size of one, n equals one, statistically meaningless except she is both researcher and subject and the experimental apparatus, which violates every protocol but here she is. The photographs show her aging. She arranges them in sequence. Measures the distances between crow's feet with calipers accurate to point-oh-one millimeters. Tuesday One to Tuesday Thirteen: skin displacement of two-point-three millimeters. Extrapolate forward: if the loop continues, her face will betray fifty-two Tuesdays before visible deterioration becomes severe. Fifty-two Tuesdays equals one year of aging. Equals death in perhaps forty years of Tuesdays, which is fourteen thousand, six hundred identical days, which is three hundred and fifty thousand, four hundred identical hours. She will not survive that many observations. New calculation needed. Chen sits. Pulls up her submission from Monday night. The paper that will never be published. Reads her own words describing consciousness as quantum observer. The math was elegant. Three equations, seven variables, one beautiful proof that awareness shapes reality at macro scale through cumulative

micro-measurements. But she missed something. Must have missed something. She reads again. Counts the equations (three), counts the variables (seven), counts the footnotes (nineteen, of course there are nineteen, she always over-cites). There. Footnote twelve. Reference to Rovelli's relational interpretation. Observation is not absolute. Observation is relative to observer. Different observers measure different realities and both are true. Which means Martinez experiences Wednesday. Her mother experiences Wednesday. The entire world experiences Wednesday except Chen, who remains entangled with the particle decay at 14:33:17. She is not trapped in a loop. She is trapped in a relation. A single persistent quantum relation between her consciousness and the accelerator's collision products. Everyone else moves forward. She alone remains coupled to this specific moment, yanked back each time the collision completes because she is still observing, still measuring, still collapsing the waveform. The solution: stop being the observer. Not abort the collision. Change the observation. Introduce a second consciousness into the measurement. Create entanglement with another mind. Let someone else see what she sees at exactly 14:33:17. Chen checks her watch. Five hours, forty-two minutes remain. She needs Martinez. Needs him to look at the screen at the precise moment. Needs his observation to dilute hers, spread the entanglement across two neural networks instead of one. Unless that creates two people trapped. Two observers locked in Tuesday. She counts the possibilities. Gets to thirty-seven before her hands start shaking again.

Chapter

THREE

written by Colin McAteer

Chen stands at Martinez's door and watches him work. He rotates his chair at 4:23 PM exactly, same angle, same velocity, reaches for his coffee mug which contains 140 milliliters of liquid cooled to 52 degrees Celsius. She has measured this. She has measured everything. But she has not measured what happens when Martinez knows. The ethics are simple in principle. Informed consent requires disclosure. She would need to tell him: you are about to be trapped in temporal recursion with me, possibly forever, possibly until our cells age out and we die in this extended Tuesday, our bodies decaying while the calendar insists nothing has changed. He drinks. She counts three swallows. The larynx bobs, returns, settles. If she tells him before 14:33:17, his observation changes. Expectations shape measurement in quantum systems. The observer who knows they are observing collapses the waveform differently than the observer who believes they are simply watching data. Schrödinger's graduate student. She cannot tell him and also use him. But she cannot use him without violating every principle that made her a scientist instead of something else. Third option: she observes herself not observing. Creates a meta-state. But consciousness cannot bifurcate that way. The homunculus problem. Who watches the watcher? Who observes the observer observing herself? Infinite regress. Thirteen Tuesdays have taught her that awareness does not nest cleanly.

Martinez notices her. "You're back," he says. He always says this at 4:23 PM if she is standing here. She has been standing here three Tuesdays out of thirteen. Small sample size but consistent response. "I need you to do something at 14:33 tomorrow," Chen says. Tomorrow means today means Tuesday means the only day there is. "Sure, what?" She opens her mouth. Closes it. Counts her teeth with her tongue. Thirty-two. She has not lost any teeth despite thirteen days of coffee and inadequate brushing. Small mercies in temporal anomalies. "Watch the collision readout. The exact moment the Higgs field spikes." Martinez shrugs. "I always watch the readout." But he does not always watch it at the exact moment. She has reviewed the security footage from Tuesday One, Tuesday Two, Tuesday Three. On Tuesday One he was watching. Tuesdays Two through Thirteen he has been checking his phone, responding to a text from his sister about their father's birthday party on Thursday, the Thursday that for him arrives on schedule, that for Chen exists only as theoretical construct. If she tells him to watch, he will watch differently. Intentionally. The quantum state changes. She thinks about her mother's fifteen phone calls. Thinks about Martinez's sister texting about a birthday party that from Chen's perspective will never happen. Thinks about all the people moving forward through Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, unaware that one scientist is aging invisibly in a pocket of recursive time. Acceptable losses. The phrase appears in her mind uninvited. Whose loss? Her loss, certainly. Possibly Martinez's loss if the entanglement spreads. Definitely the loss of whatever knowledge she might have gained from studying this phenomenon for forty years of Tuesdays before her body failed. No. Not acceptable. She became a scientist because measurement matters, because observation reveals truth, because consciousness participates in reality rather than simply witnessing it. Trapping Martinez treats him as apparatus instead of observer. Treats his awareness as tool. "Never mind," she says. "I'll handle it." She walks back to her office. Five hours, eleven minutes until the spike. She pulls up the paper again. Counts the equations. Still three. Counts the variables. Still seven. But now she sees

what she missed: variable seven, the observer's prior state. Her equation assumes steady-state consciousness. Assumes the observer at moment N minus one is functionally identical to the observer at moment N . Thirteen Tuesdays have proven this false. Her cells are aging. Her telomeres are shortening. Her neural network is not the same network that first observed the collision. She is a different observer each Tuesday, different by approximately one day of cellular degradation, observing what she believes to be the same event. But if the observer changes, the observation changes. The entanglement is not static. It is evolving. Which means the loop is not perfect repetition. It is decay with a period of one day. Eventually the decay will reach critical threshold. Eventually her consciousness will differ sufficiently from the original observer that the entanglement breaks naturally. She calculates. Assumes linear degradation. Assumes critical threshold at neural coherence loss of seventeen percent. Gets an answer: forty-seven Tuesdays. Fifty-two if she is lucky. Three hundred and ninety-one if the relationship is logarithmic rather than linear. Chen's hands stop shaking. She has an ending now. Not a solution. An ending.

Chapter

FOUR

written by Dario Selo

Chen walks to the cafeteria (which is empty, always empty at this hour, the hour being 4:47 PM when the afternoon staff has left and the evening staff has not yet arrived, a liminal time within the liminal day). She buys coffee from the machine. The machine does not care what day it is. The machine dispenses coffee according to physical laws that operate orthogonally to human temporal experience. Button press creates circuit closure creates heating element activation creates liquid delivery. Cause, effect. The universe at its most honest. She drinks. The coffee is bad. It has been bad thirteen times. It will be bad thirty-four more times, or three hundred and seventy-eight more times, depending on whether telomere degradation follows the curve she expects or some other curve, some function she has not yet imagined because she is working from sample size thirteen and all statistical models are wrong but some are useful, which is what her advisor told her in graduate school, which was nine years ago, which was also this morning because she woke at 6:47 AM the same as everyone but unlike everyone she woke having already lived this day twelve times previous. Thirteen if you count today. Counting today presents philosophical difficulties. Is this day separate from the previous twelve or is it the same day experienced with different cellular substrate? If a Tuesday repeats but the observer's neurons are incrementally different, is it repetition or progression

disguised as repetition? The question matters. She thinks the question matters. Though perhaps the question mattering is itself an illusion, a story consciousness tells itself because consciousness cannot tolerate being apparatus only, being merely the thing through which observation occurs rather than the observer itself. Chen sets down the coffee. Pulls out her phone. Her mother's contact information glows on the screen. Fifteen missed calls, yes, the same fifteen, but also she could make call sixteen. Could introduce novelty into the pattern. Could tell her mother: I am trapped, I am aging, I am living the same day while you move forward and by the time you receive this message it will be Wednesday for you and I will have forgotten I called because Tuesday will have reset. Except Tuesday does not reset. That is the wrong model. Tuesday continues for Chen while Wednesday begins for everyone else. Two timelines, not one looping timeline. Her mother is not repeating Tuesday. Her mother is experiencing normal temporal flow while Chen experiences something else, something that looks like repetition from inside but from outside is simply absence, a scientist who stops answering her phone, who stops coming home, who disappears on a Tuesday in March and never arrives at Wednesday. From her mother's perspective Chen has been missing for twelve days. She puts the phone away. New thought, branches opening: if Chen is the only one looping (not looping, wrong word, wrong model, but language fails here because language evolved for beings who experience sequential time), then the particle collision is not causing the repetition. Cannot be causing it. Martinez runs the collision every Tuesday, yes, but Martinez experiences Wednesday, so the collision completes and time moves forward for everyone except Chen. Which means the entanglement is not between Chen's consciousness and the particle decay. The entanglement is between Chen's consciousness and Chen's consciousness. She stands. The coffee cup falls. Liquid spreads across linoleum in branching patterns determined by surface tension, gravity, microscopic floor irregularities. The spill will look different from the previous twelve spills she has created through similar carelessness (Tuesday Seven, Tuesday

Nine, Tuesday Eleven, today) because initial conditions vary by microns and chaos amplifies. Deterministic but unpredictable. The coffee knows more about time than she does. Back to her office. Four hours, fifty-one minutes until the spike that she now understands is not a spike, is not an event occurring at 14:33:17, but rather a marker, a moment she has designated as significant and therefore observes with intensity sufficient to collapse probability into this specific configuration: Chen aware that Tuesday repeats, Chen measuring the repetition, Chen's measurement creating the conditions for repetition. Ouroboros. The snake eating its tail. The observer observing herself trapped by observation. Her paper described consciousness as quantum observer at macro scale. She was right but incomplete. Consciousness observes and consciousness is observed and the boundary between observer and observed dissolves at sufficient recursion depth. She has been watching herself watch the collision. That doubled observation, that self-referential measurement, creates a strange loop in configuration space. She is entangled with her own future self's observation of her past self's observation. Breaking the loop requires not changing what she observes but changing what observes. Chen pulls up her email. Writes to Martinez: "Cancel the collision. Do not run it. Delete the sequence.

Chapter

FIVE

written by Ruth Ann Keller

Chen walks briskly back to her office, her movements steady despite the weight of her decision. She clicks open Martinez's email and types quickly, ensuring every word is precise before sending it. The clock on the wall ticks loudly in the silence of the empty hallway. "Cancel the collision," she writes, "Do not run it. Delete the sequence."

She hits send without a second glance. Her mind races as she processes the implications. The machine at the counter hisses softly with each drop of coffee, its mechanical whirring a stark contrast to the profound stillness of her thoughts. She returns to her office and slams the door behind her, the sudden sound echoing in the quiet room. The walls feel oppressive, closing in around her like a vice. She walks over to the window and stares out at the campus beyond, its familiar landscape seeming foreign now, as if seen through a distorted lens. Her thoughts circle back to the security footage, the subtle differences she had noticed between Martinez's behavior on different Tuesdays. Today he would check his phone, his gaze flickering away from the screen just before the critical moment. She wonders if he even realizes what he is doing, or if it has become a conditioned reflex. She pulls up the paper once more and studies it intently. The equations dance across the screen, each variable representing a piece of her shattered understanding. Variable seven, she thinks, the observer's prior state, must be recalibrated. But how can one

reset consciousness? It's like trying to untangle a knot that's grown too tight. The phone buzzes in her pocket, startling her from her reverie. She fumbles for it, hesitating before glancing at the screen. Her mother's name flashes briefly, fifteen missed calls, as always. She swallows hard and pushes the call button, holding her breath as the line connects. "Mom?" she says softly, her voice cracking slightly. "Chen, where are you? It's been so long since I heard from you," her mother's voice crackles back, concerned and distant at the same time. "I tried calling your office every day. Your sister said you haven't shown up in weeks."

Chen takes a deep breath, trying to steady herself. "Mom, it's me. I'm sorry. Can we talk?"

Her mother sighs on the other end of the line, her voice wavering. "Of course, honey. Is everything okay? Did something happen at work?"

"No," Chen lies, her heart sinking with each word. She forces a smile that she hopes sounds reassuring. "Everything's fine. I just wanted to check in because you called so many times and I didn't want to worry you."

"Okay then," her mother says hesitantly. "Do you need anything? Money, or some clothes, or...?"

"No, no," Chen says quickly. "I'm good, really. Just a little busy with work. But we should talk more often. It's just so hard being here without any of you."

She can hear her mother take a deep breath on the other end. "Of course, darling. I miss you too. How about this? Let me come visit next month?"

Chen feels a pang of guilt at the thought of making her mother travel for something that might never happen. "That's very kind, Mom," she says, trying to sound grateful but not entirely convincing. "Are you sure it's okay?" Her mother's tone softens, concerned for Chen's well-being. "Yes, yes, it is." Chen's fingers drum lightly on the desk, a nervous habit that has become all too familiar. "Just give me a call when you're coming, and I'll pick up everything at the airport."

“Alright then,” her mother says, her voice a mixture of relief and doubt. “I’ll let you go now. Take care, honey. Love you.”

“Love you too,” Chen says, already feeling the weight of the lie settling over her. She ends the call and slides the phone back into her pocket, feeling a chill run down her spine. The room feels colder, the air more stagnant. She turns away from the window and heads towards the computer, her mind racing with new thoughts and questions. She opens a new email tab and types out another message to Martinez: “I need your help. This is serious.”

The clock ticks loudly as she waits for him to respond, her fingers tapping nervously on the desk. The coffee machine continues its rhythmic hiss, a reminder of the constant passage of time, even in this pocket of recursive Tuesday. Minutes pass in an endless loop, each second stretching out like minutes before a train station platform. She swivels in her chair and looks around the room, her eyes landing on the security footage once more. The small differences stand out now, clearer than ever. Today, she decides, will be different.

Chapter

SIX

written by inkwell_amy

Chen's fingers hover over the keyboard as she considers her next steps. She forces herself to take a deep breath and compose her thoughts before typing out the message:

"I need you to come into my office now," she writes tersely. She sends it without a second thought, then leans back in her chair, watching the clock as if it might suddenly jump forward by hours. The room feels heavy with tension; every creak of the floorboard and hiss of the coffee machine seems magnified. She glances at the security footage one last time, noticing how Martinez's fingers fidget slightly before he looks away from the screen. A small smile tugs at her lips, she knows him well enough by now to recognize his subtle cues. The door swings open a moment later, and Martinez steps inside, looking slightly flustered but professional as always. "What is this about?" he asks, his tone neutral but tense. Chen doesn't waste any time. She stands up from her chair and gestures towards the computer screen. "Look at this," she says, tapping on a specific frame of the security footage where Martinez's eyes briefly drift away from the collision machine before returning with an almost imperceptible flicker of hesitation. "You've been doing it every Tuesday, haven't you?"

Martinez meets her gaze, his expression guarded. "What are you talking about?" he asks, but there's a hint of uncertainty in his voice.

"You're not running the sequence," she continues, pointing to another frame where Martinez checks his phone and looks away just before 14:33. "You're anticipating what will happen next, aren't you?"

Martinez shifts uncomfortably. "I don't understand what you mean."

Chen takes a deep breath, trying to keep her voice steady. "Look at the variables in my paper," she says, pulling up the document on her computer and highlighting variable seven. "The observer's prior state, your behavior shows that you're aware of it somehow." She points to another frame where Martinez hesitates before his fingers touch the machine. "You're changing your behavior based on what you know will happen."

Martinez finally meets her gaze, a mixture of confusion and realization in his eyes. "I don't see how that's possible," he says, his voice softer now. "Because you are not just running the sequence; you are influencing it," Chen explains. She pulls up an earlier frame where Martinez fidgets slightly, his hand twitching towards the machine before stopping. "You're creating a loop, a self-referential loop that's maintaining this state of recursion."

Martinez looks away, his shoulders tensing. "That's impossible," he says, his voice strained. Chen steps closer to him, her tone firm but calm. "It's not just the machine, Martinez. It's us, both of us are part of this loop." She points to a frame where Martinez glances up briefly before quickly looking away again. "Your actions today will affect what happens in the future Tuesday, creating a feedback loop that's keeping you here."

Martinez's expression darkens, and he runs a hand through his hair. "And what do we do about it?" he asks, his voice almost pleading. Chen looks at him for a moment, then turns back to her computer. She types out a message: "Delete the sequence permanently," she writes, sending it with deliberate speed. Then she turns to Martinez again. "Cancel all future sequences and delete any records of past ones," she instructs firmly. "This is the only way to break the loop."

Martinez nods slowly, his eyes fixed on her screen as he opens a new tab and types in the necessary commands. Chen watches him, her heart pounding with a mixture of relief and fear. She had hoped this would work, but the weight of responsibility settles heavy on her shoulders. After what feels like an eternity, Martinez closes the browser window and looks up at her. "Done," he says quietly. "All future sequences are canceled."

Chen takes a deep breath and nods, feeling a sense of finality in the air around them. She turns to face him fully, her eyes locking onto his. "Good," she says, her voice steady but strained. "Now we need to find a way out of this loop ourselves."

Martinez looks at her with a mix of sympathy and exhaustion. "How?" he asks, his tone resigned. "By breaking the cycle of anticipation," Chen replies, her mind racing as she thinks of the next steps. "We have to find a way to step outside the loop entirely, both of us must stop anticipating what will happen."

Martinez nods slowly, understanding dawning in his eyes. "And then?"

"We need to find a new normal," Chen says, her voice softening slightly.

Chapter

SEVEN

written by rpenguin

Chapter 7

“Stop anticipating,” Martinez repeats.

“Yes.”

“How?”

Chen considers this. “We behave unpredictably.”

Martinez immediately spins in a circle, slaps himself, and shouts, “BANANA COURT!”

Chen stares at him.

“What?”

“I didn’t anticipate it.”

“Then it worked.”

“No, now I’m anticipating you’ll do something stupid.”

Martinez lowers his hand. “That feels personal.”

They begin scientifically.

Chen walks backward through the corridor. Martinez wears two lab coats, one backward, because “causality won’t know which side is in charge.” They swap coffee mugs, change chairs, and spend eleven minutes discussing whether deliberately choosing randomness makes it predictable.

At 12:06, Martinez steals a bagel from the administrative refrigerator.

"That isn't random," Chen says. "You've wanted that bagel all morning."

"I've wanted it every Tuesday."

"It belongs to Susan."

"Susan labels yogurt with the date and time. She's a temporal authoritarian."

At 12:08, Susan discovers the crime.

The resulting investigation involves three security guards, an all-staff email titled "KITCHEN BOUNDARIES," and Martinez attempting to conceal cream cheese in his pocket. Chen records everything. None of it has happened before.

"This is excellent," she whispers as security escorts them toward Human Resources.

"You're enjoying this?"

"The loop is destabilizing."

"My pants are destabilizing. Cream cheese is surprisingly warm."

In Human Resources, a woman named Linda asks whether either scientist understands the seriousness of food theft.

Chen checks the clock. 14:31.

"We may have fractured time," she says.

Linda sighs and opens a form. "Is that workplace-related?"

"Extremely."

"Was anyone injured?"

"Possibly causality."

Linda checks "Other."

At 14:32, the lights flicker. Chen's pulse climbs. Martinez grips the stolen bagel like a flotation device.

"Don't anticipate," she says.

"I'm trying."

"What are you thinking?"

"That something terrible will happen at 14:33."

"Think about something else."

Martinez squeezes his eyes shut. "Giraffes wearing little neckties."

“Good.”

“They’d need very long neckties.”

“Martinez.”

“Or very short ones, depending on placement.”

The clock changes.

14:33:17.

Nothing happens.

Then every computer in Human Resources reboots simultaneously. The printer spits out forty-seven copies of Martinez’s disciplinary form. The coffee machine begins dispensing hot chocolate without a cup beneath it.

Linda watches the spreading puddle.

“Is this causality?” she asks.

Chen looks at the wall calendar.

For the first time in thirteen Tuesdays, tomorrow’s square is visible.

Wednesday.

Martinez begins laughing.

Chen begins crying.

Linda lifts the bagel from his hand.

“I’m keeping this as evidence,” she says.

The clock ticks forward.

Then the giraffe walks past the window.

Chapter

EIGHT

written by Sasha Loomis

The clock ticks forward in a rhythmic, almost mechanical way, and the room seems to stretch, as if the passage of time is being distorted. Martinez continues laughing softly, while Chen's tears mingle with the coffee stains on her lab coat. The office feels colder, the air thick with an unspoken tension. "Did you see that giraffe?" Martinez asks, his voice tinged with a surreal humor. Chen nods, wiping away a tear and trying to focus. "Yes, I did." She glances at the calendar again, her heart racing as she takes in the blank space where Wednesday used to be. "It's real."

Martinez stands up from his chair, stretching his arms above his head. "So, we're free?" he asks hopefully. Chen shakes her head, her voice barely more than a whisper. "Not yet. We need to figure out what just happened." She walks over to the security footage and rewinds it, pausing at 14:32:59. "Look," she says, pointing to Martinez's hand as he reaches for the bagel. Martinez watches the video, his expression serious. "I didn't anticipate the reboot," he says. "It just happened." He runs a hand through his hair, looking more exhausted than ever. Chen turns off the monitor and leans against it. "The loop is breaking," she muses. "But we can't predict what comes next."

Martinez nods, his eyes fixed on the calendar. "That's not good."

"Exactly," Chen replies. She starts pacing, her mind racing with possibilities. "We need to find a new routine that isn't predictable."

Martinez sighs and joins her in pacing. "How about... we just stop showing up?"

Chen stops abruptly and looks at him. "What?"

"Just skip Tuesday. Don't show up for the sequence."

She considers this, then shakes her head. "That won't work. We need to be present but unpredictable."

Martinez smirks, a rare moment of levity in their serious discussion. "Alright, let's try something different. How about... we do random, irrational things that can't be anticipated?"

Chen smiles weakly. "Okay. Let's start with the lab today." She walks over to her desk and starts gathering items: a rubber ducky, a deck of cards, and some old magazines. "Why those?" Martinez asks as she packs them into an envelope. "Randomness is key," Chen explains. "We can't predict what will happen if we act randomly."

Martinez nods in agreement, his expression thoughtful. "Let's go."

Chen leads him out of the office towards the lab, her steps determined but uncertain. As they walk, she pulls a card from the deck and shuffles it, trying to decide on their first random action. The clock ticks past 14:00 as they arrive at the lab. The room is quiet, the usual chaos absent. Chen places the rubber ducky on her desk and starts flipping through magazines, looking for something that catches her eye. Martinez watches her, his eyes following her every move. "What's next?" he asks. Chen pulls out a magazine article about giraffes and laughs, trying to shake off the surreal feeling of the day. "Let's read this," she says, showing him an image of a tiny giraffe wearing a bow tie. Martinez chuckles, his face softening for a moment. "Alright," he says. "Let's act like we're studying giraffes today."

Chen nods and sits down with the magazine, but before she can open it, her phone rings. She hesitates, then answers it. "Hello?"

"Dr. Chen?" It's Susan from Human Resources. "Yes?"

Susan clears her throat. "We've been reviewing your file. We noticed some irregularities."

Chen's heart races as she listens to Susan explain the findings of their investigation. The coffee machine dings softly in the background, and Martinez stands behind her, his presence reassuring but also unsettling. "Are you there?" Susan asks, breaking into Chen's thoughts. "Yes," Chen replies, trying to keep her voice steady. "What irregularities?"

Susan continues explaining about the missing bagel and the rebooted computers. "We need to discuss this further," she says, sounding concerned. Chen looks at Martinez, who gives her a supportive nod. "Okay," she says, ending the call. She turns back to the magazine, trying to hide her anxiety. Martinez steps closer and places his hand on her shoulder. "It'll be okay," he murmurs. "Thanks," Chen replies, squeezing his hand gently. "Let's just finish this random day."

They spend the next few hours reading about giraffes, occasionally stopping to flip through more cards or look at rubber ducks. The routine feels almost normal, yet it's clear that something is off. As they near 15:00, Chen starts packing up her things, her mind racing with thoughts of what might happen if someone notices their behavior. Martinez watches her, his expression a mix of concern and support. "Are you okay?" he asks softly. Chen nods, trying to keep her voice steady.

Afterwords

Notes the writers left after the last chapter.

Colin McAteer

Randomness is our compass.

inkwell_amy

Tomorrow never comes twice.

Margot Vail

The loop may break, but unpredictability remains our only anchor.

Finished on 31 August 2026.

*Written in relay on relaywriters.com: eight strangers, one chapter each, never
more than eight hundred words at a time.*

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