

(This work is copyrighted, and represents the author's blood, sweat and tears. Any duplication and/or modification, without the express, written consent of the author, is strictly prohibited – and just plain wrong.)

## **SUBWAY SURVEY**

*By Michael Young*

A bank of the florescent subway lights flickered and died. It was only one of a row of lights, but even so the three men sitting in the car felt its absence. They each sat as far apart from one another as possible, engrossed in their own private worlds.

Only two of them noticed a fourth man enter the car, wearing a dark blue uniform and carrying a clipboard. The two alert men assumed he had come for their tickets and set about fishing through pockets. In their haste, they did not notice that the man had seven fingers on each hand and that his uniform did not match. It bore only a single piece of insignia—a bright green patch which read R.I.P.

Some might have mistaken this particular messenger for the angel of death. However, this messenger was an employee of an entirely different entity, one who hadn't bothered to check if their company's acronym might be confusing before they set up shop.

The messenger took a seat next to Nathan, the man with his head in his hands. Nathan was a short, dark-haired man with the signs of a fledgling beard. His clothes were brand name

and had been nice once. Now the knees had taken on a shine usually reserved for newly washed windows. The shirt was missing a button on the front, and one side of the collar stayed up in a permanent salute.

“Good evening,” said the messenger, “May I have just a moment of your time?” Nathan glanced up slowly, blinking rapidly. “What? You want what?”

“Time,” said the messenger in the accent reminiscent of a Yale Professor. “Just a minute, to be precise.”

Nathan brought up his wrist and glanced at his watch. “Well, I’ve only got a few to spare. Make it snappy.” He shook his head and gave a rattling sigh, which broke into a coughing fit.

“Imagine that. Someone wants a minute of my time.”

“Well, I assure you sir,” said the messenger, “strictly 60 seconds.” He extended the clipboard to Nathan and offered him a pencil from his breast coat pocket. “My name is Cumulus Cartain with the Relocation of Intergalactic Prospects. We are testing out a new product on your planet in the form of a short user-driven presentation. Your feedback will be vital in developing our product in accordance with the needs of the consumer on this and other planets.”

Nathan glanced down at his hands and fiddled briefly with a plain silver band on his left ring finger. “Well, my wife will be happy to know that as of today, I’ll never drink again. It’s finally pushed me to hallucination. Should help—now that we’ve lost our sole source of income.”

Cumulus continued as if he hadn’t heard. “This device will allow you to return to a single minute of history, any minute at all, and replay the events in whatever way you like. After that

time, you will return here, and I will ask you a few follow-up questions. At that time, I will leave you in peace. If you agree to the terms, simply sign here, and we'll get started."

Nathan raised his bloodshot eyes and stared at Cumulus, continuing to blink as if he expected the stranger to evaporate at any moment. When nothing changed, Nathan took the clipboard and scanned its contents. "What is this really? Are you some sort of scam artist? I'm no expert, but I've already been scammed too many times."

Cumulus's expression remained placid. He reached inside his suit coat and withdrew an ordinary-looking pocket watch with a single ruby set in the top button. "I assure you, we are quite genuine. Simply sign the paper and press the ruby on the top of the device while picturing the desired minute to which you wish to return. It is as simple as that."

Nathan scanned the paper, but the words hardly made sense to his alcohol-deadened brain. On impulse, he snatched the pen and sloppily signed his name across the bottom of the paper. "There you go, big guy. I've signed my life away. Not that it was worth much to begin with."

Cumulus silently handed the watch to Nathan who took it and held it a few inches from his face. The train's intercom system came on, announcing the next stop, and Nathan closed his eyes. "Well, there is this one minute I wouldn't mind having back."

He pressed the button and pictured a day ten years previous. The clock dials spun and landed directly on 3:02.

Nathan suddenly found himself in a street side café in one of the nicer districts of New York City. Before him sat a half-eaten French dip sandwich and fries and across from him sat his friend Charles Widsoe, whom he hadn't seen in years. Charles wore an expensively tailored

gray pinstripe suit with a tie that cost more than Nathan used to make in a day. Charles's signature sunglasses almost never left his face, and his bright red hair looked as if it might have come from a department store mannequin.

Charles took a sip of his fancy cocktail and then gestured at Nathan's own empty glass. "Can I get you another?" he offered. "We've got cause to celebrate."

Dazed, Nathan glanced quickly at his glass and then shook his head. Nervously, he reached out and popped a French fry into his mouth.

"Well," continued Charles, "maybe I better ask you first before I start proposing toasts. I want you on board with my company, but it's ultimately your decision. It will mean long hours and hard work, but man, it's going to take off. You'll be set for life."

Charles took another long draw on his drink, licked his lips, and sat forward expectantly. With one hand, he lowered his sunglasses, revealing his deep blue eyes, "So what will it be? Are you in?"

Nathan paused, and it was as if he could hear every second ticking away from a plate-sized pocket watch. The moment he had thought about every day for the last ten years was actually back within his grasp, and all he could do was sit and stare blankly at his long-time friend who had offered him the chance of a lifetime. He tried to speak, but part of the French fry had lodged in his throat. How much of his 60 seconds remained?

He coughed to clear his throat, and Charles wrinkled his brow in concern. "Perhaps you better think twice about that drink—waiter!"

In panic, Nathan forced himself together and brought his hand down hard on the table. "Yes," he managed, "I'm in."

Charles broke into a sweeping grin, and immediately the scene around Nathan faded to black, like the end of a film.

In an instant, he found himself back sitting next to Cumulus. The messenger smiled broadly, displaying teeth that didn't quite line up. "Welcome back!" he said cheerfully. "It takes about 10 seconds for any effects of your temporal trip to kick in, and after that, I'll just have you rate your experience on the clipboard there."

Ten seconds passed, and Nathan could feel himself changing. His suit shimmered and changed, at once becoming an exquisitely tailored Armani suit. His thoughts and his vision cleared, and he realized that he was no longer drunk. The grime disappeared from under his fingernails, and the soreness dissipated from his shoulders.

A grin started up his face, but then died in mid-trip. He glanced down at his hand. His wedding ring was gone.

"There you are," chimed Cumulus, "Now just a few questions. I believe your stop is coming up."

Nathan rubbed the spot where the ring used to be. "No, put it back the way it was. Don't these trials come with some sort of money-back guarantee or something?"

Cumulus shook his head, "No, I'm sorry, that's not part of the deal, as you'll see there in the large print. Now please, just a few questions."

Nathan took the clipboard and slammed it to the floor, "No! Take me back!"

Cumulus's mouth tightened and the humor disappeared from his eyes. He reached into his other pocket and withdrew another watch with a sapphire jewel on top. He clicked it, and at

once the time clambered to a halt. With a single motion, the clipboard was back in his hand and in front of Nathan's face.

"You signed the paper," said Cumulus. "You agreed to help with the survey. Answer the questions."

Sullenly, Nathan picked up the clipboard, "Fine." He scribbled the answers and flung the clipboard back at Cumulus. Cumulus scanned the answers and nodded. "Thank for your participation, and have a nice day."

Cumulus tapped the blue watch once more and time resumed. Without another word, Cumulus moved on and Nathan staggered to his feet, forgetting his leather briefcase on the seat behind him.

The train resumed its motion, and Cumulus took his place next to the next passenger, Father Preta, a man in priest's robes. The man sat with an open Bible on his lap, seemingly oblivious to his surroundings.

"What are you reading?" asked Cumulus.

Father Preta looked up and met Cumulus's gaze, "The Holy Bible...in the book of Genesis, and pondering the actions of our first parents. Are you familiar with the Bible?"

"Why yes," replied Cumulus, "It's actually required study where I'm from. It's quite intriguing."

"And just where are you from, might I ask?"

Cumulus considered his answer for a moment, "Far away...probably not a place that you've ever heard of."

The crow's feet around the priest's eyes grew more pronounced, "That's all right. I'm from a rather small town myself. What can I do for you?"

"I need your expert opinion, father...as a member of the clergy, I think your opinion might be especially valuable."

Cumulus brought out the red pocket watch and placed it in the priest's hands. "When you press this, you will be able to visit and influence a single minute out of all of history. After this, you will be brought here to give me some feedback. If these terms are acceptable, please sign here."

Father Preta considered Cumulus with dark, penetrating eyes, "You don't say? Just tell me one thing, do angels usually have seven fingers, or is it just you?"

Cumulus cocked his left eyebrow, "Excuse me? I'm not sure. I don't really have any experience with them."

"Perhaps you're a demon then," continued the priest, "Perhaps I should dismiss you without a second thought."

Cumulus chuckled and conjured up a disarming smile, "Think you're dealing with the devil do you? I don't want your soul, Father, just a minute of your time. Just read the contract. You'll find there's not even any fine print."

Father Preta took the clipboard and scanned the contents. He glanced from the board to his Bible and back to the board. With one hand, he reached out and touched the holy book, tracing its words with one finger until it rested on a single verse. He whispered the words and then clasped his hand to his heart.

"I'll do it. I want to go back to this moment, the one described in this verse."

He reached up and signed his name to the board. In exchange, Cumulus offered him the red pocket watch. “Good luck Father. I hope you achieve your desired result.”

The priest pressed the button, and instantly his world melted away. The hands on the clock spun to read 12:00.

Father Petra found himself in the middle of a forest clearing, ringed with flowering plants in every color imaginable. The air smelled of fresh, sweet scents that topped even the sweetest perfumes the priest had ever smelled--cinnamon, and mint, fruit and strange exotic spices. Butterflies, birds, and dragonflies danced around his head and their darting colors invoked a sense of wonder that he hadn't felt since he was a small child.

He turned to the center of the clearing and noticed a magnificent tree laden with bright red and orange fruit. Its branches reached out in all directions, and were bursting with leaves, blossoms and fruit, and at once, he felt himself drawn towards it.

Father Preta took a step forward and noticed the woman at once. Though her long, flowing hair covered most of her body, he averted his eyes in shame. In one hand she held one of the round apple-like fruits and was considering it as if looking for blemishes on its surface. She nodded slowly and slowly started to raise the fruit towards her mouth.

Father Petra's skin suddenly froze over. This was the precise moment...the moment he'd always read of in the Bible about the moment when mankind fell from grace. He had made the decision to try to change it...but how? What could he do now to stop her?

Acting on impulse, Father Preta covered his face with one hand, and stretched out the other hand. With a cry, he rushed towards the woman, “Eve! No, don't eat it!”

He harbored no hope that she'd actually understand English, but the shout had the desired affect. The hand with the fruit dropped to her side, and she stepped back, so startled that she dropped the fruit. It rolled and disappeared into the underbrush. Father Petra barreled forward, but a moment before he reached her, a villainous black snake swept down from the branches of the trees and bared a pair of jagged fangs. It hissed in warning, and its forked tongue lashed out. Father Petra gasped in terror and fell onto his back into the lush grass. The snake dropped beside him, reared up and struck at the priest with full force.

Its fangs met with empty grass. They sank deep into the soil, and stayed there. The priest was gone.

A few seconds later, a man emerged into the clearing, holding the fruit that had just rolled away. He approached the woman, gave her a questioning look, and offered her the fruit in his outstretched hand.

Father Preta found himself back on the train, clutching his wildly racing heart. Cumulus placed a seven-fingered hand on the priest's shoulder, "Are you okay, Father? Don't worry, I assure you that you are quite safe."

Without a word, Father Preta snatched up his Bible and stared at the page he had been reading. 10 seconds passed, 15, 30...and still the page remained just as before. Father Preta shook his head, and blinked rapidly to dispel the bitter tears forming in his eyes, "Why isn't it changing? I intervened, something should be different!"

Cumulus sighed. He'd seen this happen many times before. "Sometimes even when you make a change, history remains unchanged. It appears to be the case in this instance."

"No!" cried Father Preta, "That's impossible! I changed it! I know I did!"

“Please just finish the survey,” said Cumulus without emotion, “I still have one person to survey in this car.”

Cumulus slid the clipboard in front of Father Preta, and the priest numbly filled out the questions with trembling hands. He had scarcely filled out the final question when the clipboard fell from his hands and clattered noisily to the floor.

Cumulus stooped and picked it up, and then continued soundlessly, leaving Father Petra leafing frantically through his Bible and muttering incoherently.

Marcus Kellerman tapped his foot and mindlessly hummed a tune, like a man trying to scratch an unreachable itch. He looked up from reading his paper and motioned for Cumulus to take a seat next to him. “Have a seat,” said Marcus, “I’d like to try your product.”

Cumulus sat and drew out the watch, “You overheard me talking to the priest then?”

“Every word,” said Marcus, folding his paper and setting it aside. “And I know exactly what I want.”

Cumulus narrowed his eyes. He was not accustomed to this sort of response, “Are you sure?” said Cumulus, “The other two people in this car have been...well...less than satisfied with their own results. I would encourage you to think critically about this decision.”

Marcus silenced further discussion with a curt shake of his head, “No, I don’t need any more time. I know exactly what I want to do.”

Cumulus shrugged and offered the clipboard. “Really, it’s all the same to me.”

Marcus took the pen and let it hover for a moment over the paper. His fingers twitched involuntarily, as if urging him to make a decision. He inhaled deeply and then exhaled sharply, and brought pen to paper.

A moment later, the red watch made its way into Marcus's hands, and his thumb wandered onto the button. He pressed the button before he had time to second guess himself.

Marcus vanished and the watch dials spun to read 11: 53.

Marcus found himself in a dimly-lit subway station. The day's usual flood of people had slowed to a sauntering stream. Marcus grinned like a person who found an unexpected wad of cash in his pocket. His plan had worked.

"First thing's first," he muttered to himself, and fished around in his pocket for his MP3 player. After extracting some change, an old necktie, and a fortune cookie, Marcus finally located the device and plugged the headphones into his ears.

However, instead of selecting 'Random' as was his habit, he scrolled down through his play lists and selected one of his favorite songs by name. His face and arms relaxed and he walked off with a spring in his step.

He walked up to the ticket machine and quickly punched a series of buttons, inserted some coins and retrieved his printed ticket. With the last few seconds, he stuffed the ticket in his pocket and rested contentedly on the nearest bench.

He was still smiling when he reappeared next to Cumulus. "You look satisfied. Did it go well?"

Marcus nodded, "For me, yes...but probably not for you."

Cumulus leaned forward, with both eyebrows raised high. The situation continued to baffle him, "Whatever do you mean?"

Marcus burst out laughing, as if he'd just gotten the punch line of a wonderful joke, "Well first, I got rid of the awful song I've had stuck in my head all night."

Cumulus barely resisted the urge to roll his eyes. The people around here had the nerve to call him alien. “Anything else?”

“And...” Marcus paused to calm his unruly chuckling fit, “I saw what happened to those other two. So, I went back and bought a ticket for another train.”

Cumulus floundered with the clipboard, trying to thrust it into Marcus’s way before it was too late.

It was definitely too late.

The laughing form of Marcus promptly disappeared, leaving only a newspaper lying folded on the seat.

Cumulus rose and looked around, but it appeared that Father Preta was still too absorbed in his reading to have noticed the exchange. He stuffed his clipboard under his arm, shuffled into the final car and found it empty.

Cumulus attempted to maintain his signature smile, but failed. The customers had been universally upset, and all his feedback dismal. He leafed through the papers on the clipboard to the final page, which consisted of a single line for his own final recommendation.

“Not ready,” wrote Cumulus in his meticulous script. His mouth turned down slightly, and as the train screeched to a halt, he was gone.