

## Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

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### Lunchtime Doubly So

MOIRA SAT IN THE CLINIC ROOM on the end of the table arm of what looked like an MRI machine. Her feet kicked and dangled, bored but anxious.

She knew it wasn't an MRI machine. It had various clock faces all over it. She actually knew the machine pretty well by that point, perhaps more intimately than she knew many of her friends, but she never remembered what it was really called.

Her fingers fidgeted with her wispy, pale blond hair. She'd always had it so to speak, now at least, but she'd never gotten over the switch from that awful red. She'd always hated that red. Ginger. A little timeline surgery to revise which gene she'd received had been worth the money.

Unless ... but she wasn't going to think about that yet. Pre-diagnosis would have been jumping to conclusions. She wasn't going to do that. Not yet.

Her legs, hanging off of the table arm, continued to kick. Her slim legs.

She looked at them. That surgery was worth it too. Instead of getting into that sketchy diet pill which had ended up wrecking her metabolism, she'd joined a nice gym. Hell of a revision. Definitely a good one, perhaps one of her most valuable.

Well ... not literally. The one where she'd stayed home and studied that night for the SAT instead of going out drinking as she originally had, that was literally the most valuable. Eventually led her to Yale and board membership. That timeline surgery, in a way, paid for itself ... as well as the other surgeries.

All her surgeries.

Dr. Parker opened the door and strolled into the examination room. "Moira! How's my favorite patient!"

He had on a lab coat, but didn't have it buttoned. She could see his polo shirt, his jeans and sneakers. His hair was even a little mussed, though it was a closely clipped flat top so she might have merely been imagining things.

"Not good, Dr. Parker. I experienced missing time."

His grin faded. He pulled a rolling stool up close to where she was and sat.

"Missing time or *missing time*?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"I was in a board meeting," she explained, "and then I wasn't. For about a half hour. Then, suddenly, I was again. I didn't even realize it, same chair as if I'd been there the entire time. Thirty people verified."

Dr. Parker grimaced. "Moira ... you know what this means. You've been here often enough; I don't need to explain again. Your timeline is frayed. I'm sorry."

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Well ... she did but she didn't. Sure, they have her the disclaimers each time she had a surgery, each and every time, but who really reads those? Fraying almost *never* happened. She never thought it would actually happen to her.

"But can't we just do a procedure so I never had the surgery responsible for the fraying?" she pleaded. "Why won't that work?"

Dr. Parker shook his head. "This was all set out for you, Moira. You should have listened more closely."

She looked down at the floor.

"Which surgery was the one responsible?" he went on. "We have no way to know. Even if you'd only had none or two like most people and we guessed, it wouldn't do any good. Your timeline is simply frayed. An alternate history transplant would still be grafted onto that frayed line; it'd be like sewing a patch onto a knit sweater while pulling on the thread."

Moira swallowed.

"I'm terribly sorry, Moira. We have to replace your entire timeline with one of the backups we've made. It's the only option, and we need to do it today to be safe ... make certain you don't simply blink out of existence."

The backups she knew about. They duplicated her timeline each time she came in for surgery, as mandated by law. She had to have dozens on file they could choose from.

Except ... they weren't exactly duplicates. The backup was a person's timeline, but there were differences. Maybe good, maybe bad. Maybe a little, maybe a lot. Perhaps your dad got a stint in time instead of having that heart attack on his fiftieth birthday. Then again, perhaps that car this morning didn't 'almost' hit you. There was no way to tell until the backup was loaded. By then, it was too late to do anything about it. Even chrono specialists didn't really know how the process worked entirely.

"We have to do it now?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "That would be the safest. We have no idea when your actual timeline will completely disintegrate. Could be months ... or hours."

She sighed. "Will I know what's changed? The way I do with the normal surgeries?"

"Well ... only during switch over." He paused. "For a moment you'll actually have both timelines until the old one is removed. You'll be aware then, but only briefly. Very quickly after that you and I, and everyone else, will forget it was ever any other way. It won't have been any other way."

"No suffering over bad news for long, then," she grumbled.

"Not for long," Dr. Parker confirmed. "You'll likely be disoriented during the switch, having been crossed up like that. While you have both we run a quick DIFF command on the two timelines, pipe the text results directly into your brain. We think it helps prepare you, though for obvious reasons we're speculating a bit."

"At least there's that."

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"You may have to read fast, though," he cautioned her. "It only works during crossover. If there are a large number of differences between the old and new timelines, that text would have to scroll pretty fast."

She nodded.

He stood. "Well ... are you ready?"

Her eyes shot open wide. "Now? Don't you have to get anything ready? Prep?"

"No, your backups are always available in the system. Since we can't analyze any differences between them, the system just grabs one randomly." He gave a wan smile. "All we need to do is send you back in."

She nodded again, weaker. She lay back on the table arm and Dr. Parker helped pull her up until she was supported her entire length. Then she closed her eyes as he went to the controls, the table arm slowly drawing her into the mouth of the machine.

"Is this safe?" she hollered out.

"Somewhat late now to ask, isn't it?" he shouted back. The machine was making a terribly whine, like a turbine. "But yes. The only dangers are whatever is in the backup timeline. The process itself is physically harmless. Stay still, though."

Reflexively, she wanted to nod. She caught herself, though. Fear.

The whining grew louder. She thought of a jet engine on takeoff. Her skin felt as if she was outside right before a thunderstorm. It tingled, warm. The whining dully hurt her head a little though, like ears popping during flight or drilling a tooth while numb.

"Crossover," Dr. Parker warned. Somehow, she could hear him even over the noise though he wasn't shouting.

And then she couldn't hear the whining any more. Somehow she knew it was still there, but she couldn't hear it. The feeling was strange, but more comfortable. Then blackness covered her vision. She panicked, but relaxed as blue text appeared. It was only the DIFF screen. Secondly realizing what that meant, she anxiously read the text. However, the only entry read: DIFFERENCE 1 – PATIENT DID NOT REQUIRE TIMELINE TRANSPLANT SURGERY.

What the hell? Did that mean she had her original timeline or not? Moira's confusion grew as her awareness faded.