

Tempus: Fug It

By Brice Austin

We Robinsons have always had a love-hate relationship with Time; like everyone else we want more of It, but have come to understand that in some sense It is our enemy, too, an obstacle to be overcome. Our mixed feelings date back at least to my grandfather Synge, who 127 years ago said: “Age is the rust produced when Life is exposed to Time.” That was how *he* saw the passing years, as an environmental condition to be avoided as much as possible, like exposure to the elements. Which doesn’t make a lot of sense, I know, except that for the most part his strategy worked—he was alive until very recently. Maybe you’ve heard of him: Synge Robinson, the oldest man in the world? The oldest man in the entire solar system. Yet Time had Its way with him, too, in the end, as It does with us all.

How did he live so freakishly long? It’s a bit of a mystery. He did do some traveling out to Proxima and back at partial light speed, which he liked to call “taking the cure.” It’s rumored, too, that he slept in a high gravity chamber each night, though personally I can’t confirm that. His secret certainly was *not* the “Time Cream” he invented and sold by the truckload to a gullible public, though he himself swore by the stuff. I suppose that’s one key to being a successful swindler: you have to at least partly believe your own con. And the reason he believed it was directly related to his own experience. When you live to be almost two hundred yourself, I suppose you become your own proof-of-concept and a walking advertisement, though personally I still don’t think his product had anything to do with his longevity. I think he lived a long time for some other reason—ornerness, perhaps, or just good Robinson genes—but people believe what they want to believe. And sometimes that alone is enough to have at least some placebo effect: double-blind studies have shown that those using the cream, or even what they only think is the cream, tend to live 8 years longer than the cream-less controls.

But enough about Grandpa Synge. He lost his fight with Time, just as everyone else, whether a Robinson or not, always has. In the end he did manage one small final victory, though: he left behind two crazy daughters and one crazy son, who also happens to be my father. Let me tell you first about Aunt Ilana, the oldest of the three siblings. She was probably the craziest of them all. She actually believed she could *see* Time flowing around things, and used to describe what she saw as a sort of green mist. That mist pooled around inanimate objects, she said, and the dead, but swirled in a vortex about the living. She must have taken to heart some of her father’s beliefs about Time being an environmental factor, because she would often say that the green mist was “eroding” us, that it ate away at our lives somehow. According to her, it ate away at objects like rocks and Buicks, too, only far more slowly. Anything inanimate just sat there wrapped in a cloud of green acidic smoke and dissolved. Both the animate and the inanimate were headed for annihilation, in her view, just on different schedules. The trade-off, or perhaps the penalty for being alive was that the green mist actively swirled around you, that it worked a little harder at cooking you down to a quantum soup.

I remember Aunt Ilana much better than I do Grandpa Synge. He was always too busy hawking his Time Cream, or taking the cure, to pay me much attention. She and I, on the other hand, took a lot of walks together around the lake behind her house in upstate New York. She had what was called “blue” hair, even into her twenties (that is, her hundred-and-twenties), blue in the same sense that red hair is called “red” even though it

isn't all that red, really. Blue hair is as common in our family as longevity, both of which date back, I imagine, to some rogue mutation in the distant past. Who knows, it may be that the two traits are linked, though Grandpa Synge, who lived the longest of all of us, never had a single blue hair on his head, even when he actually had hair. My hair isn't blue, either. I don't suppose that proves anything one way or the other, though, as the gene could still be hiding somewhere in my DNA, a recessive stowaway.

Anyway, I used to take walks with Aunt Ilana around her lake. What I remember most is how green her eyes were. I always imagined that the mist she saw was the same color. I remember her talking about that mist as we walked, and straining to try and see it myself, though I was never able to do so. Was it really there? I want to say no but don't feel quite comfortable making such a pronouncement. Whenever I'm tempted to pooh-pooh all her claims, I begin to wonder if maybe I'm the deaf man who stubbornly insists there is no such thing as music, the blind man who disbelieves the very notion of sight? And I remember vividly, too, something that happened while I was walking with her late one afternoon. We had stopped to watch a flock of geese glide in for a water landing. Ilana was looking at them more intently than I was.

"See that goose out on the edge of the flock?" she asked suddenly. I thought I knew which one she was pointing at: it was on the fringe, closest to us. "That one will be dead by morning."

I asked her why she thought so and she said it had to do with its aura. The green mist that was swirling around it had almost stopped swirling. I couldn't see that mist myself, of course, but imagined it as a slow tornado, as a top that had almost spun itself out and was about to tip over. *Bullshit*, I remember thinking, and rolled my eyes, because I was only in my forties then. I liked her even during those surly years, but had no illusions that she wasn't old and crazy. The next morning, though, when we walked the same route, there was a dead goose in the water. Presumably, the green mist was no longer swirling around it, but had settled down into a stagnant cloud.

After I had grown up and moved away, I used to wonder sometimes if Aunt Ilana ever saw the same sort of phenomenon in herself as she got older, if she woke up in the morning and looked in the mirror and saw not only that another of her blue hairs had turned gray but that her own green mist tornado was slowing down? If so, that seemed like a rather harsh fate to me, being a daily witness to one's own incremental decay. Eventually, I came to understand that it's something all of us experience, whether we see green tornadoes or not, that it's simply the price we humans pay for being self-aware.

I liked Aunt Ilana, though even back then I knew she was crazy, but I loved her sister, Aunt Marissa. Everyone did. That's what makes her story so hard to tell. She was the youngest of Grandpa Synge's three children, the baby of the family, seventeen years younger than my father and almost like his own eldest child. He did the lion's share of raising her, what with Grandpa always out taking the cure, hawking his cream, or holing up in a gravity chamber (if that part of the legend is really true), but her biological father's lack of attentiveness isn't what makes Aunt Marissa's story so sad. Her personal rebellion against the tyranny of Time took a rather dark turn. Aunt Ilana said it best when she described the green aura surrounding her sister as "turbulent." For Marissa was a drug addict, a drug maker and dealer, which I suppose put her firmly in the tradition of Grandpa Synge and his Time Cream, though Marissa wasn't selling or using any sort of snake oil. *Her* drugs actually worked. They altered one's sense of Time, making It seem to pass more slowly or swiftly, depending on which drug you took. You may say that such an approach doesn't really change Time, only one's perception of It, but Marissa would argue (and did argue) that the

two things are the same, that Time only passes at the rate at which we perceive It. She would always point out how slowly Time goes by for the young, and how quickly for the old, as proof of her theory, which if you think about it isn't all that different from Einstein's. He sometimes explained it to laymen in the following way:

“When a man sits with a pretty girl for an hour, it seems like a minute. But let him sit on a hot stove for a minute and it's longer than any hour. That's relativity.”

Marissa was that pretty girl. Her blue hair set off her blue eyes in ways that are hard to describe; when you looked into those eyes it was like you were settling into a pool of water that was just the right temperature. Time must have gone by awfully fast for any red-blooded man who happened to be sitting with *her!* And there always were such men, lots of them, not so much sitting as metaphorically standing in line. They would take her out to Jupiter to go gravity-surfing, or to Mars to free-climb Olympus Mons, or often as not, at her insistence, back to her flat to surf or free-climb *her*. Time may have gone by quickly for them while they were in bed with her, but not so for Marissa—she had her drugs. She had found a way to escape what I think of now as Einstein's dilemma (pleasant experiences pass quickly; unpleasant ones do not), a way to reverse that equation pharmaceutically.

Her favorite thing in the world, she once told me unabashedly, was to engage in what she called “forever sex,” copulation slowed down to deliciously agonizing slow-motion by a massive infusion of her time-altering drugs. She would tell me things like that fairly often in those days because she thought I was down with them, that I was young and therefore as hedonistic as she was, though the two aren't necessarily related. I have too much of my father in me. I'm a bit of a prude. Thinking of Dad now makes me remember what he used to say about Marissa, that she was one of what he called the “bright-eyed people,” one of those human beings who seem to feel things more intensely, who taste flavors in life that are unknown to the rest of us, certainly unknown to him and me! But I'll come back to the two of us soon enough. I still have a little more to tell you about Aunt Marissa.

I had a conversation with her one day in a bar, towards the end of her life, and that conversation now seems important given the way in which her life ended. I was nursing a beer, the picture of moderation, while Marissa was having Scotch whiskey, straight-up and double, giving Life both barrels. Drug-wise, I assumed she was on something, because she almost always was by then, but which one? Had she hit Time's brake, or accelerator? From her point-of-view, was our meeting going by at hare- or tortoise-speed? Soberly, I asked her what would happen if she ever took the wrong drug on the wrong occasion.

She laughed. “Well, that can certainly happen, Gabe. Because you don't always know which experiences are going to be good and which ones are going to be bad, until they happen. Most end up somewhere in between. Those aren't worth tampering with. But there are some that are no-brainers. A trip to the dentist? You want to be sure *that* goes by as fast as it can! A ride on the roller coaster at Six Flags Over Enceladus? Now that's something worth slowing Time down for!” That last example never made much sense to me: why you would want to slow down an experience that is only thrilling because it involves speed? And she hadn't really answered my question, had she? What if there was an accident while you were riding that coaster, what would it feel like to be stuck in an instant when some kid fell onto the tracks and perished?

It seemed a little strange, too, that she was talking to me about dentists and theme parks, when I was a grown man. It was like she still saw me as a little kid. I wondered if that was because she had always thought of herself as my big sister, or if it was because the drugs were having some sort of effect on her mind, on her ability to perceive the standard passage of Time? I was wondering, too, if she was on one of her drugs right then, while she was

talking to me. If so, which one? Did she want our meeting speeded up or slowed down? How did I rate with her, *really*?

Others must have wondered the same thing, as years went by—fairly uniformly for the rest of us; in fits and starts, I imagine, for her—because in spite of what Marissa said about using her drugs judiciously, I don't think she herself ever did. Once you get used to taking such things, to experiencing the good times slowly and getting the bad times over with as soon as possible, it must be hard to live like everyone else again, watching happiness go by at the speed of a Jamaican sprinter while sadness, like an unwanted house guest, won't leave. I think that by the time she died, she must have been taking her drugs more often than not. And I remember worrying, both at that meeting in the bar and on other occasions, that sooner or later she would make a mistake, that she would take the wrong drug at the wrong moment, not so much that she would take “warp,” as she called it, while she was having fun, because that would only result in disappointment, but rather that she might take “molasses” in a situation that you absolutely would not want slowed down.

“You worry too much, Gabe, just like Dad,” she said, with a flash of those blue eyes that had ensnared dozens of men. By “Dad” she meant my father, of course, rather than Grandpa Synge, who was too busy keeping his own scorecard with Time to realize that he was missing out on what Life had to offer, counting flowers in a field instead of seeing or smelling them, too busy trying to simply stay alive himself to save the life of his bright-eyed daughter.

For here is what happened to Aunt Marissa, in the end. She was gallivanting around on Mars again, this time with the wrong guy. One of her new boyfriends turned out to be a jerk, who maybe couldn't stand the fact that he could never have her all to himself. After they had checked into a hotel room together, he beat her to death with an empty whiskey bottle. The idea of her being brutally murdered is horrible enough, but knowing that while it was happening, she was likely on “molasses,” that Time was going by ultra slowly for her, is almost unbearable. When I saw her body afterwards, in the morgue, every bruise on that beautiful face looked like a galaxy being sucked down into the black hole at its center, over the course of a billion years. I shuddered when I saw her, knowing that she must have endured almost interminably those terrifying final minutes of life, hanging there on some event horizon between pain and death, as each passing second dilated out towards infinity.

Once Time finally did end for her, the police and paramedics who came roaring up to the scene of the crime discovered something which no one had known about or expected: Aunt Marissa was carrying a child. Was that what she and her “boyfriend” had argued about? I'll never know because she couldn't tell me, and before anyone could talk to the man who might or might not have been the father, a judge had sent him away to serve a life sentence in Alcatraz Two, on Venus, and I've always been afraid that if I went to see him there, I would kill him with my bare hands, right in front of the guards and warden. Besides, there were more important matters to attend to, such as who would take care of her child?

My father would have been the logical choice as he had more experience in that realm than any of the rest of us, and I feel sure he would have been willing, but the suddenness and manner of Marissa's death had left him in a bad way, emotionally. Which meant I couldn't help out, either, as I had to attend to him. Eventually, Aunt Ilana stepped forward, though somewhat reluctantly. She didn't have any children of her own and so wasn't sure she was up to the job, but once she had taken the little girl in, and named her Ellen, she was—by her own admission—happier than she'd ever been. The truly amazing thing is that even Grandpa Synge took a shine to Ellen, paying more attention to her than he ever paid to any of the rest of us. He seemed happier, too, because of it, and more engaged in life in

general. Did that play any role in his recent death? I wonder. I wonder if the fact that he held himself aloof from us for so many years contributed in any way to his longevity? It seems unlikely, though perhaps no more unlikely than the idea of a “Time Cream!”

As I said, after Aunt Marissa’s death, my father started to go downhill. He had always been what Vladimir Nabokov (whom he read and admired) once termed a “chronophobe,” a man who was quite literally afraid of Time, but when Marissa was murdered, he experienced what amounted to a complete temporal breakdown. Ever since then he has been like a man who is afraid of heights yet trapped forever on a high, narrow ledge, too terrified to move a centimeter in any direction. Nabokov imagined our existence as a “brief crack of light” between two eternal darknesses and Dad is a living example of that metaphor now, reduced to a single green eye peering out through a gap in the blanket he has wrapped himself in, on the sofa.

I stayed with him as often and as much as I could during the first few months after Marissa’s death, trying to help him, watching his Chronophobia gradually turn into something worse, into what I have now come to think of as “Chronosis,” a sort of Time Sickness, a condition in which you become so hyperaware of Time’s passage that you finally forget how to live. I know that firsthand because I think I eventually caught a touch of it. Sitting there with Dad, day after day in his house, eventually I too became afraid to move, or even live. The ticking of the clocks in his den, and sometimes even the beating of my own heart, seemed to go off all around me like gunshots. In a very real sense, I found myself fighting to stay alive, and sane, in the midst of what amounted to a Time war zone.

Dad was in a state, and consequently so was I. With every day that went by I could feel his Time Sickness further infecting me, sucking all the joy out of life, making it impossible to appreciate anything because I was so overly sensitive to how fast all of it was slipping away. It got so bad that I even considered taking some of Marissa’s “molasses,” in hopes of slowing things down, but after what had happened to her, I was afraid to risk it. What if it didn’t take away the daily, almost hourly, panic attacks that Dad and I were experiencing? What if instead it only made them seem to last for an eternity?

There’s no telling how long this might have gone on, how long the two of us might have suffered, if Colonel Dougherty hadn’t come to see us, if he hadn’t told us about the project. The Colonel first showed up on our doorstep a few weeks ago, a white-haired old man with a buzz cut and heavy, black-rimmed glasses, wearing an Army uniform and smoking a Tareyton. He sat down in my father’s den and accepted the glass of iced tea I offered him. He wiped his forehead with his sleeve and commented on what a hot summer it had been, before finally getting down to business.

“Actually, I came to see Synge, because we have a lot of history together, but then I found out that he passed away a little while ago. He’d been alive for so damn long, I guess I thought he would live forever. Actually, that’s sort of what I came to see him about.”

My interest, of course, was piqued. The ice cubes in his tea clinked against the side of the glass as he drank. “You’re his son Arthur, aren’t you?” he said.

I shook my head. “I’m his grandson, Gabriel. This is Arthur, my father,” I added, gesturing to the mute green eye wrapped in a blanket on the sofa. I felt a wave of Time Sickness chills wash over me.

The Colonel regarded my father with a calmness perhaps born of military training, studying him as I imagined he might have some benign alien. “What I came to offer Synge was a chance to ‘take the cure,’ as he used to call it, permanently. I’ll make the same proposition to the two of you. You’re Robinsons, after all, aren’t you?” he added with a chuckle.

At least I hoped I was. Unwittingly, Colonel Dougherty had hit a nerve exposed by my recent bout with Chronosis. The disease had infused me with the sense that Time was going by much more quickly than It ever had before, that It was flowing at a rate usually reserved for the general population. Maybe that meant I wasn't a Robinson, after all, or that I was but hadn't inherited the longevity gene? The fact that I didn't have blue hair while Ilana, Marissa, and my father all did, made me even more nervous. I kept reminding myself that Grandpa Synge hadn't had blue hair, either, and that he had lived longer than anyone except Methuselah, but how do you know a longevity gene is there until you've outlived everyone around you? I mean, if there isn't a scientific test for it? "What proposition?" I asked, curious.

The Colonel explained it. They—and I assumed that by "they" he meant the military—had built a new, experimental spaceship, one that the "eggheads" felt fairly certain could exceed the speed of light. "They've named it the C-squared," he said with a grin. He looked around for an ashtray and when he didn't find one shrugged and used the coaster. "It's a prototype." The sun had gone down by then and through the screen door I could hear the sound of cicadas swelling endlessly towards an elusive crescendo. It was one of those rare, prime number summers. "What that means, of course, is that whoever is piloting the craft should experience Time slowing down, coming to a standstill, perhaps even moving backwards. It won't be much of a life, living inside the closed world of the ship, but it's a life that could last practically forever." He leaned forward and lowered his voice a little. "Whoever is on board that vessel may well bring Time to Its knees!"

Saying such things to a Robinson was like throwing a piece of fresh meat to a hungry wolf. No more Chronophobia, or Chronosis, if there was no Chronos! For how can one be infected by Time Sickness if Time no longer exists? I thought of Nabokov again, how he had come to see Time as prison, as a type of closed, curved fishbowl from which there is no escape. Could this experimental ship of the Colonel's really slip those surly bonds, transcend the prison, could it take us to whatever there might be on the other side? I tried to imagine what such a state of existence might be like, clocks melting all around me as they did in that world depicted by Dali's *Persistence of Memory*. Could Time Itself melt? I looked at the eye-in-a-blanket on the sofa, my father, and then back again at the Colonel. Obviously, he wanted one or the both of us to pilot this spacetimecraft of his.

"What is the power source of the ship?" I asked suspiciously.

"That isn't your concern," the Colonel said sternly, then added: "It's classified." He lit another Tareyton. "Look, I couldn't tell you even if I wanted to. It's beyond me. The eggheads tell me that it's recursive, building on itself as the ship goes along. Now you know pretty much everything I do."

I mulled that over, decided it didn't much matter. "What's our destination?" I asked. "I assume we're headed somewhere, out and then back?"

The Colonel shook his head. "No destination. Out but not back. It's a one-way trip. Well, unless spacetime is curved. Some of the eggheads think it might be. They say there's a chance that if you go far enough you might wind up in the same place, back here."

I frowned. "What if we don't come back, though? How will you ever know the ship works? How will you know that we ever broke light-speed?"

The Colonel ran his fingers through the white stubble of his hair. "Here's the way they explained it to me. As you go, you'll send back a steady transmission. As you accelerate, that transmission will take longer and longer to reach us, right? Eventually, there will be a period of total blackout, where we won't receive anything at all, or at least the transmission will take so long to get here it won't matter anymore. But if you really are able to go faster

than light-speed, at some point you'll be transmitting from the past. The further back in Time you go, the more time there will be for your messages to reach us. If you're successful, we should start receiving your last messages almost as soon as you go. At least, that's the theory."

That didn't make much sense to me, but I didn't care. I wasn't concerned with what might or might not be transmitted back to Earth, as I had decided to leave Earth behind anyway. Apparently, so had the green eye on the sofa, which suddenly emerged from its blanket.

So that's how we wound up here, in a barracks in Florida, waiting for the launch tomorrow morning. A little while ago, at dusk, I went out for one last walk on *terra firma*, to say goodbye to the planet. It's probably not a surprise that, before long, I found myself at the launch site. There, on the other side of a chain link fence, in the distance, stood the rocket they had named the "C-squared," its silhouette outlined against the darkening sky like an enormous finger flipping off Time Itself.

So, I thought as I stood there, nose to the fence, listening to the cicadas in the trees all around me. In the morning we would leave on a journey that would accelerate out towards the stars and perhaps a lifespan without limits. I wondered if it would prove to be true that space and time are curved, that we would arrive back here at this same place, at what for us might even be virtually the same moment. For those we were leaving behind, though, how many years would have passed? A hundred, a thousand, ten thousand?

Suddenly I felt sad, though not so sad that I wasn't still eager to go, to try it. For I knew that it was my destiny, my family's destiny, to do such things, to cut off our noses to spite Time's face. I did find, however, that I had one regret. I was sorry to be leaving behind the people I cared about, in particular Aunt Ilana and her daughter, Marissa's daughter, my cousin. I was sorry that I wouldn't be around to watch Ellen grow up. What would her life be like? Maybe she would turn out to be a practical sort, like most human beings. Maybe her particular combination of genes would steer her towards the rest of the population, rather than towards that fool clan of ours, the Robinsons. Maybe she would freely accept her enslavement to Time. Or maybe not. For when I held her in my arms a few days ago, just before Dad and I flew down here to Florida, and kissed her for what I imagined would be the last time, I couldn't help but notice on the top of her head a few wispy strands of blue hair.