

Originally, that link led to a tale about pseudo-successful cryogenics, but that story was selected as a finalist in a contest. (I can't say which yet.) That link will be restored when the story is published. In the meantime, I hope you'll enjoy this quick little foray into time travel of a different sort.

This story is currently under review with a publication that does not allow multiple submissions. Please contact me if you'd like to purchase it; that submission can be withdrawn for competitive offers.

Be Kind, Rewind

by Chris Robinson

The balding attorney's neck swelled red to match the vitriol of his closing argument. Veins bulged, their expansion held in check only by an overpriced necktie—no simple button could survive an onslaught like this. Katrina Gonzalez was afraid her client wouldn't either. Katrina was unmoved but quite worried by the grandstanding; she was acutely aware of the ever-agitated Chadrick Wurthington's effect on a jury.

The trial had been focused on buttons of a different kind. The revolutionary Rewind function was baked into all the new smart devices and—at the touch of a button—allowed a person to erase the last 8.7 seconds of their life and try again. Finally, the marketing said, you have an undo button for real life. “Control+Z Your Reality” was an actual slogan.

The technology seemed far-fetched, like something out of a straight-to-Crackle sci-fi movie that inexplicably featured Ryan Reynolds; heavy on the fiction, light on the science. But it worked. Perfectly. Seamlessly. The actions were erased from reality, living on only in the memory of the user and the memory of the user's device. It did this without breaking any time-space continuums, without side-effects, without fuss. There were limits on how often it could be used—apparently imposed not by hardware limitations but by “the unalterable laws of physics”—and users purportedly made up for the “extra” time in their sleep. The technical details were completely outside Katrina's understanding, but the actual science wouldn't be particularly important in the courtroom anyway. It never was.

As with any technological leap of this magnitude, Rewind was met with considerable opposition. Religious groups claimed that reversing time was an affront to God's divine plan, armchair “scientists” wrote dissertations arguing the tech would create a black-hole and kill us all, while conspiracy theorists used Rewind as proof that reality was just a simulation. Katrina was confident large groups of early humans froze to death while boycotting “fire” as something unnatural. But God never showed up to smite Rewinders or to post bail when his followers smote in his—rather glaring—absence and it turns out “peer reviewed” is different from having your friends up-vote something, even if they are technically peers who technically reviewed it. The simulation idea gained some real traction, even among actual scientists. Rewind was just too much like a feature someone would add to a video game. But grants were bestowed and experiments conducted and the consensus remained that the physical world humans perceive actually exists.

Rewind complicated Katrina's job well before this particular clown show. Actions were erased entirely, but the user could retain information. Items couldn't be stolen, but passwords

and bank information could. New laws demanded the data for all “lost” time be untouchable—not even the user has access—and un-deletable, but ensured they were easily subpoena-able. Identity theft and bank fraud cases could be built around video evidence of events that didn’t technically happen. No one could be prosecuted for actions taken during a Rewind—they are literally undone—but if you forced someone to tell you their banking login at gunpoint, Rewound, then emptied their accounts: the recording of the Rewind was admissible.

Katrina’s client, Brandon, had not committed a crime. Not in the real, permanent timeline anyway. He had, on quite a few occasions—far too many, for the sake of Katrina’s case—harmed both victims. Cynthia Hudson and Brandon West lived in the same building; Brandon alone, Cynthia with her 8-month-old daughter. The two walked the same halls and shared access to the same neatly-appointed rooftop common area. Cynthia was quite unhappy with the situation. Brandon was admittedly rough around the edges; he got clean and found a stable job so he could keep the apartment during a custody battle a few years ago, but his unclean years had not been kind to his appearance. None of this was an issue for Cynthia. Literal hours of recorded video and audio proved that Cynthia was primarily unhappy with the color of Brandon’s skin. Her slurs and diatribes were remarkably imaginative, but listening to them was one of the most difficult and revolting experiences of Katrina’s life.

Brandon’s Rewinds were worse. After months of enduring Cynthia’s constant hatred—this was well documented on the building’s cameras and both individual’s smart devices—Brandon had lost his phone. Had been forced to upgrade to a Rewind-capable device. Had found in this a way to process Cynthia’s never-Rewound abuse without doing any lasting harm. Or so he thought.

The first time wasn't planned. Cynthia wished something unrepeatable on Brandon's daughter and he punched her squarely in the face. Flustered, he scrambled to Rewind and managed to activate just in time to endure Cynthia's vile comment with a smile and a nod. He'd been smiling and nodding his whole life. Not anymore. The recordings from those first few of weeks were mundane enough. Cynthia called Brandon a slur, he bashed her face into the wall. Cynthia told Brandon a story involving a group of men and his daughter, he threw the baby down the stairs. Shocking to imagine in a world without Rewind, but incredibly common in a society that offers 8.7 consequence-free seconds to anyone.

Common, but still shocking. Common, because every single juror had admitted to committing and Rewinding a murder at some point in their lives; shocking, because none of them had been forced—or even able—to watch it happen on video. Much less to watch one person murder another literally hundreds of times. While locking Rewinds away from the user provided vital protection against revenge porn and bank fraud, it also helped promote the belief that Rewound time was truly lost forever. It freed people to truly let loose; freed them from reliving the evidence of their indulgences. Until it didn't. Cynthia's hate was revolting and—importantly—actually happened, but Brandon's violence was played out over and over again, eight seconds at a time.

Brandon grew more creative as the weeks wore on. He brought knives, clubs, tasers—even his own feces, once. He looked right into Cynthia's eyes as he murdered her child. He whispered "I'm saving the baby for dinner" as Cynthia bled out. It was disgusting, even if it was deserved. Through it all, Brandon was incredibly careful. Eight seconds isn't a long time and people reveal their intentions or miss their window all the time. Cynthia never saw a knife, never saw him rush her—he never said a single threatening word to her in real life.

One day he found Cynthia on the roof, crept close, and shoved mother and child to their death. His testimony confirmed that he came to prefer this less intimate form of release; he started following her up there. There are thirty-seven distinct videos of Brandon shoving Cynthia to her death. Three months ago, Cynthia and her child were found dead on the street after falling from the roof of their apartment. Brandon wasn't even in the building. Cameras inside a nearby bodega show Brandon petting a tabby cat as he waited on a sandwich when Cynthia hit the ground. Cameras inside the apartment building show Cynthia carrying the baby to the roof alone. Multiple eye-witness accounts, the GPS in Brandon's phone, and a debit card transaction in the amount of \$7.52 place Brandon in the bodega.

Yet prosecutor Chadwick Wurthington was able to convince a judge to try Brandon for murder. Thirty-seven videos—each exactly 8.7 seconds in length—take a little over five minutes to watch, when you view them back to back. Five minutes and twenty one seconds to be precise; 5 minutes and 21 seconds of “evidence” proved Brandon really, really wanted Cynthia to fall off a roof. A short clip from a security camera proves that—the one time it counted—Brandon had nothing to do with her fall. Chadwick didn't even attempt to provide evidence that Brandon had harmed Cynthia in real life. He just played clips of a black man murdering a white woman hundreds of times. Murdering her in the exact way she eventually died thirty-seven times, back to back. He then glossed over the part where no murder actually happened.

Sweat dripped from the prosecutor's face as he finished, “You've seen what Brandon West is capable of. We've all seen more of that than we'd like. You've seen a short clip of someone in a bodega, mindlessly petting a cat while a woman and a baby fall to their death. Does one outweigh the other? That's not for me to say. That's a decision each of you have to make.”

Katrina will refute that, obviously. She'll explain why one really does outweigh the other. Explain the difference between real life and things that never happened. But she doesn't need time travel to know what comes next; one glance at the jury's eyes will suffice.

She'll appeal the verdict. Push for a mistrial. Hope to find a jury who can watch someone commit murder a hundred times and truly believe none of it ever happened. It'll take years. Years Brandon will spend in jail; his propensity to commit crimes that never happened will see to that. Justice was never really on the table, anyway. It rarely is.

Chadwick looks down at Katrina smugly. The fire of her glare cannot melt the cloud of smug surrounding him, but she knows what can. Her finger traces the smooth ivory handle of the letter opener in her briefcase; a letter opener kept for moments exactly like this. With the speed and fluidity of a trained fencer—or at least someone who took a few lessons—she seizes the blade and lodges it deep into Chadwick's neck. He is still struggling to remove it as he collapses onto white marble, turning red. Towering above, she peers deep into his eyes and savors this expression—always so shocked, as if this is the very first time life didn't go his way. Katrina presses a button.

Chadwick looks down at Katrina smugly. She greets his condescension with a smile. Her finger traces the smooth ivory handle of the letter opener in her briefcase. A letter opener kept for moments exactly like this; a letter opener that has been sheathed in this specific throat more than once before. She takes a sip of water; momentarily sated, she stands to address the jury.