

Caption Town

by Alex Kelly

Act 1

Sydney rushed from one overflowing table to the next, shoes skidding on the unforgiving concrete, and barely pausing to blink. It went: grab wire from table, pick up the coinciding tool, and hastily -but caringly- affix the wire in the machine that he was working on. *Not just any machine...not just any machine.* The words echoed in his head like jet propellant, pushing him ever closer towards tomorrow.

Or rather, yesterday. “Focus!” Sydney thought to himself. The committee was reviewing their grant projects the next day and he had spent every last dime on advancing the technology for this mechanism. If Sydney was not selected, he would likely be shut down. Maybe thrown out. Not to mention, if the machine failed to even work (as it had not done so up until this point because why would life be easy for once) he would be marked with a red flag on his specialist card, out of a job save for the odd hyper-net house repair. Sydney refused to let this slide through his fingers.

A red beam of light flashed across the side wall of the machine and his face. He turned to the window near the ceiling of this hodgepodge of a basement to watch another nitro-car zoom by. He stared deeper into the blackness of the night. Searching. There must be something in the sky that he just cannot see.

Bzzz. His comm hummed to life in his pocket. A message from Isaac: *“At least after tomorrow you’ll only have to worry about judging high-school science fairs”* Short, rude, and pointedly needless. Just like Isaac. This particular scientist was his main competition for the preceding review and he was good. Not just any type of good, but the type that works in dark matter research and actually comes out the other side with useful intel. He looked back towards his work, it looked like an old century phone booth or beachside changing tent. Except this version had a spinning particle wheel on the side, a whimsical array of lights painting it like a pollock, and a million other parts he still needed to assemble.

Several hours and energy canisters later, Sydney was ready. He took in his machine once more and this time the light from the upper windows revealed the bewitching light of what would soon become dawn. It made the whole mismatched room feel otherworldly.

The committee review was in four hours. He had just enough time to rest. He began to turn and walk away but as his hand reached the lightswitch, he thought, “One test-run should do the trick”.

Some would’ve called the machine an elevator that lost a fight with a circus. He gazed upon the apparatus fondly, the blue glow of the generator reflected off the cluttered walls. Once he stood inside it began to purr. It came to life around him and for a moment his overly critical mind was at bay to pure, excited wonderment. With one final look around his lab of fifteen years, he slammed the large circular button on the wall to his side and the doors slid shut with a final clang of metal.

Act 2

Crackle-bang! The light entering his eyes popped in and out hazardously, as if he were falling through space and glow sticks were being thrown at him. Clap-Boom! His ears were so clogged that at one point he thought his head would explode from the bends. Shouting would prove futile as the air was swept from his lungs, an all consuming tornado vacuum. He felt as though he was forgetting a dream and gaining a memory all at once. Ka-Blam!

Everything went silent and dark for what could have been seconds or years.

Sydney was reminded of the contraption he was in by the small shudder it gave around him, seemingly from a cold breeze, more likely a rough landing. He straightened his glasses, fixed his tie, and opened the door. His face wasn't bitten with the cold of night, but rather washed over with a warm summer evening. Sydney stepped out and took in his surroundings. His time machine had landed him in the back corner, tucked away out of sight behind a lively diner at dinner rush. Shakily, he took his first few steps.

If someone were to have told him right then that clouds were cotton candy, made in factories, and shot up in the air, and the milky way was just warm sand on an expansive beach, he would still have a worse chance of believing where and *when* he was in this moment. The air he knew, logically, was mostly the same; however, it felt crisper, younger. He had only punched in a few days in the time machine, a small request all things considered, yet here he stood in the back alleyway of what felt like the set of *Grease*. Clearly the time-set control panel needed some adjusting, no matter. Either way, it worked! Sydney imagined he could jump through the ceiling, and just keep going. He felt as though he were closer to that certain something than ever before. Sydney got out, locked the door and dropped the key safely into his pocket.

He walked through the back door into the diner. The first thing to hit him was the smell. It was melted cheese and apple pies. He was greeted with laughter from enough people to fill up a room and the stylings of a jukebox.

"Hey ankle-biter, you lost?" Sydney shook his head and faced the loud man who spoke. He had a white beard and no hair on his head. Large glasses balanced on his nose and he smiled warmly at Sydney, "Everyone gets lost once and awhile, especially in Caption Town." And he swung his arm around his shoulder, directing him to the bar, "Name's Ron by the way. I help run this town."

Sydney's mind was still racing a mile per minute and he had so many questions, so many things to explore. He focused for a moment and said, "Hello sir, my name's Sydney, Sydney Steele. Do I look lost?"

Ron peered through his frames and guffed, "Yeah, a bit. Don't worry though. Happens to the best of us." And he sat down on a barstool and gazed out towards the menu behind the bar wistfully.

Sydney considered what he said and took a seat carefully, he noticed he was still shaking. "I'm new in town. I think you may be right, might've been lost for a while," the song changed and nearly everyone jumped to the checkered floor to dance, "but I suppose that's changing."

Ron gave him a knowing look, "Everyone finds life here, son. I have no doubt you will too." An elderly woman shouted, "Ron, you need to join the floor for your favorite song or I'll come over and grab you myself!" Sydney gave him a polite nod and Ron left, smiling.

"Milkshake or soda pop?" His attention went to a perpetually red-faced, curly haired boy behind the counter. He answered, "Soda pop, thanks," and he went about his work. "So mister," he directed at Sydney once more, "How was your trip?"

Just then, Ron appeared out of nowhere and put an arm around Sydney's shoulders again, "Benny, let's not berate the newcomer with questions, shall we? Perfect." With that he waltzed back to the crowd.

Benny was nervous now. His hands were putting orders together but he almost dropped a plate because they were shaking. He was a quite lanky, quivering twig in an imaginary wind. Sydney paused, then decided to speak up, "Just between you and me, Benny, the trip was pretty unimaginable, but now I'm here, so I guess it worked out alright." Benny only stole a momentary look over at him and nodded, as if to communicate some deeper meaning but Sydney had no clue what it meant. A woman sat down next to Sydney and ordered a malt. She was scribbling in a small notebook quite intently. "Must be a good story you're writing." He opened conversation to continue piecing the time he sat in together.

She glanced up at Sydney, about to speak, then she realized she didn't know his face, "You're...new?" She said, almost hopeful.

Sydney grinned, “Yep! Just passing through, I have a big appointment to make.” Her look turned to that of staring at a lost puppy, though he did not know how anything he said called for pity. Carrying on, he said, “I’m Sydney Steele.” And he extended his right hand out to shake, “Nice to meet you...”

She gave him another odd look. Her right arm was fully gloved in white and she hesitated, finally reaching out with her left hand. Sydney chuckled and swapped hands. “I’m Ava. You really like it here, don’t you?” The woman said.

“Of course,” Sydney exclaimed, “What’s not to like?” Ava’s smile never reached her eyes. She wasn’t outright sad, just pensive.

“Shakes up!” Benny joyfully yelled as he attempted the classic bartender-drink-slide down the counter. It surprisingly glided all of the way down, whip cream in place, until the tall silvery cup clashed against Ava’s gloved arm, making for a loud, metallic *CLANG*. The music still played but some surrounding people gave sideways looks. Slightly embarrassed, Ava collected her drink and left the money on the table.

“Real nice meeting you, Sydney. I’m sure we’ll see each other soon.” And with that she nodded to Benny and walked out into the night.

Act 3

It was now midnight in Caption Town. Everyone had gone to sleep except for the neon lights. Ron had supplied Sydney with a room in the town’s motel. The only problem was that Sydney wasn’t asleep. He couldn’t stop thinking about this surreal night. He decided he could sit still no longer and went to recover his time machine. To do what, exactly, he was still deciding. He really should be heading back soon, even though it’s the past, he doesn’t want to prolong the inevitable research review with the committee. Especially now that it works. On the other hand, he hasn’t had any true time off in months and he wasn’t merely looking through the window into a more relaxed town, he was living in it. Upon opening the motel door, he jumped at seeing Ava and Benny standing outside, Ava’s gloved arm posed moments before she was about to knock on the door.

“There’s something you need to see.” Ava turned and walked away, leaving no room for subtlety. Since he had no time to question her and no reason had presented itself to distrust her, he chose to see where this took him. Moving too quickly to pause and lock his door, Benny and Sydney followed behind. They were led past many a dark house until one at the end of a street had a cracked-open garage door. They entered and Sydney took in the view. There wasn’t much to take in. A wooden ladder hung

sideways on the wall, no cars to admire, old shoes and sports gear lay strewn near the corners. “I’m...so pleased...that you brought me to your empty garage to murder me,” Sydney tried finding the words to express his confusion, “but I’m afraid I’m missing the bigger picture. Is there a bigger picture? Maybe there’s not, that’s ok too, I mean, if this is the thing, we can settle down here and play cards, I’m sure you have uno. Wait, scratch that, you don’t have uno. Sorry to bring it up, forget I mentioned it-”

“-We’re almost there.” Ava said with a half smile, and maybe they weren’t going to try and murder him in a garage.

Benny and Ava were moving a rug out of the way to reveal locked trap doors and while Ava used some odd looking key on the lock, Benny said, “You talk a lot when you’re nervous too? I can’t help it. Reminds me of when I first got here. Come on!” And he beckoned Sydney into the narrow staircase that Ava had already disappeared into.

Why not. Sydney followed curiously. The doors above him closed and he was left feeling the walls in an absolute haunted house level of darkness. “Why is it so dark?”

To which Ava replied with, “The best secrets are usually kept shrouded in mystery.” Neither Sydney nor Benny replied. “Nothing? Ok I’m not great with jokes. Just don’t trip, you’re in the back.” Well, she’s not wrong.

“Are you sure he’s ready? Hasn’t even had a full night’s sleep.” Benny nervously questioned Ava, voices bouncing off the close walls so that it sounded like they were talking right next to his face and also several yards away. Finally they reached the bottom and a light flickered on. One lone, uncovered bulb hung in front of a steel door. Rather modern looking for this era. Ava was clicking away on some panel next to it and there was the refreshing sound of an air-tight door seal being released.

“There’s no way around it.” She said flatly, “Come inside.” And she opened a wooden door, revealing to Sydney probably what he least expected to see. Stacked carefully in columns and rows like a compact version of the secret warehouse where Indiana Jones stored the Ark, machines were all he could see. There were things that resembled upside down cars, spaceships, souped-up refrigerators. Parts from all different science fiction movies he’d ever seen, and some he hadn’t, littered the walls and tables. There was a buzzing in the air and his breathing felt electric.

“These are all...” Sydney started.

“Time machines. From the people in this town. We’re all stuck.”

END OF EPISODE 1