



# *Time of Punishment*

Twenty-five Very Short Stories  
for the Last Month of Our Lives



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# 1 When an Agent Dies

When an agent dies there's no mourning, just the closing of a file. When *this* agent dies there isn't even that.

The file remains open, and a year later there's a new set of fingerprints, a new face, and the same absence of a past. Nobody knows where the men for the name come from, but only the Queen and the head of MI6 are aware that, literally, *nobody knows*.



## 2 The Son

His father had been powerful, but he hadn't left him his power. His only inheritance had been his genius, but that was OK. Genius was better. His father had also left him a wary mistrust of women he had never found the time or interest to challenge, and a mission of revenge.

He was supposed to say "This is for Hephaestus," he assumed, or something equally classic, but instead Nikola Tesla simply squatted by the smoking corpse, his eyes already searching for any differences between Zeus' lighting and his own.





### 3 The Beginning of History

The Strange Ones hadn't been men, yet they had talked (although not like men talk) and fought (but not well enough, not by far). When the last Strange One died, men who had killed without a second thought began to have uneasy feelings. The world had had Strange Ones, and now it had none, and perhaps somebody or something would be angry about this.

So men raised the first temple to say they were sorry, and built the first city to hide from each other the shame they felt, and they invented the first language, the first records and the first history, so their children would never know what their fathers had done.



## 4 How to Know the Future in Six Easy Steps

- 1. Go to a subway station. Hide inside until it's closed.
- 2. Walk through the tunnels until you find a quiet corner with exposed ground.
- 3. Dig a small hole, pour blood into it (human is better), and call the dead in ancient Greek.
- 4. When the ghosts appear, forbid them to drink the blood until they answer your questions.
- 5. Realize the ghosts see images of the future, but lack the context and knowledge to explain them in any useful way.
- 6. Wait until the morning and get back to the surface, ignoring if possible the knowing smirks of the subway employees.



## 5 The Inquisitor

A hundred innocents could read a hundred books for a hundred years, and only one of them would be infected by the words-that-are-souls. But that one would become a Vampire, lose his immortal soul, and endanger the world.

So I throw the books into the pyre, and try to forget my nightmares of millions of innocents reading millions of dark books.



## 6 The Venice Bond

We frequent the same places. Never Venice, of course, and never anywhere like an engineering research lab.

It doesn't matter. We might be rich and retired too young like so many others, and we don't speak about dynamic dams and flow control like most others don't, but we recognize each other on sight anyway.

We drink together. Sometimes we sleep together. We never discuss our plans to save Venice.

They all work, or we wouldn't have been paid to forget them by the companies who are profiting from Venice's death.





## 7 The Silence

Most of the time you think you are God. Why not? You are immortal, alone in the emptiness between the galaxies, nothing but mind, eyes, and time.

You imagine new creations in near-infinite detail, loving, loyal Creatures that will nonetheless be flawed enough for you to punish them out of love. Their science will grow, but their spirits won't, and they will defeat Death before they defeated Crime.

What prisons will immortals use?

The answer sits inside you like an abyss you don't dare getting close to, so you flee from the question for another meaningless amount of time.



## 8 The School

In your first day in the School you are expelled; you are told you are the first person to fail in such an complete way. Then they send you to a place nobody has ever returned from.

Whoever returns to the school, whole and alive after being nothing and dead, graduates.

There are no graduates yet, but only a few centuries have gone by, and the School is patient.



## 9 Time as Orthogonal to History

Philip K. Dick was, and had always been, the leader of the Resistance.

Philip K. Dick is, and has always been, a science fiction writer struggling with schizophrenia.

Philip K. Dick will be, and will always have been, an unknown man who spent his life in a psychiatric asylum.

The Empire never ended.



## 10 Anomaly Handling

Jane is the world's expert on anomalous C14 readings. She's the one archaeologists send their findings to when something doesn't make sense. Nine out of ten times, it was a technical error or tricky chemistry.

The tenth is an object that legitimately comes from the future. Those are the ones Jane lies about, and then makes a note on her private diary to be read by her true employers, whenever they are.





# 11 Fishers of Souls

That thing about photographs stealing souls — that was just a silly superstition. It gave us the idea that eventually became the "social networks," though.



## 12 Holding Pattern

The plane hasn't landed in thirty-seven years. Only Von Braun knew how to turn its engine on and off, and when he died he left behind no notes. Nobody wants to be responsible for grounding forever a plane that has flown almost four decades without needing to refuel.

They do keep two pilots in it at all times, though, transferred via an often suicidal plane-to-plane jump. It's not that the plane needs to be manually flown; as far as they know, it has been on autopilot since the night Von Braun turned its engine on, circling the North Pole in low-altitude, radar-evading loops.

What keeps the USAF generals up at night is what the plane might be waiting for.



# 13 The First Charge of the Dark Brigade

Where the Queen needed him, the British soldier went. Sometimes, though, the war was so secret and the destination so bleak that soldiers were told nothing until their arrival.

“Reform the line!” yelled the officer at horses and men, all equally reeling from the impact of the Russian bullets. “You will worry about being dead *after* you have cleared this Valley for me!”

The place was dark and bleak, and the enemy looked like nothing they had ever seen before. The Brigade charged.



## 14 The Dance and the Dancers

A “greenhouse effect” driven by carbon dioxide. Outrageous as the idea is, I understand why almost everyone has fallen for it. After all, it took all the Dancers in England to summon the storm that destroyed the Armada, and even the Thousand White Dancers of Russia didn’t do more than worsening a bit the winter that received Napoleon, and that at the cost of their own lives. Warming the planet in the degree we are seeing would take more Dancers than have ever lived. No wonder people believe the scientists’ explanations.

But I don’t. I know there aren’t enough Dancers, and I know the temperature readings are right, but I also can feel a Dance in the air, through the clouds, in the light that falls from the sky, and I wonder if perhaps beings other than humans might have learned to Dance.

I used to live by the seashore, but I cannot sleep there anymore.





## 15 Night Rituals

Every night Jake's father watches him brush his teeth, and then checks his mouth for any illegal drug-synthesizing mouth microbiota.

Then Jake goes to sleep, to dream strange dreams whispered to him in discrete corners by his classmates.



## 16 Crowd Computing

Lucy's PhD dissertation had been about the unexpected richness of mathematical models of crowd behavior. But there was little paid work in that area, so she eventually moved to other fields.

Years later, as she elbowed her way out of a particularly crowded subway car, she was startled by the thought that isomorphisms went both ways. You could find a complex equation system to model any crowd... and a crowd to model any complex equation system.

Lucy made a mental note to draft a short paper on the idea, and then lost herself again in the city's mind.



## 17 Verbum

Thousands of users. Hundreds of threads. Anonymous accounts. No moderators. Every sensitive topic under the sun. And yet not a single flame war, troll, or even spambot.

Outside commentators joked about a miracle. But our hearts told us they were more right than they could ever know.



## 18 The Apocalypse Surfers

It's dangerous, but they don't do it for the danger.

It's read as a political statement, but they don't care about how others see them.

They often share the perils of those too poor to move away, but if they were alone they would still choose to be there.

The truth is simpler than that. The city-eating rising seas are magnificent on their own way, and the Surfers would die rather than live elsewhere than at the crumbling end of the world.





## 19 Odds and Ends

There is blood on the records in this database. Metaphorically, I mean. Ages, families, life events, skills. With enough data, and there is certainly enough, you can predict the likelihood of a person becoming a hero.

My company is paid for the names of the dangerous ones, and we are paid not to think about what happens to them after we have identified them.

I've seen my own data. My likelihood of heroism can barely be said to differ from zero. Perhaps that's why I keep altering the records ever so slightly, dooming some to protect the rest.

There is blood on my hands, too. Perhaps the models are not wrong. I'm not a hero. But thanks to me, maybe one day there will be one.



## 20 Time of Punishment

I killed my husband two months ago. My trial was quick; they found me guilty, sentenced me, and sent me back home.

I know I should feel happy, but I don't. The device they put in my head keeps me from joy.

I wish I could feel anger about that.

I go to work every morning, and count the years every month. I don't — I can't — feel hope.



## 21 On Eternity's Door

You can see the moonlight shining off the Head Monk's blade, but you can't hear his chant. You know what he's saying, though. He's praying so you will find Enlightenment before you leave this world, for they deny this chance to no-one.

You blink. Somewhere out of your sight, your body falls on the stones and its own blood.

You blink, and try to meditate, and wonder how many blinks you have left.

You blink.



## 22 The Fixer

I picked her from the airport, a pendrive in my pocket with all the data on the city the Mayor could get his hands on. “No, thanks” she said when I offered it, “maps and territories, you know.” She said nothing else until we arrived downtown.

Five blocks away from the hotel where I had booked her, she asked me to park the car, and took off her clothes as she did so. “Don’t look for me,” she ordered over her shoulder, as she walked, naked, into a nearby alley.

I saw her sitting on a sidewalk a month later, asking for spare change. She nodded at me, asking silently for me to walk away. I did so, and didn’t see her when I walked past the same place an hour after that.

Months later things started to look better, if only slightly so. Traffic was smoother, the air a bit clearer, crime felt somewhat low. There was something in the air, or something was gone from it, and eventually it showed on the reports.

One day I received a phone call, and picked up the fixer in my car. Her clothes were city-bought, and I could have sworn she had been born in the city as well. She said nothing on the way to the airport.

“What will happen when you leave?” I asked at the last moment I could. She didn’t answer.

Traffic felt worse as I drove back downtown, but I couldn’t be sure.





## 23 A Distance on the Look of Death

We have just painted over the number on one wall of our secret meeting place. Now very little remains to do before we kill ourselves.

Before that we will burn all our papers and records, including these pages I write now out of habit. Of everything we know —may God forgive us what we know— we will only leave two pieces of information to our descendants. One: We don't know the world. There are inferences few make and none should make, points of view that shouldn't be considered. To do so takes no mystical knowledge, secret drug, or esoteric skill, but it leads individuals and even societies to insanity and death. This much we dare to leave behind.

There isn't much else we dare to make explicit. Knowledge is already moving too fast, curiosity accelerating, minds quickening. It's dangerous even to know that there's something dangerous you shouldn't know, and even more dangerous the hypothesis that something, *something we can't and must not know*, is trying to *make* us know.

Better to burn our libraries and burn our brains than to bequest this suspicion to our children.

Only one other piece of information we will leave behind. Over the fresh paint on the wall we paint another number, one higher than the one below. Our children will know to increase the count when their time comes. The number is already in the double digits.

There's a thought half-formed on the back of my mind, something I'm just about to realize.

I must hurry.



## 24 The Writer

Do you know how hard it is to have a Hail Mary pass in the last seconds of a game *not* turn into touchdown? Do you have any idea of the artistic discipline it takes to resist that temptation?

But I always write them like that, or nearly all the time. Quarterbacks bitch and threaten, but the League pays the salaries of us all, and they want the best story.



## 25 The Ghosts

There are no windows in the secret asylum in Florida where they keep the astronauts gone mad. It's the only way to keep them from ranting about the fifty years old moonbase they found up there on the Moon.

That isn't what makes them insane. The base exists, their original inhabitants dead in their bunks with cyanide pills in their stomachs, "Made in America" etched in every bolt of every door. Nobody knows who made the base, or what for.

The dead astronauts' diaries speak of a hopeful project, a nuclear war, brief despair, and then nothing at all. The astronauts that explore the base come to the asylum and never leave the place. Their rants about the base are not very different from secret debates taking place elsewhere.

What makes them insane is that they think the dead astronauts were right. There was a war, and only they survived, and then they killed themselves.

They think they are ghosts; they say we all are.