

02:10:31

By Kevin Brown

“Pause the tape just right, just a second before the plane hits,” Jeff says, staring at the screen, “and think of all those people you save.” Taking a shot of bourbon, it dribbling down his chin, down the front of his shirt, he says, “Freeze it just right, and you still got the towers.”

He pours another shot, his hand shaking the bottle into a blur, sloshing liquor on the floor. Everything he says, it echoes through the empty house. Bounces off the bare walls. His wife, Pam, she took everything. The couches and tables. Beds and dressers.

Their daughter’s toys and clothes.

All that’s left, just deep ruts and grooves in the hardwood floors. Sheetrock with nail holes like bullet wounds. A couple lawn chairs, his mini TV. The Mickey Mouse VCR.

And the tape.

Me, I’m sitting in a foldout, finger-nailing the label off a sweating beer. I’m turning it in my hand, looking at the ceiling, at the window, the stairs and door. Anything to keep from looking at what’s happening on the screen. What happens, what’s about to happen, about to start everything that ends with us sitting here in this gutted house, I’ve already seen. Live and unedited.

And I don’t want to see it again.

“Stop the Zapruder tape at frame 207,” he says, “you change history.”

“Why you doing this to yourself?” I say.

Not breaking his trance on the screen, he says, “Take his brother.” He says, “You freeze him at the podium, and he’s not gunned down in that kitchen.” Downing the shot, he says, “He’d always be ‘off to Chicago.’”

My eyes cut to the television, then away. Back to the television.

On it, framed in the 14” x 21” screen, is a shaking mini birthday party. There’s a mini clown in the background twisting red balloons into a tiny poodle. There’s kids zipping by in front of the camera with party hats cocked to the side. Adults in lawn chairs, the same we’re sitting in now, relaxing in the shade of a cypress, legs hooked over their knees, waving. A picnic table, it’s lined with paper plates and plastic forks and presents leaning-towered at the end.

Everything formatted to fit your screen.

The cameraman's voice, it says: Alright, guys. The camera shaking, the voice says: Let's all gather around for cake and ice cream.

Jeff's voice.

The screen says: 01:41:13.

And these scaled-down kids, they swarm together like feeding fish, wild and high-pitched. Parents step behind their sons and daughters, their knees or elbows or half-faces the only thing visible. My hands are reaching from out of frame, rubbing my son's head.

Pam comes on screen holding a large Hello Kitty cake. She sets it in front of their daughter, Dawn, and everyone's singing "Happy Birthday." Jeff's voice loudest next to the camera mic.

Seven candles are flickering.

The song ends and she closes her eyes. Leans over, hooking the dark curls behind her ears. Her cheeks inflate and she blows, the candles going out. Smoke mouse-tailing in the air.

Everyone cheering.

The screen says: 01:47:05.

Taking a drink, his voice gritty, Jeff says, "Then there's that tightrope walker." He shakes his head, smiles at the screen. "If you'd just hit the pause button while he's still on the wire, he doesn't drop hundreds of feet seconds later." He says, "He stays up there forever."

I lean forward, drape my wrists over my knees, and say, "He still drops, just not again."

On the TV, Jeff's voice is saying: Sorry baby. Saying: We didn't get you anything this year.

And Dawn cocks her hips to the side, hand on her waist. Hair blowing across her forehead, she's smiling and wagging her finger.

Daddy Daddy Daddy, she says. You're so silly.

Jeff rewinds the tape, her finger wagging in quick-reverse. Her hips straightening, hand coming off her waist. He hits play and she does it all again.

Daddy Daddy Daddy, she says, and blinking at the screen, Jeff says with her, "You're so silly."

The screen says: 01:54:26.

I stand and step behind him, my footsteps click clack clicking on the floor. I put my hand on his shoulder, throw my head back, and let the beer bubble against my lips. "All's I'm saying,"

I say, “is video doesn’t stop something from happening.” I squat beside him, stare at the side of his face, and say, “It’s just proof that it did happen.”

On screen, Dawn’s peeling back pink wrapping paper. Ripping it high above her head and letting it drop behind her. Then, her eyes go wide, her mouth wider. Pam’s clapping, saying: Looky there!

And Jeff’s voice says: What is it?

Tickle Me Elmo, Dawn says, tugging at the box flaps.

She tears open a Malibu Barbie. She digs into a E-Z Bake oven.

A Hannah Montana Sing-a-long Microphone.

A Mickey Mouse VCR.

And she keeps digging until the tower of gifts is gone.

Then, Jeff’s voice says: One more!

Dawn’s looking around, mouth half-open. A finger to her lips.

Hon, Jeff’s voice says. What’s it Mom’s got there? His finger stretches out in front of the camera, pointing toward the house. And Pam steps from around the corner, pushing a Hello Kitty Big Wheel. A large red bow tied across the handlebars.

All the kids, their mouths are dark pits in their faces. My son looks up at me and I smile down. Massage his shoulders before we disappear out of frame, the camera jumping and shaking to follow Dawn running toward the toy, screaming. Arms V’d out.

The screen says: 02:00:05.

Jeff’s bouncing his knee in rapid bursts. He sits straight, then leans forward again, elbows on quads. He pours another drink, shoots it, pours another. His knee still bouncing.

I grab another beer from the box. Water bubbled up and sliding off the bottle into pucker marks on the floor. “What’s say we get out of here,” I tell him. “Get some dinner.”

His knee moving faster, it’s vibrating up his torso, bouncing his shoulder and head. He says, “Then there’s that treasurer in Pennsylvania. The one that blew the back of his head off on live TV?” He thumb-rubs the Mickey Mouse-eared remote in his hand and says, “With just a click of a button, he lives forever.” He smiles at his daughter laughing on screen and says, “Of course the gun’ll always be in his mouth, but nothing’s without sacrifice.”

I shake my head, stare at the screen, and take a sip. What was my wife, she’s not in the video. She’s not at the party. Not at our house. Where she’s at, is in some other family’s videos. Smiling and waving into the camera at some other kid’s birthday party. “Jeff,” I say, “this acting

this way, look what all it's cost you." I look around at the nothing in the house and say, "Look!" and my voice slaps off all the bare spaces and repeats: Look!

He doesn't break his trance.

On the screen, Dawn's walking toward the camera with the giant bow in both hands. She brings it closer to the lens, closer to the lens, until the screen shakes and goes dark. Until only bits of the party can be seen through the loops of ribbon.

Over the dark, the screen says: 02:03:50.

"Video," Jeff says, "is the modern crystal ball." He says, "It's our prophets, our fortune tellers. It lets us see what's gonna happen." He chokes the bottle of liquor and takes a drink. It spills over the corners of his mouth in a frown.

And I say, "It doesn't let us see what's gonna happen." I tell him, "It shows us what's already happened." Taking a sip of beer, I say, "You see the future, but it's in the past."

Jeff smiles, takes a drink, and shakes his head. "The video camera is our fountain of youth," he says. "Don't you see?" he says. "You can make the old young again."

I walk over and yank the remote from his hand. He stands and I hit the pause button. On the screen, Dawn is leaning back, her hands on the handlebars of the Hot Wheeler, her hair blown flat behind her.

"Give it," he says. "I'm not fucking playing." His jaw pops, his face vibrating. His eyes red-webbed and slicked over.

"See what I'm saying," I say, pointing at the screen. He looks, and the screen is shaking and twitching, trying to move forward. White lines jerk across the middle of his daughter. "The video wants to keep going," I tell him. "It has to. That's what it does." I take his hand, turn it over, and lay the remote in his palm. He looks at me, water pearling at the bottom of his eyes, zipping down. "Nature," I say, "has to take its course."

He closes his fingers over the remote, sits down, and takes a drink. He hits play and his daughter leans forward, her hair dropping back flat.

In the video, chain-link fenced next door, is my mini backyard. My son's bicycle propped against the fence. The doghouse where no dog lives since my wife left. Her withered and sun baked Forget-me-nots, sagging, they're lifted and rocked by a breeze. For more years than I've got fingers, she groomed that flower garden. Sunbathed on the patio. We hosted barbecues for friends. The camera shaking, kids yelling, I try to rewind our life in my head—we're not talking, just walking around backwards like erratic moving zombies.

We're screaming and fighting in reverse. Her not walking away, but backing toward me down the hall. Her hands held up.

We're making up, then having small disagreements. Everything ending before it begins.

Jeff and Pam, my wife and I, we're taking food out of our mouths. Then, we're grilling out, the food un-cooking, and watching the kids zip around in reverse.

We're smiling, watching our son ride his new bike backwards. The dog running beside him, wagging tail first.

We're staring at our backyard for the first time, arms wrapped around each other. Then letting go. Backing inside in quick jerks, our mouths opened and smiling.

I blink and take another drink. On the video, the sky above the party's the color of wet tissue. Clouds clawing over each other. Wind blowing.

The camera, it's looking down at Dawn, who's pulled up in front of Jeff's feet. She smiles up, a front tooth missing. Her head cocked to the side.

And Jeff's voice says: Can I ride?

And her head still cocked, Dawn closes her eyes, rolls her bottom lip over her top, and says: You wish, blowfish.

She peddles in reverse, away from the camera, waving. She stops and starts riding in circles. Her hair lifting. Jeff rewinds the tape and in quick time, she circles counterclockwise. She stops, facing the camera. Rides toward the lens, smiling and waving, and stops at Jeff's feet. Her head cocks. Mouth moving, bottom lip rolled over top unrolling.

Her closed eyes opening.

Jeff hits play and his voice says: Can I ride?

A tear rips over his smiling cheekbone and he says with his daughter, "You wish, blowfish."

The screen says: 02:08:49.

I sit beside him. Swallowing in quick bursts, my eyes sting. My face hurts. Tightens like a clinched fist. "Turn it off," I tell him. "For me?"

"With video," he says, his voice skipping, "you got the power to bring people back to life." He says, "Just by pressing a button—they're dead, then they're alive." He spider-crawls his fingers over his head, rubs it hard back and forth, and slips it out, his hair standing up. He says, "Like an electronic God."

He knuckles his eye and tells me with the right timing, you can stop the Challenger from

exploding. He says, "That teacher'll never make it to space, but she won't not make it, either."

The screen says: 02:09:21.

His voice shaking, he says, "You can stop bombs from hitting."

You can see your father again.

Remove cancer.

Reverse AIDS.

Barely audible, he says, "You can single fingerly control fate."

On the video, Dawn is still riding in circles. Her voice getting louder with each loop. The screen says: 2:10:10.

:13.

:15.

The clouds shifting, thunderheads ripping inside them, Dawn is yelling louder. My son chasing her around, his hands Frankensteined out.

:17.

:19.

"Pause Buddy Holly's plane lifting away," he says, just breath and shaking voice, "and the music don't die."

:21.

:23.

And I put my arm around his neck, pull him toward me. He drops his head to my chest and his shoulders start to tremor and bounce in jerks. And everything's coming out. I slip the remote from his hand and it's smeared wet. I look at our yard, shaking in the background. Everything dark and dead or dying. I know video doesn't show the future. It can't make divorced couples married. Make sick people well. Make dead people alive.

You wish, blowfish, I think.

I squint and my eyes are bubbled slits. The TV blurry and wavering.

On the video, Dawn finishes her loops and takes off down the driveway, toward the street. Peddling hard, the grinding sound of plastic wheels over pavement.

And I hit the pause button, catching a voice in mid-yell. Camera in mid-shake. Freezing Pam in the middle of standing. Stopping Dawn from peddling away forever.

The screen twitching and jerking, trying to move forward.

"It don't die," he says, screaming into my chest.

“It don’t die,” I say, and squeeze him tighter.

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