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TIME TRAVEL *for* **BEGINNERS**

**JACLYN
MORIARTY**



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PART ONE

Time Travel Agency Pty Ltd

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION REPORT

Place and date visited:

LA, 1956

Agent who assisted you:

Can't remember his name. Joon? Young guy. Long hair.

Any comments on your agent?

Good value. We had a laugh. He stayed in character, though—never stopped acting like it was “time travel.”

Had you visited the Time Travel Agency before? If so, how many times?

No.

Why did you choose to visit the Time Travel Agency today?

My girlfriend got me a gift certificate for here for my 40th. (I once mentioned that the 1950s would've been cool—the cars, I meant—and I guess she grabbed a hold of that statement.)

Please provide an account of your journey. Include any thoughts on the cleanliness, comfort, etc. of the booth and any symptoms of time lag you may now be experiencing.

Booth was fine. I didn't really look at it.

I sit down and next thing I was “in the 1950s.” There wasn't any transition. You might think about adding that, e.g., make it a carriage on a track, carriage moves slowly uphill—zzzzzzip downhill and sudden stop. “Welcome to the 1950s! Enjoy your visit!” And then the customer gets out and walks around.

As it is, it's kind of an anticlimax.

I'm in the booth—

5, 4, 3, 2 . . .

—and I'm there.

I got to see a street, some old cars, people dressed up. Including a bunch of girls wearing crop tops. (Did they show their stomachs back then?? Doubt it.) One girl had a ponytail which was better for the era. Weird lipstick and eyebrows all around.

The sounds were good—honking horns, engines, birds, voices talking with American accents. I saw a hot dog stand and lined up to try “1950s food,” then remembered my gift certificate didn’t include the currency option. So I got out of the line. That wasted a bit of time.

The production value and effects were excellent. It felt like I was properly there. Sun burning the back of my neck, and somebody brushed right by me. (An older woman with brown hair—did not look 1950s, by the way. She was the only one you didn’t get right—except for those crop tops, but keep them.) There was even a bit where my shoe got stuck to melting tar. The colors really popped, and the old ads and billboards were good.

I could see the Hollywood sign in the hills, and that looked fake. Plus I saw in a documentary that it said Hollywoodland back then, not just Hollywood.

The trip lasted around 15–20 minutes. Plenty. I’d had enough.

No “time lag,” lol. Maybe a headache, but that’s another issue.

On a scale of 1 to 10, how likely are you to visit the Time Travel Agency again?

0.

No offense, just it’s fairly pricey for what you get. Also, I’ve done it now so it’s . . . done.

10/10 for effort, though. And I’ll be careful what I mention around my girlfriend in the future, lol. If I’d mentioned the state-of-the-art bar fridge that I want (and that costs about the same as this one trip), instead of freaking 1950s cars, my life might’ve taken a whole other direction. As it is, well, here we are.

1.

ANNA

A WOMAN IN a red coat was walking up a flight of concrete steps.

It was a Thursday, early June 2025, a crisp Sydney winter's day, and the woman was hurrying. At the top of the stairs, she paused and unbuttoned her coat. She did not wish to remove the coat altogether, only to open it. It was a new coat, and very smart, with large silver buttons.

In addition to being a woman in a red coat, this was a woman in a lemon-yellow shirt, black jeans, and black ankle boots. A navy blue beret sat upon her head. This had been knitted for her by her sister, Monique, who was crafty and practi—

Oh look, I can't keep this up.

All I'm doing is describing the colors of my clothes.

The woman was me. Anna Salone. Pleased to meet you.

My idea had been to write this narrative in close third person, like a clear and tender voice at my own shoulder, following me around through my days. Pausing for moments of quiet reflection—as I ducked my head into the linen closet, say, or scrubbed dried egg from a plate. But I haven't even made it past the opening.

(Also, to clarify: When I say that my sister, Monique, is “crafty,” I don't mean she's wily and cunning. Just good at craft.) (The navy blue beret is beautiful and well made. I feel elegant when I wear it. Also, I

feel ridiculous. People stare, their expressions inscrutable. Frank admiration or suppressed hilarity? Could be either.)

The reason I was hurrying up the steps was that I was late for work.

And the reason I was late was that I'd driven my thirteen-year-old daughter, Nicola, to the bus stop, whereas usually she walks there. I'd been applying lipstick in the bathroom, believing Nicola to be packing her lunchbox in the kitchen. I'd even heard the thud of her dropping a yogurt pouch onto the floor. *Oh, Nicola*, I'd thought fondly. *Always dropping things*. Then, passing Nicola's bedroom, I'd caught a glimpse of tangled hair and pink pajamas.

What's that child doing in my daughter's bed?! That was my first reaction: indignation.

Quickly, it occurred to me that it was more likely that Nicola was oversleeping—and that the dropped yogurt pouch had been a car door slamming out in the street—than that a strange child in pink pajamas had climbed into my daughter's empty bed.

The oversleeping hypothesis proved true.

I hustled Nicola out of bed and followed her around like a close third-person narrator, only less tender, shouting instructions. "Hurry! You're going to miss the bus!" and "No need to brush your teeth for two whole minutes, no, seriously, don't set the timer, Nicola! Leave it! Yes, I know the dentist said, but the dentist isn't going to miss the bus!"

Then I tossed her a banana for her breakfast and zoomed her up the hill to the bus stop.

After that, I drove back home, parked the car in the garage, and set off to walk to work.

I miscalculated how long it took to walk.

(That's a fancy way of saying I knew perfectly well that it took me twenty minutes to walk to work and yet, that day, I decided I could do it in three.)

Having reached the top of the stairs, I rushed past the tennis club, the playground, and a pair of art deco apartment blocks, my new coat flap-

ping like a malfunctioning burrito. In my head I was rehearsing excuses.

I couldn't blame Nicola for my lateness because Trisha, the manager, holds strong views on "enabling children in habits of carelessness."

Trisha has three sons, two at university and one in high school. All three "learned quick smart" that Trisha was "*not* at their beck and call." Let's say one of Trisha's sons was at a pool party, realized he'd forgotten his swimsuit, and called her up seeking help? She, Trisha, would not come running with the swimsuit! No, sirree! Her son would have to face the consequences.

"And you know what, Anna?" Trisha liked to say.

"What?"

"They never forget that swimsuit again!"

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. You know why? Because they've suffered the . . ."

"Consequences," I would fill in obediently.

I myself have suffered the consequences of my own forgetfulness, or carelessness, plenty of times in my life and yet I carry on forgetting and careless-ing. I mentioned this to Trisha once, and she flashed me the look she used to give me, the one that meant she suspected there was something not quite right about me—a bit off-color even—before turning back to weighing the dry-roasted almonds. (I worked for Trisha at the Nut Bar.)

So I couldn't mention having driven Nicola to the bus stop.

Anyway, the real issue was that I'd then driven home instead of continuing on to work. (I had to. My Fitbit requires the steps. So really this whole thing is the fault of a needy Fitbit.)

I decided to invent an excuse.

I'm sorry I'm late, I rehearsed. I spilled coffee on my shirt at breakfast! I had to change!

How long did it take to change a shirt?

I'm so sorry I'm late. I got halfway to work and realized I'd spilled coffee on my shirt at breakfast!

Why had I not noticed the stain when I spilled the coffee in the first place?

I'm so sorry, I began, crossing Yeo Street, and that's when the car hit me.



IT FELT VERY personal, as these things do.

I landed in the gutter with a shriek of outrage.

Next I realized that, of course, it must have been a car, not a hostile stranger rushing up to give me a good shove. The rage dissipated. A car, like a falling tree branch, is inanimate. I must have walked right in front of it. The car had been in its own territory, the road, and I'd strayed into that territory. These were the . . .

"Consequences," I whispered.

I lay in the gutter, embarrassed.

Footsteps ran toward me. They reminded me of the time when my family went to Universal Studios and watched a demonstration of how sound effects were added to a scene. These footsteps had the same self-importance. *These are running footsteps*, they said. *Tap, tap, tap.*

The footsteps scuffed up beside me and became heavy breathing. *This is heavy breathing.* A deep intake of breath and a man's voice asked, "Are you okay?"

Am I okay?! I was affronted.

"I got hit by a car!" I expostulated, sitting up quickly. *Was I okay?!* Of course I was not okay! Although my head had felt fine when I sat up quickly just now—it often spins when I do that, even when I haven't been hit by a car.

"Yes." The man was standing in direct sunlight so I couldn't see his face. "Yes, it was my car." He crouched, and there was his face.

He had very white skin with pale freckles here and there. Dark hair clipped close to his scalp. Late-thirtiesish. The bones of his face, and the veins in his temples, were prominent. His shirt, a soft lilac color, looked expensive. Its buttons were small and discreet. His trousers were gray wool. Polished shoes.

He sat down beside me in the gutter.

"Are you okay? Shall I call an ambulance?" He was holding a phone. Like his face, the fingers wrapped around the phone were very white, but with sparse threads of black hair.

I considered the phone and the wiry hairs on the man's fingers. I looked up and down the street. No other people were around. Several parked cars, but none in motion. A silver Mercedes sat just along the road, jutting out at an angle, as if hastily parked. That must be the man's car. He'd pulled over his Mercedes and run back to check on me.

The emptiness of the street gave me the odd feeling that I'd "gotten away with it." Nobody but this man had witnessed me being hit and, therefore, it hadn't really happened—at least, not in a particularly relevant way.

"No, no," I said. "I'm fine."

The man exhaled. "Are you sure? You might not be qualified to say. Let me look at you."

I angled my face so he could do this. He studied my eyes. His own were a very bright blue.

"I'm not qualified to say, either," he admitted after a moment. It occurred to me that the man had a Scottish accent, although only at certain junctures in his sentences. "Can you stand up?"

"Yes."

A pause.

"I believe I can," I added.

He suggested I test my theory. "Here, I'll help you." He leaped to his feet and offered his palm.

A long pause. "I don't want to," I decided. "I'm fine, though. Honestly. I'm very sorry I ran in front of your car. I was late for work. It's lucky you were driving slowly. Sedately, even. You can . . ." I gestured at his car. "Don't let me hold you up."

The man studied me anxiously. "I'm quite worried about you," he said.

"Don't be. It's just the shock. Nothing even hurts. Don't let me . . ."

He followed my gaze, back to the silver Mercedes. "That's not my

car," he said, and he pointed across the road instead, to where a small red car stood at its own quirky angle. I don't know what kind of car it was. Red. And it had the low, slanted look that cars get when they're expensive. They sink beneath the weight of their own price tags, cars. "Are you sure you're all right?" the man was asking. "Because I do need to be somewhere." He was looking at the red car and frowning, its existence having reminded him of responsibilities, I guess.

"Absolutely," I said.

"Let me give you my name and number in case you realize later that you *are* injured," he offered. "That can happen."

"No, no. I promise, I'm not going to realize. I'd know by now."

"Well, give me *your* name and number then. So I can check on you. I'm desperately worried about you."

Desperately worried. I laughed. His accent was gathered in that phrase. "Honestly, I'm fine. I only want to sit here and think."

"If you're sure . . ." And when I nodded again, he checked both ways and then he crossed the road backward, watching me the whole time. He seemed able to walk in reverse with surprising ease and grace.

"I'm really sorry!" I called to him. "I hope I didn't . . . dent your car."

At this he laughed aloud, apparently delighted, and did not even look at his car to check. I found that impressive. Most people would have glanced at least.

"Are you sure I can't get your name and number," he tried again, "so I can check on you?"

"Honestly," I sang back. "I'm fine."

So he opened his car door, climbed in, turned on the engine, checked his mirrors, flicked on his indicator, and drove away. He raised a single hand to me and was gone.



I SAT IN the gutter. I felt very happy because now I had a good, solid, truthful excuse for being late to work. *I'm so sorry. I got hit by a car.*

Into the stillness came the sound of traffic on Military Road a block away. Also construction noise somewhere—a jackhammer?—and a leaf

blower. Everyone busy getting on with things. In the same way that the silence was filling with sounds, Trisha would currently be filling with righteous fury at my absence. Should I call her or wait until she was so angry that *she* called me? An excuse like being hit by a car, you want it to have the biggest impact.

“Anna!”

The sound of my own name, spoken into my ear, astounded me. How had I not heard the footsteps that surely preceded that voice? For a moment, I believed it was Trisha—out from behind the Nut Bar counter, prowling the streets of Sydney to hunt me down.

It was Rena Kappas.

“What’s happened here?” Rena demanded. “What are you doing in the gutter?”

Rena is a school mum and a friend. I met her at the front office one day when Nicola was in year one. We’d both come to collect our girls for medical appointments—hers to an ear specialist, mine to an orthopedist—and there was a delay on account of the class having gone missing. Rena and I joked about that, not *too* uneasily. (Turned out, they were doing reading groups under a tree.) Anyway, we liked each other enough to organize playdates for the girls.

The girls grew much closer than Rena and I ever did. We’re fond of each other, sure, but we can get by for weeks without talking or texting, whereas they couldn’t get through a day. Also, unlike our girls, Rena and I have never once painted each other’s fingernails or dyed each other’s hair or visited a pharmacy so we both could get *two* holes pierced in our *right* ears (“It’s kind of, like, our *thing?*”) or choreographed song-and-dance routines for school talent shows and TikTok, or gotten sticky marshmallows all over our sheets during a sleepover and then cried because we thought we’d get in trouble.

Still, we’re always happy to see each other.

“Hello!” I said, genuinely happy. “I *got hit by a car!*”

Rena chuckled, thinking I was joking. I doubled down. Rena switched to outrage: “And they didn’t stop?! They *must* have known they’d done it! You can’t *hit* a person and not *notice* it! Was it a truck?