

Futures

I'll burn this bridge when you get here

Just passing time. By Wendy Nickel

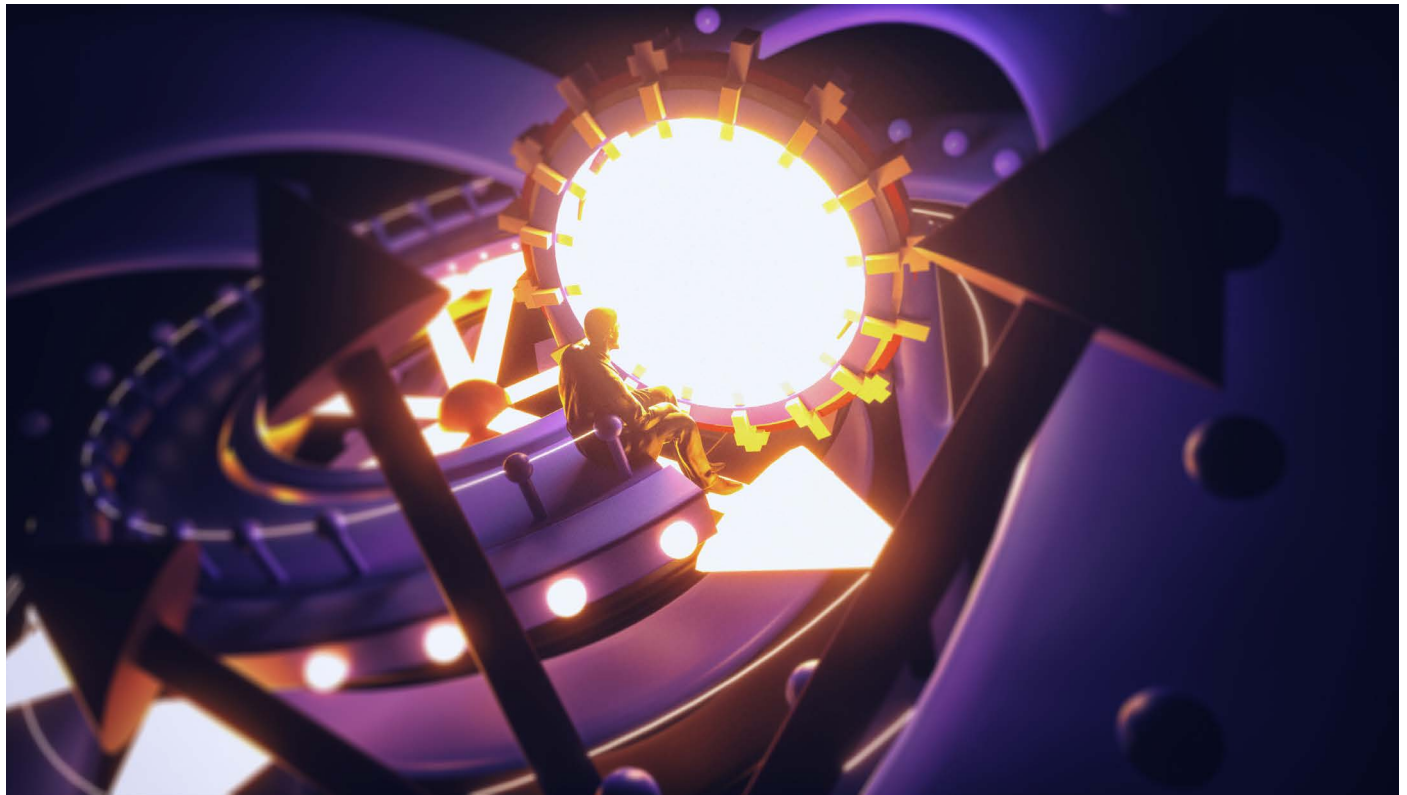


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

The time bridge continues to hum, rippling waves of energy into the air long after you've disappeared. Long after the anxiously blinking lights cease and each of us who were holding our breaths have sucked in a lungful of air.

The world is silent, except for the overlapping vibration, that persistent buzz, just as much in my mind as in my ears. The second hand on my watch taps its foot impatiently as seconds and seconds crawl past.

"It's been over five minutes," someone whispers. "Shouldn't he be back by now?"

Figures swim on the page beneath my fingers. *Shouldn't he? Shouldn't he?*

Shouldn't you?

The plan was simple: skip five minutes forwards. Enter the gate and emerge from the other side in exactly five minutes' time. Everyone cheers. We pop the champagne and pat ourselves on the backs for a job well done before moving on to the next increment.

How else are you supposed to test a time machine?

The bridge's hum is still audible, even over the lab's buzz. Engineers swarm, barely holding back their panic as they try to figure out what went wrong. It's a hive that's been invaded by the worst of worst-case scenarios, thick with fear-heavy pheromones.

"What should we do?" they ask.

What should we do?

What have you done?

It was my call to make it five minutes. The rabbit had jumped ahead five hours, and the gerbil was gone for ten, but I've been clawing my way up the ranks in this field since the day I decided to be a physicist; there's no way that I'd risk my professional reputation – or a human life – on a too-risky test.

"We ought to make it longer." You'd made your opinion well known. But you have your charisma, your test-pilot fame, and your

daddy's money to fall back on. All I've got is a brain full of numbers, too much nervous energy, and too much stubbornness to give up.

You'd have had plenty of opportunity to enter an extra zero (or two or three) before stepping across that bridge.

50 minutes pass. 500 minutes pass.

How many did you enter? How far did you go?

There's only so many possibilities.

"He's not there, so he must be there."

"Then," someone corrects. "He must be then."

There's one more possibility that I don't speak of: that you are Nowhere, Never, Not at All. It's possible, if anything were to happen to the time bridge before whatever time you programmed in, you'll never end up anywhere at all. I don't mention it as a possibility, because in my mind, it's no possibility at all. I can't afford that spot on my record – to forever be the first person to lose someone to Time. So, for me,

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waiting's the only choice I've got.

A memorial of used coffee mugs collects beside the sink.

5,000 minutes pass. Faces fall. Shoulders slump.

It's a 30-day wait for 50,000 minutes.

You wouldn't have done that to us.

Would you?

You would.

I knew your type but hired you anyway. Your heroes were all silver-screen rouges with sly smiles who'd never learnt to take no for an answer. Who always managed to get themselves out of a bind: save the girl, save the day.

I hate that that's how you see yourself. You don't recognize that *you're* the one putting us all in danger.

50,000 passes.

They halve our funding. Pheromones of panic turn to pheromones of decay, and the bees begin abandoning the hive.

I stare at the empty bridge so long and so hard that it becomes a fixture in my dreams.

Month by month, as I wait for 500,000, I watch all I've worked for disappear. Equipment repossessed. Coffeepot unplugged. My swarm of workers ghost me, fade. Until all that's left is me.

Me and that wretched bridge.

When I envisage your return, you always look so victorious, stepping out with the same arrogant pose and cocky grin you were wearing when you stepped in. Seconds later for you. Nearly a year for me.

You'll laugh and the media will go wild with the story.

Your story, that is. Not mine.

Your two seconds will be so much more exciting, much more noble, much more courageous and daring than my 347 days of waiting.

The day arrives, and I'm the only one left to watch the clock tick down. Just me, still

clinging to this dusty, abandoned hive. Morally incapable of tearing apart this life-ruining machine while there's still some small chance you might step through it.

This is the last time, I think. The last time I let you put me in this position.

An unwelcome thought follows: *Unless you hit another zero.*

(I hate you, knowing you would. That if one year is more adventurous than five minutes, then how much more exciting is *ten*? That you wouldn't even think twice about those you left waiting. About *me*.)

Waiting. Paralysed. Unable to walk away. I hold my breath.

Three ... two ... one ...

Wendy Nickel is a speculative-fiction author with a degree in elementary education, a fondness for road trips and a terrible habit of forgetting where she's left her cup of tea. For more info, visit wendynikel.com.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Wendy Nickel reveals the inspiration behind *I'll burn this bridge when you get here*.

Many of my flash pieces grow out of story prompts from my online writing group's annual flash-fiction challenge. This past year, we were challenged to use a 'twisted idiom', a phrase constructed of one or more idioms, with the words altered or shifted to make it mean something new. One twisted idiom that sprang to my mind, which now makes up this story's title, combines the phrases 'burning bridges' and 'we'll cross that bridge when we get there'.

The next step was to figure out what sort of bridge this was, where someone was returning from, and why the bridge needed to be destroyed. At the time, I'd been watching a sci-fi TV series in which, episode after episode, the supporting characters were putting their lives in the hands of the main character who, frankly, wasn't someone I'd have trusted so much.

My musings on that dynamic, combined with my twisted idiom, became the basis for this story written from the perspective of a 'supporting character' who must deal with the fallout when the ego of the 'main character' puts their whole team in a dangerous, no-win situation that makes them feel like burning the whole thing to the ground.

