

The Butterfly Scenario

an original script
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FADE IN:

EXT. CENTRAL PARK -- DAY

We are in a particularly isolated section of the park. A single wooden bench is positioned near a path, and though it is a beautiful, sunny summer day, large trees overhead allow little light through.

JEN BREZANSKY is dressed like your typical Ivy League college student, and is intensely studying a very thick physics book with a picture of Einstein on its cover.

A MAN walks past her without stopping, and she is too engrossed in her book to take notice. A few moments pass, and the man returns to her bench. He is dressed in dark clothing, despite the heat.

MAN

Mind if I sit down?

Jen looks up, surprised.

JEN

Sure, go ahead.

The man sits down next to her, stretches, and looks around the park. Jen returns to her reading. A few moments pass.

MAN

I'm sorry, I don't mean to disturb you, but may I ask what you're reading?

Jen looks up again. She's not annoyed by him yet, but her purpose in coming to the park was to study.

JEN

Just a physics book. It's for one of my classes.

MAN

Really? I'm actually an author, and I've been doing a lot of work recently that's centered around physics. Which book are you reading?

Jen holds up the book. It reads: Quantum Physics Revisited.

JEN

Quantum Physics Revisited. It's by a guy named Robert Southern.

MAN

Haven't heard of him. Confusing?

JEN

At first, yeah, but once you get the hang of the language, it makes sense.

MAN

I know what you mean.

He sticks out his hand.

MAN (CONT'D)

Michael York.

She accepts his handshake awkwardly.

JEN

Jen Brezansky. Nice to meet you.

MICHAEL

Likewise.

She returns to reading her book. Michael sits back, staring out into space.

MICHAEL'S POV

A WOMAN in the distance is sitting on a blanket, holding her new-born BABY close to her breast. Her TWO OLDER CHILDREN, about ten or eleven, are running around chasing a soccer ball.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

I'm sorry, can I bother you one last time?

Jen looks up, somewhat annoyed this time but doing her best to hide it.

JEN

Sure.

MICHAEL

So this book I'm writing. It's about a man who travels through time. I've been trying to keep the physics of it grounded in reality but the books I've been reading are pretty much Greek to me. I was wondering if you could maybe help me understand the basics.

JEN

Do you have a specific question?

MICHAEL

Well, I have a few.

Jen tries to restrain her dismay, but it's difficult.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

First question. From what you know, would you say that travel to the future is possible?

JEN

(thinking)

Yes, technically. It can be proven with Einstein's theories of relativity and special relativity. If you were to go at the speed of light over a period of time, you would, in a sense, travel to the future.

MICHAEL

I see.

JEN

As an object approaches the speed of light, the object experiences a phenomenon known as time dilation. Time slows down for the object as its speed increases, yet time around the object continues to go at a normal pace.

She realizes what she has just said is a little confusing.

JEN (CONT'D)

In other words, if I were to travel at the speed of light, time for me would slow down, whereas it would remain the same for you. I would age one year for your every eighteen years.

MICHAEL

Really. Well, if it's possible, why hasn't anyone done it yet?

JEN

Because achieving the speed of light requires an infinite amount of energy and unfortunately,

(smiling)

we really aren't capable of generating that much.

MICHAEL

How about travel to the past? Is that within the realm of physics?

JEN

That gets much more complicated because there's no one clear answer.

(MORE)

JEN (CONT'D)

Scientists have hypothesized that travel to the past might be possible with the existence of wormholes, which actually bend space-time, but its still a highly controversial subject. Again, you would need an enormous amount of energy to do any of this.

Michael thinks about all of this for a moment.

MICHAEL

Not bad! You sound like you know your stuff.

JEN

Thanks.

She holds up her book.

JEN (CONT'D)

I study a lot.

With that hint, she returns to her reading, leaving Michael to his thoughts. He stares across the park again.

MICHAEL'S POV

Two TEENAGERS, a boy and girl obviously in love, are throwing a Frisbee back and forth.

Watching the two teenagers from a bench opposite Michael and Jen are an ELDERLY MARRIED COUPLE. They seem fascinated by the simple game.

Michael watches them intensely for a few moments. Suddenly, as if shaken from of a dream, he looks down at his watch.

MICHAEL

Want to see a magic trick?

Jen looks up and pretends to be interested.

JEN

What?

MICHAEL

In ten seconds, a pigeon will land at the base of that tree over there. Black with white spots around its neck.

He indicates the location while counting down the time silently.

JEN
(skeptical)
Oh really.

MICHAEL
Mmm hmm. Right about...now.

As he says the words, a pigeon comes to rest in front of a tree a short distance from them.

Jen is somewhat amazed, but resisting her urge to believe it wasn't a setup.

JEN
Ok. How'd you know that?

MICHAEL
(smiling)
If I told you, there wouldn't be any magic in it.

Jen is ready to find a new bench.

JEN
Well, Mr. York...

MICHAEL
Michael.

JEN
...it's been fun, but I have to get back to school.

She starts packing up her book bag.

MICHAEL
Leaving so soon?

JEN
Physics class.

MICHAEL
Well, how about one last question before you leave?

JEN
(reluctant)
OK, but only one more.

Jen plunks down for a final query.

JEN (CONT'D)
What's the question?

MICHAEL
My story is actually going to deal more with the ethical side to time travel than the factual.

JEN

Ethical?

MICHAEL

Have you ever heard of the Ray Bradbury story...I forget the title, but it's about men who build a time machine and travel back in time to hunt dinosaurs.

JEN

Sure. "A Sound of Thunder" was the title. One of the hunters accidentally steps on a butterfly during the hunt, and that one small insignificant death completely changes the future when they return.

MICHAEL

I can't believe you've read that story!

JEN

It was a bedtime favorite.

MICHAEL

One of mine too. My problem is just what you described with the butterfly. It seems like if you were to go back in time, it would be easy to change the future. Here's the premise I've been thinking about for my story. What if you could go back in time and create a perfect world?

JEN

How so?

MICHAEL

Well, let's say I went back in time to the year 1900, then traveled forward, stopping along the way to prevent various disasters I knew would happen. I warn people of World War 1, stop Hitler from coming to power, warn JFK of the assassination attempt to come in Texas, and so on. I fix all of these, then finally travel forward to the day I left and live out the benefits of my perfect world. What do you think?

JEN

I think that would make a very interesting story.

She starts packing her bag.

MICHAEL

I'm serious though. Let's say you personally had the power to live a perfect world - prevent the wrongs of the past for a future in which everyone benefited. Would you do it?

JEN

I...I don't know. I don't particularly think the world as we know it is all that bad.

MICHAEL

Well, it's a science fiction story, so let's say that everything is much worse than it is today. Imagine that millions of people are wiped out in...I don't know, World War 3 or something. An extreme scenario. You are one of the sole survivors. Suddenly, by some fortune, you have the opportunity to travel to the past and change the future - you could prevent the war from ever starting and save countless lives. Would you do it?

Jen is not taking him too seriously.

JEN

Well, in that extreme scenario, maybe I would.

MICHAEL

What if...What if it meant killing someone to prevent that outcome? Millions of lives traded for a single one.

Jen is a little perplexed at this statement.

JEN

I'm not sure what you mean.

MICHAEL

Use your imagination. Say, the entire war can be attributed to the decisions and inventions of one girl. A single human life.

JEN

A girl?

MICHAEL

Killing her would prevent so many deaths. Would you do it?

JEN

I don't think I could kill anyone.

Jen does not understand any of this, and Michael is growing stranger by the sentence.

MICHAEL

You're not in the right mindset, Jen. Imagine all the terror and tragedy I'm describing could all be traced back in time...to a single girl sitting on a bench in central park...reading a physics book.

Jen bolts from the bench.

JEN

I have to go-

Michael grabs her wrist with an iron grip.

MICHAEL

Move and I'll fucking kill you.

He flashes the handle of a gun he has concealed in his jacket pocket. Jen looks around desperately.

JEN

Everyone will see!

MICHAEL

I don't care. Sit down or you're fucking dead.

She looks around helplessly, then returns to her seat, confused and scared. Michael is still holding the concealed gun.

JEN

If you want my money, you can have it-

MICHAEL

I don't want your money.

JEN

What do you want then?

MICHAEL

I want you to convince me not to kill you.

Jen is stunned.

JEN

Why do you want to kill me?

MICHAEL
You just heard why.

JEN
What are you talking about?

Michael thinks for a moment.

MICHAEL
Imagine that everything I just told you is basically true. That somewhere in the future, you *will* be responsible for the deaths of millions.

JEN
Me? What are you talking about?

MICHAEL
It all begins with a controversial theory...a theory that has the potential to solve all the world's problems. Do you know what the idea behind perpetual motion is?

JEN
Yeah. A machine that generates more energy than it takes in. It's impossible.

MICHAEL
Impossible is a pretty definite word to use, Jen. People used to use that word with traveling through time - and I can assure you that it is very possible. So let's say that you create such a device. A machine that constantly generates more and more power. Imagine what you could do with it! Free energy, heat, an end to pollution of all kinds, lower prices on everything...

JEN
So what's the problem?

MICHAEL
Think about the dangers you would inadvertently bring into the world with so much available energy. Think of the weapons that could be created.

JEN
You're crazy.

MICHAEL
Shut up.

(MORE)

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

Certain countries decide to use the idea for a bomb of unimaginable power. A surprise attack on America completely destroys Washington D.C., and it is said that the light from the blast can be seen across the country. War breaks out, and no one is left out of the chaos. In the end, there are few survivors, and the Earth is devastated beyond repair.

Jen watches him in stunned silence.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

You said before Jen, that what was preventing us from ever achieving time travel was the energy it required. And yet, with your ideas, we were able to overcome that obstacle. We could trace all the incidents that result in the destruction of mankind back to you sitting here in Central Park on this very day. Stopping you is the simplest way to prevent the destruction of mankind that will come if you are allowed to live.

JEN

I...I don't believe you.

MICHAEL

What will convince you? Would you like me to tell the future? Predict what is about to happen?

He looks at his watch.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

A squirrel will run down that tree in the next ten seconds.

It happens.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

Maybe you want something a little more definite. A senator from the midwest will retreat to his bedroom tonight complaining of chest pains. He will have a heart attack in the night and die. It's not a great example though, because you won't be alive to hear about it.

JEN

I can't believe it.

MICHAEL

It doesn't matter. In the end, it all inevitably traces back to you. It has to be stopped here, or never. All I have to do is kill you, then return to the future. A perfect future you were never alive to ruin.

JEN

(frantic)

I won't study physics! I'll give it up!

MICHAEL

At this point, you already know too much. The idea is as inherent to you now as the theory of relativity was to Einstein. All you have to do is realize it - and you will.

JEN

(begging)

Please let me go.

It is almost as if Michael is trying to reason with her now.

MICHAEL

Jen, don't you want me to spare this world from the horror I have seen? That I have lived through?

JEN

You'd be a murderer.

MICHAEL

(furious)

You want to talk about murder? You have no fucking right, Jen! You have no right! I have seen my wife's body charred beyond recognition. I have seen my son - two years old - flesh stripped from his body. I have seen this great city reduced to rubble, oxygen become unbreathable, corpses lining the streets in droves - you want to call this murder, go ahead. But one death for millions seems pretty fucking justified to me.

JEN

But...

She is thinking hard to save herself.

JEN (CONT'D)

But you don't understand the idea behind this! The underlying fact to everything is that the butterfly scenario is not true! One man cannot simply change history.

MICHAEL

What are you talking about?

JEN

If what you say is correct - if the theory of perpetual motion is out there - then *it will be discovered*. Do you think the theory of relativity would have remained undiscovered if Einstein hadn't come along?

MICHAEL

But you make the discovery.

JEN

There would be a moment in history when the theory of relativity would be discovered, whether it was with Einstein or not. And from that point in time, history would basically mirror our own. If this idea is there to be found, then the future that goes along with it is unavoidable.

MICHAEL

But who knows when that will be? I could kill you now and prevent it from happening for millions of years.

JEN

Maybe. Or maybe there's someone about to discover the theory at this very moment. Have you ever heard of Alexander Graham Bell's famous race to the patent office? He perfected the telephone only hours apart from another scientist. If Bell hadn't figured it out, someone else would have on that same day.

MICHAEL

I...

JEN

If you kill me, it won't change anything.

MICHAEL

If I don't...then the events of the future will still unfold as I know them. Without question.

JEN

They won't.

MICHAEL

Really? You really believe that?

JEN

Yes.

MICHAEL

You really think that you'll be able to stop yourself from studying physics? Jen, if I leave you now, the war will still happen.

JEN

How can you know this?

MICHAEL

Because of something you once told me.

JEN

Me?

MICHAEL

After the war.

JEN

What-

MICHAEL

About an encounter you once had with a man in central park, who tried to convince you not to continue with your studies in physics right before you made your famous discovery. She - you - sent me back to try again. I was told not to let you talk me out of it. But I realize now that I'm not a murderer, no matter what the circumstances. And I think that maybe this is the exact conversation that was had before. The exact conversation that failed. This all means that I'm about to die.

In a split second, Michael stands, pulls the gun from his pocket and aims it at Jen's head. Jen clenches her eyes, teeth gritted and crying.

There is a GUNSHOT. After a moment, Jen opens her eyes, alive.

Beside her, Michael falls to the ground, shot from behind. Coming into focus from the background is a police officer.

POLICE OFFICER
Hey! Get away from him!

Michael twitches on the ground, the gun having fallen from his lifeless hand. The police officer runs to the bench and pulls Jen to her feet and away from Michael. Several people begin approaching the area and forming a circle. Jen is dazed. The police officer bends down to check Michael's pulse.

POLICE OFFICER (CONT'D)
He's dead.

Two other cops rush onto the scene and begin examining the body. The police officer stands up and turns to Jen, panting.

POLICE OFFICER (CONT'D)
I...I saw the two of you on the bench.
You looked upset. I saw him pull
the gun from his pocket...

Three more officers join the others and back the crowd away. A SIREN can be heard in the distance. The police officer guides Jen away from the crowds.

POLICE OFFICER (CONT'D)
We'll wait right here, there's an
ambulance on its way.

Jen is still dazed.

Two officers are examining the body.

OFFICER 1
Fucking sicko. Tried to kill this
girl for no reason.

The other officer pulls out his wallet.

OFFICER 1 (CONT'D)
What's his name?

OFFICER 2
It says Michael York, but it must be
a fake.

OFFICER 1
Why do you say that?

OFFICER 2
The expiration date on the license
is thirty years from now.

OFFICER 1
Weird.

Jen hears all this from aside. Two paramedics come from behind and wrap a blanket around her.

POLICE OFFICER
Come on. Let's get out of here.

JEN
Huh? Ok.

Jen is totally dazed as they guide her away. Suddenly, a WOMAN from the crowd runs up to her.

WOMAN
Hey, miss! Miss? You forgot your book.

She holds out the physics book, and Jen hesitantly accepts it.

JEN
...thank you.

The woman smiles and walks away. The policeman and paramedics lead Jen to the ambulance. The book is tucked safely beneath her arm.

FADE TO BLACK