

Time Machine

It is Valentine's Day, and I am spending it at the library. I work here, although I hardly feel like I've earned that status as I've only been here for a week and a half.

It's a cute little library, situated between a bakery and a barber shop in the South Hills of Pittsburgh. If I had a car, it would take me 15 minutes to get here, 30 minutes at most, if the traffic's really bad. But I don't have a car. Instead, I ride the bus, which takes anywhere between an hour 15 and an hour 45. I spend about 40 minutes of that time on the bus, 10-20 minutes walking, and the rest waiting.

There's this phenomenon I've been experiencing lately that I'm sure someone smarter than me would be able to identify as the XYZ Fallacy or the Whatchamacallit Postulate, and it goes like this: I take two buses both to and from work. I have a connection downtown. But the bus routes are all screwed up because Port Authority is remapping them (although they don't seem too concerned with finishing the project). My transit app hasn't quite adjusted to these changes, so the times and locations it gives me aren't always accurate. Getting *to* work isn't usually too bad—somehow my app seems to know what's going on in that direction. It's getting home that's hopeless. I have no idea when my connecting bus will arrive downtown. They don't seem to follow any sort of consistent schedule, and my app is so off base I don't even check it anymore. I just take the bus downtown and hope for good timing.

But for the past week and a half, it has seemed, like clockwork, that my bus will fly right past me just as I'm turning the corner, one minute too late. So now, whenever I get off my first bus, I sprint to the bus stop, as if it will do anything. It's gotten to the point that whenever my first bus hits a particularly long red, or someone takes their sweet time getting on or off, wanting to have a chat with the driver or dropping all their change, I find myself grinding my teeth and tapping my foot, thinking, "this is gonna make me late!"

But of course, it won't. There is no such thing as "late." There is no schedule, at least not one that I have access to. Now I know it may seem like there is, in fact, a schedule if my bus beats me by a minute every night, but I don't think that's true. There are six different buses I can take home—61A, 61B, 61C, 71A, 71B, and 71C. If the same bus beat me by one minute every night, maybe I'd believe there's a pattern there. But it doesn't; I've been paying attention. On a given night, it could be any one of the six possible options. And I don't arrive at the same time every night, either, I've also been paying attention to that. No matter how fast I run, how many greens we hit, how speedily people board and exit the bus, my next bus could always beat us by a minute. But I keep running, because if it "works" even once, and by "work" I mean coincide, it'll be enough to convince me that I can beat Port Authority at its own game.

When I do end up missing the bus, which is always, I wait. Usually not too long, 25 minutes at most, but I wait. I wait at the corner of Fifth and Smithfield. Out of breath and somewhat in denial as I watch a 61 or 71—*my* 61, *my* 71—trail off in the direction of home without me on it, I assume my place in the congregation of waiters, squeeze in wherever there's a sizable gap in the bodies. I stand beside workers—workers in cargo pants and hard hats and security vests, in Brooks Brothers suits and Zara blazers and Louboutins; I stand beside mothers holding babies with no shoes and mismatched socks; unshaven old men folded over at the waist, so much so that their knuckles graze the sidewalk; women with dark eyeliner and no teeth, people smoking cigarettes and weed and other substances I can't identify, nurses in scrubs, queer kids wearing anarchist pins and knee-high lace-up boots, 20-something boys in khakis and navy sweaters, boys I might have taken Intro to Microeconomics with. I weave myself into this human tapestry, wondering how tight the stitches really are, and if they even exist at all.

When I stand in this crowd, I can't help but draw a line in my head and place the people around me on either side. Then I place myself, which is useless, because I'm always on the same side of it, no matter the night, no matter the crowd.

What this line delineates, most rudimentarily, is rich and poor. And I'm rich. In some ways, this is a useless dichotomy, an unproductive way of thinking about social class. In some ways, I belong on the other side, or a different side altogether. There are workers, and there are owners. I am a worker, as is the homeless woman beside me, because we sell our labor for wages and do not own our means of production. I know that I am much closer to being in her position than Jeff Bezos's. But I have a washer and dryer and dishwasher in my kitchen. I have a kitchen. I have an apartment. I have my comforts and my luxuries, a bachelor's degree and a full-sized bed and an alarm clock that is programmed to gradually get brighter for an hour each morning and wake me up at 7:30 with bird sounds. Throughout the day, this clock, which sits on my bookshelf and emits a warm, orange light, reminds me of the time. When I lie on my full-sized bed long enough that the orange light gets brighter because my room has gotten darker, I'm aware of how much time has passed.

I don't say this to distance myself from the woman beside me. I'm sure she has her comforts and her leisures too, even if they look vastly different from anything I'd consider comfortable or leisurely. We both do not own our means of production, but we both *have* things, physical and spiritual things. In these ways, we are alike. But our experiences of the world are so vastly different. We are undeniably on different sides of a line.

Still, there's one quality we all share when we stand on that sidewalk: we're all waiting. When a bus turns the corner way down the road to our left, we all crane our necks and squint, trying to make out the number on it, waiting with bated breath as it gets nearer, hoping it's *ours*.

This is not the only time I wait. The bus *from* the library to downtown, the 39, is regular and reliable, but it only comes once every thirty minutes. Tonight, it comes at 7:10, and I get off work at 7:15. The next one's not until 7:40. It's 30 degrees out—20 degrees at rest.

On days like this, I let myself get a treat to stay warm and pass the time. I don't know what constitutes a "day like this" seeing as I have to wait at least 20 minutes every day. I guess a "day like this" is one I deem special. Valentine's Day, for example, a day on which I'm returning home from work to an empty apartment, no one waiting there for me with a candlelit dinner and a bottle of wine.

I watch the time on the desktop computer change from 7:14 to 7:15. I wait my turn to clock out, not wanting to seem too eager. I walk out with the rest of the crew, say my "goodnights" and "see you tomorrows," then split down the boulevard to Antonio's for a slice and a soda before the 39 rolls down the boulevard at 7:40.

Antonio's is unfancy. The interior is dark yet bathed in a neon green fluorescent glow, like how a 90s arcade looks in the mind of someone too young to have ever been to one. Rainbow fairy lights hang from a water-damaged ceiling and illuminate the grey-green stucco walls. A pinball machine sits in the corner, next to a refrigerator full of drinks.

It's busy in here, busier than I would have liked. No one is currently ordering, so I take my chance before I have time to think about what I want. The menu appears on a TV above the counter, transitioning through different sections like a powerpoint—one minute it's sandwiches, the next it's sides. I can't find a paper menu, and at this point the cashier is looking at me expectantly, so I look up at the screen. Unable to locate the pizza section of the menu and with too little time to wait around for it to appear, I order a pepperoni calzone instead. A pepperoni calzone and a soda.

"That'll be about 20 minutes, is that okay?"

It's currently 7:20. Bus in 20. I mutter a cross between a "yes" and a "sure" without enough time to consider whether or not I have enough time. She nods, I pay, and she hands me my receipt and tells me the drinks are in the fridge.

I walk over to the fridge, faced with another decision: I want a Coke, not a Pepsi, because the Coke comes in glass bottles, and the Pepsi comes in plastic ones. Cold drinks taste better in glass, everyone knows this. But the glass is the exact reason for my indecision. If I don't drink it all before the bus comes, it'll be a hassle carrying an open glass bottle on the bus, especially

when trying to get my bus pass out and tap it while also holding my boxed calzone, as I certainly won't be able to finish *that* before the bus comes. So I grab a Pepsi, which I can open and close and stow at my convenience, and zip it inside my backpack.

I hang off to the side with the other waiting customers. I take out my phone to scroll through something stupid but time-consuming. I hope the cashier overshot the estimated wait time, but I try not to show my impatience on my face. The universe senses things like that.

Five minutes pass, one order is called. Six other people wait beside me. This does not necessarily mean six orders. Based on who people are standing with and talking to, my guess is that there are actually three orders ahead of me. But still, there are six people who need to eat. Probably more. There are two young boys in the booth in front of me who appear to be brothers, and I have a feeling they ordered for the whole family.

“Order for Jamie?” The woman behind the register calls. One of the boys hops up out of his seat and walks to the register, and the other one quickly follows upon seeing the second full bag of food on the counter. A minute or two go by.

“Order for John?”

“Order for Jane?”

I don't look up when I hear these orders being called. I know they're not mine, and I don't want to get my hopes up by looking. I check the time: 7:31. I give myself a strict 7:35 cutoff.

According to my guess about how many orders were before mine, I should be next. Now I let myself look up to see if I was right. There are more than six people here, but no one I recognize, which means I was right. These must all be people who ordered after me.

At 7:32, another order is called, but it's not mine. I don't even have to listen for the name to know it's not mine, because the first three words tell me all I need to know: “Mobile order for...”

Another mobile order is called immediately after the first. I watch a young man stride up to the counter, no urgency in his gait. Must be nice to fold your laundry and walk your dog and get gas and see a movie while your food's being made.

It's 7:34. I don't even feel like waiting the extra minute. I walk up to the counter.

“Hi, excuse me? Sorry, could you actually cancel my order please?” I hope that my asking this will remind her that “oh, actually your order has been ready for five minutes! Thank you for reminding me,” but she just looks vaguely annoyed.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

She cancels it. She tells me to tap my card when I’m ready. I can feel the money getting sucked back into my bank account. It feels like a net gain even though it’s not. You have to tell yourself these things.

At 7:38, I arrive at the bus stop. I lean against the concrete stoop and look left down the boulevard. In the dark I can just make out a lit up “39,” written in orange, block numbers. The numbers don’t move until they do, at which point they start getting closer. The light must have turned green, which means each successive light will be green by the time the bus reaches it, which means it will be here any minute.

At 7:41, it comes to a screeching halt in front of me. I’m the only one at the bus stop and no one ever gets off here, so I enter before the doors have even fully opened. There is only one other person on the bus, a middle-aged man, who dozes off in the second row on the left. I sit in the third row on the right, window seat.

As we rumble along, each Pittsburgh pothole feeling deeper and wider than the last, I go through what I’m going to do when I get home: wash my hands, drop my backpack in my room, change into sweatpants, boil water for the pasta I’ve unknowingly already decided to make in lieu of the calzone, refill my water bottle, refill the Britta...

As I think about my water bottle, empty and rattling around in my backpack, I think about something else in there. I unzip my backpack and crack an open-mouthed smile at what I find: my Pepsi, unopened, still cold, and free.