

The Temple of Screens

By

Taste omniscience at the Temple of Screens the welcome brochure promises. There is a list of viewing packages and prices, from the basic ten screen package up to ten thousand screens. Ten is all I can afford.

A temple attendant escorts me to the back of the building. We go down a long hallway full of closed doors that emanate flickering lights from their borders. The attendant opens a dark door and ushers me in.

I hear a click as the door shuts behind me. I can't see anything. There is a bit of an electric odor and taste in the air. The floor is soft, like I'm standing on large leather couch. Then there is low blue glow.

A wall of screens flicker, an image comes into focus. It's me. I see myself standing in front of the screens ahead of me looking at an image of myself staring at screens in front of me. The infinite image partitions into ten segments. Ten movies begin in parallel.

I see myself exit the temple from all ten screens. Then the stories start to diverge. On a screen right in front of me, I watch myself turn left. On another screen, I turn right. On a third, I sit on the steps outside the Temple and cry.

As I watch I feel nauseous and have shivers of cold and flashes of heat. I get short of breath. Adrenaline surges like I am spying on a bathing woman, or juggling with lit dynamite.

I scan from screen to screen. Trying to concentrate on an image. Trying to feel if there is any sort of connection to a singular one. They all feel equally familiar and foreign at the same time. A face that I've seen before but can't remember the name.

I laugh as one of my movies has me get into an altercation with a crotchety old woman who ends up throwing coffee in my face and she sticks out her tongue at me.

The TVs throw the scenes at me quickly. Minutes happen in seconds, my future possible lives in fast forward.

I start to notice the fuzziness. The edges start become more out of focus. Sometimes the faces of people I meet flicker from male to female, blue eyed to brown eyed.

The screen on the bottom left shows me getting to her first. My angel. My love. My Stella.

She's in the hospital room where I last saw her. Tubes dangle around her, carrying in their medicinal nectar and carrying out her biological sludge. Wires record every breath and heartbeat and send information to the computers that dispense more or less medicines.

My heart's desire lies in this plastic web like a paralyzed fly. Not fighting nor accepting the intrusiveness.

I still feel the pang of guilt squeezing my spine and shredding my heart. I wipe the blur of tears from my eyes and force myself to watch. I need to know how to save her. It's my fault that she ended up there.

I need to know that there is one path out there that brings her back. One scenario that will bring us back to that gazebo in the park where we shared a dance to music only we could hear. One scenario that will fix my mistake.

But she doesn't come back in this movie. The monitors in her hospital room flash and beep and then grow dark and silent. I don't care what happens next. I turn my attention to another screen.

I'm with Stella. She is in a wheelchair. She seems unresponsive. I am walking her through a garden. We are stopping to watch some hummingbirds. They are her favorite, her spirit animal in many ways. Beautiful, but vicious and fierce. Small and fragile, but remarkably resilient and resourceful.

I kiss her on the head and then walk away. Then I run, wiping my eyes with my jacket sleeve. Stella stays with the hummingbirds. Her head slumps into her chest, like an old woman falling asleep in a rocking chair. But she's so young, and she won't be waking up from this sleep.

I wish I had a stone in my hand that I could throw at the screen, shatter it to a million pieces. My legs grow weak, and I fall to the floor. I know why it is padded now.

I try to focus through watery eyes. The images are getting blurrier as well, with more variability in colors and weather.

But then I see it, the one I've been looking for. We're at the gazebo in the park where we met. She has her head on my shoulder and we slowly spin and sway.

There's no music and there's so much music. Our chests pound with synchronized drum beats. A light wind tickles leaves and grasses, and the crickets, the frogs, the birds take their turn with punctuating notes. This is the moment I never want to end. Can I press pause here?

She whispers I love you in my ear. As I watch, I touch my own ear, pining for those warm gentle lips. But then her eyes roll back and she falls to the floor and starts convulsing.

On screen I start to scream for help. In the room I scream as well. *Someone help her!* But the people that come are too late. I taste bile in the back of my mouth.

I feel ripped in half. Part of me wants to flee, to be done with this Hell. Part of me feels compelled to watch. I get a precarious grip on my fractured self and try to endure the images.

Seven more times I watch her die. In three more scenes, she never leaves the hospital. In another, a car crashes into us as we leave the parking lot. In one, I find her in a bathtub with orange pill bottles floating around her. In a particularly beautiful one, she's sitting by campfire on a lakeshore, surrounded by everyone she knows and loves while she drinks wine and eats chocolates. She eventually goes to sleep, and we send her off into the lake on a makeshift raft filled with flickering candles.

The last scene burns in my mind the most.

We are in the hospital. She's in a different sort of room. She is lying on a bed, lifeless. I curl up on the hospital bed next to her. I wrap her arm around me. But it's not just me. There's a little baby girl between us. Everything else on the screen is out of focus and fuzzy, except the child's face. The baby girl is smiling and peeks open her eyes. They look just like her mothers.

All the screens go dark. I suddenly feel exhausted.

I wake up somewhere else. I'm on some sort of cot. I'm in a room with wood panel walls. The floor is a soft white shag carpet. There's a small table and it has a glass of water on it. I'm parched. I down the water and need more. There's a door. I stand and reach for the handle, but the door opens before I can get to it.

A woman walks in. She's in a beige jumpsuit with her walnut colored hair tied back in a tight ponytail. She's carrying a water pitcher and refills my glass.

"Good to see you awake." She says. Her voice is kind. "You've been out for eighteen hours."

I sit on the edge of the bed.

"Where am I?" I try to keep my hands steady as I take the glass of water to my lips.

"You are in one of our recovery rooms. Seeing the future affects everyone differently, we want to make sure that we can release you back into the world."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Sage, I'm the actuary that orchestrated your scenarios." She pauses and looks down to the floor. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry."

I don't know what to say, so for a few moments we just stay in silence. She eventually moves to the wall and presses on a panel and computer screen flickers on. I shudder as I recall my last episode with screens. She looks at me.

"What do you want to do when we release you?"

"I don't know."

"Good." She flashes me a smile and exhales a small sigh.

"How is that good?"

"Some people want to go back in, have us pull more scenarios. That's a known road to ruin. After so many return trips, people would enter into inescapable loop until all we could show them would be themselves forever watching themselves. That's part of the reason we make it so expensive."

I give a slight nod. For a moment I actually thought about going back in for more. But I didn't need Sage's cautions. The scars on my soul still ached.

"Other people get fixated on something they see. They either want it to unfold exactly as they saw it, or they want to try to alter it completely. These are both basically impossible to do and will be a waste of effort. The scenarios only work because they operate under the condition that you don't know of the consequence of your actions. We are showing you likely futures based on what we know about your patterns and what we know about the environment around you. You've bought the ten most likely scenarios, and that's what you've seen. So while you may now be a little more certain about the types of things that can happen, being uncertain is still the best state of mind to be in. Do you understand?"

I run my hands through my hair, take a deep breath, try to process what Sage is implying. I shake my head, it's not sinking in.

"Ever since humans began to be aware of a future, we've wanted to explore it. We've cast stones, searched in tea leaves, held the entrails of animals in our hands to try to extract some knowledge of our fate. Some of our stories try to show us that like Oedipus, we can't change our fate. In other stories, we find an escape, we have the power of choice, at least to some degree. But in either case, knowing our future changes how we act. Now that you've seen your possible futures, they are tainted. If you were to go back in, they'd all change, reflecting that you had some knowledge. The algorithm would give reallocate a new set of weights to your tendencies, increasing some behaviors and decreasing others."

A wave of anger flashes through me, and I stand and start pacing. "So what's the use of this?"

"To help you embrace what's possible, to come to terms with it. You came here because you were afraid of a certain future, one you hoped to avoid somehow. We can't fight or flee from the future, whatever one we fall into. But we can find serenity in any of our futures, if we so desire."

She empties the pitcher into my glass and heads for the door. "Take a minute to let it soak in."

Sage exits, and I fall back on the bed and stare at the ceiling. I close my eyes and try to decide what to do. Suddenly I start to laugh as I remember that day in the park that I first met Stella.

I had a magic eight ball. My friends and I would ask it silly questions mostly, but sometimes serious.

Will Stella go out with me? *Definitely not.*

That wasn't the answer I wanted. I shook it again. Another negative again. No matter how hard I tried, I never got it to give me a "most certainly" or even a "not sure" type of an answer. So I tossed the thing away, disregarding it as just a toy.

I went up to Stella, grabbed her by the hand and without a word starting dancing with her in the gazebo. She danced back.

Now I wonder, was the knowledge of the unlikeliness of our paring the thing that finally motivated me to go after her? Had I not sought the plastic oracle, would I have just stayed mired in my hesitancy?

I remember how strongly I felt, that I did not want a future that didn't have her in it. I still don't. That thought brings to my feet in the wooden room. I open the door and call for Sage.

I start talking as she enters the room.

"Is it possible that Stella will live now? I want her in my future as much as I ever have."

Sage takes my hand.

"Anything is possible, but I can't tell you that. You need to be prepared for a future without her, that's your best path. All the scenarios I've scanned, she's not alive. I've even reviewed some of the least likely scenarios. They are very grainy and it's hard to see what's happening, but as far as I can tell there are too many extraneous conditions to make her survival likely. That said, some of my fellow actuaries believe that life is more about what happens in the fuzz, in the most blurry parts, than what we can see more clearly."

I smile. Sage looks confused.

"I've consulted the future before and it was wrong." I reply. "You want me to try to come sort of place of acceptance. But as far as I see it, this place, this is no Temple. It's just a fancy version of a toy I played with as a child. If you want to know what I accept, I accept the fact that it is possible that your machine is broken."

Sage goes back to the wall computer and starts typing, her fingers attack the keyboard.

"You are free to go." Her voice is terse now, colder than it was when she first checked in on me.

"Really?"

"Yes. Rejection of what you've seen means you won't fight or flee from it. You don't believe in it, so you're free from its affects. But for what it's worth, the Temple is not a toy. We monitor our results, and we have seen our forecasts play out many, many times. Just try to come back to a place acceptance if things start turning for the worse."

She turns off the computer screen and leads me out of the building. As I leave, I take note of the care ward. There is a large number of catatonic bodies being attended to by the Temple's servants. Their eyes are glossy, perhaps forever replaying whatever horrors they witnessed in the dark rooms.

I head back to the hospital. Ready to apologize endlessly to Stella, ready to tell her I love her a thousands times.

When I get to her room, she's not there. In a bit of a panic I rush to find the nearest nurse.

"Where is she?" I yell for anyone who can hear me.

"Can I help you sir?" One of the elderly that had cared for Stella steps out from another room.

"Where's Stella? Do you know what happened to her? Where is she? Is she okay?"

The old woman chuckles.

"Calm down child, she's fine. She started coming back to us last night. This morning, she was standing on her own and eager to get out of her. She expected you to come back here. She told me to tell you two things. One that she forgives you and two that you know where to find her."

I let out a deep breath.

"And the baby is fine as well." She adds.

"Baby?"

The nurse gives me a wink.

Maybe the Temple's predictions aren't that totally wrong after all. I start to head out to the park to look for my love.

"Hold a minute son. Stella left her phone behind. Can you take it to her?"

I take it from the nurse and throw it in my pocket. On the way to the park it buzzes. A text message pops on the screen. I normally wouldn't spy on her, but the name caught my eye. It was from Sage.

I'd been with Stella for some time and had met all her friends. She never told me she knew anyone named Sage.

Showed him ten of your deaths. He didn't accept it. He will be sorry now though. You owe me.

I stand at the edge of the sidewalk. I stare at the phone screen. Is this screen the truth? Is this the scenario she lives? The scenario where I find out she wanted to punish me. I know I messed up, but the temple is a torture chamber. Have I atoned for my sins? On the phone glass, my reflection looks at me on top of the glowing text. I look away from the screen.

I see the green trees of the park off in the distance to my left.

To my right is the hospital and beyond that, the Temple of Screens.

I look down. There is a shiny glimmer at my feet. It's a coin. I pick it up, flick it into the air.

Maybe I'll let the fates decide.