

[INTERMISSION III]

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The Diary of Aliza Schultz: “Rafael Muslani and the Largest Cat in the World”

He has a cat on a leash. The largest cat in the world, according to him. It attacks who he tells it to attack. That’s rare for a cat. I had never heard of such a thing before reading about him. He does not exercise this power with caution. Many have gotten injured when he takes his cat out for a walk. It’s not that bad, mostly. It’s the largest cat in the world, but by that I mean the largest domesticated house cat. It’s still just a cat. It can claw and scratch and bite, but only with small claws and small teeth. It can’t be that hard to fight it off. I guess I’m still young and spry enough to not have to worry about such things, as old and decrepit as I might convince myself that I am sometimes.

He wrote all of those books, you know. Airport novels. Just the ones that say “Rafael Muslani” on the cover. I don’t know why people read them. Don’t people play games on their phone or something on the plane these days? Why read a book? Why not bring a book from home? *The Half-Time Sequence* is getting a movie, so many people bought it in an airport. Getting a movie or lost in development hell. It’s been awhile since they announced the project and they haven’t announced casting yet, which isn’t a great sign. It’s been a decade of a year, though. Things happen, or more importantly don’t happen. I’m sure someone is still working on it.

The Half-Time Sequence isn’t even Muslani’s worst book. I’m embarrassed to know so much about his books. Reading trash novels is like picking at a canker sore in your mouth. You know that you’re only causing yourself pain and making things worse, but it feels like a relief to feel that brief shock of pain compared to the lingering soreness. *The Half-Time Sequence* is a fine book to read on a plane, I just get hung up on the time travel aspects of it all. In my opinion, there aren’t any good stories about time travel. Some poor concept always gets left holding the bag. No explanation of the physics or the chain of events can bear the brunt of the weight of an author who needs it to justify all of his creative decisions. *The Half-Time Sequence* isn’t any different.

Time travel in the novel amounts to magic. People can either time travel or they can’t. There isn’t any science involved. This isn’t a science fiction novel. This eloquently steps around having to know anything about math, or time, or anything really, but personally it takes me out of it a little bit. I’m old enough to have seen all of magic debunked in my time. Fortune tellers who never are able to predict that they are about to get exposed on live TV. It’s petty, but the lack of science makes me feel like I’m not invited. This story clearly isn’t about me. These people live in a magical world and I don’t. And even then, most of those people aren’t magical either. People don’t have time for science fiction while they are 30,000ft above the ground.

The story follows Oscar Kelvin Price as he leaves his apartment one day, only to see that he has stepped out the door into rural America in January 1929. This is obviously a precarious time to be in America, since the Great Depression is around the corner. After weeks of trying to figure out how he made the jump in the first place and trying in vain to find other people like him and nearly getting arrested in the process, he changes his focus to trying to do everything that he can to prevent the Great Depression. Unfortunately for Oscar, he doesn’t have enough historical knowledge of how it all happened or economic knowledge to know what should have been done differently. He flops through 1929 in vain, trying with all his might to prevent the history that he knows he will have to live through, with all of its brutal poverty and lack of modern amenities.

In July of 1929, right before the stock market crash, he meets a woman named Olivia at the library. Something seems off about her, but off in the same way that he seems off living in 1929. They

become close friends and then quickly lovers. One day, as she is showering in the other room, he notices a quarter that had fallen out of her purse. When he picks it up, he notices that the date on the quarter is 2053. Surprised by this, he confronts her about it. Before she can say anything and before he can finish explaining that he was also from the future, Olivia grabs him by the arm. Things go black for a split second and then they are standing together in a new apartment building, built where the old apartment building was in 1929, 124 years later.

This is where Muslani loses me. 2053 is boring. I appreciate that it isn't all chrome and retrofuturism, which is somehow something that people are still doing these days, but it isn't interesting, either. He fails to predict even the most basic of quality of life upgrades or changes in politics or geography. It is written as though history has already ended. Nothing new can happen. There's still 50 states. The countries are the same, the way people talk is the same. Why invent a future where everything is the same? Because the story isn't about time travel, it's about Oscar and Olivia. I find it hard to care about their interpersonal drama while the time space continuum is warping dramatically in the background. They couldn't look any smaller on the stage. My eyesight is barely good enough to see them.

And of course it turns out that Olivia was a traitor this whole time. Turns out that in one timeline, Oscar actually did fix the Great Depression and Olivia was sent by the Russian government back in time in order to stop him in order to hurt America. She's not evil with a capital E, but they have her sister held captive. She has no choice. She really does love Oscar-- she was ordered to kill him and opted to bring him to the future instead. The chain of events was the same either way, as far as she could tell. He was prevented from stopping the Great Depression. The two of them hatch a plan to use their time travel capabilities to bust her sister out of a Russian prison. It is suspenseful but of course everything works out and they live happily ever after. There's a funny throwaway line at the end about how Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson was America's 43rd president, showing that the effects of the time travel had not been fully sussed out by our protagonists. The End. Plenty of potential left open for some sequel or movie or spinoff or audiodrama to pick up and run with.

It's contrived. The story has been told a thousand times before, right down to the Red Scare stuff thrown in for good measure. I don't get it. Why would you spend so much effort to write a boring story when you have the largest cat in the world? Surely that's more interesting. I thought about the cat the whole time that I was reading the novel. I would write about the cat instead of the time travel. You wouldn't be able to get me to write about anything else other than the largest cat in the world if it were me who owned it. What is it like? What would it say about me if I had the largest cat in the world? What am I like if I am the ones who owned it? I forgot the ending to *The Half-Time Sequence* by the time I got off the plane.

Rafael Muslani has a cat on a leash. The longest leash in the world, according to him. He's sitting in his house, by the fire with a good book-- a book much better than any that he could've written. Or even wants to write. When he reads this book, he does not aspire to write this book. It's a confidence that I can never know. The longest leash in the world extends out of his doorway, miles and miles, into the center of a dark street, dimly lit by streetlights. It has been raining but it is no longer raining. At the end of the longest leash in the world is the largest cat in the world, according to him. It is staring down the street, seemingly angry at some indiscretion that no one has truly perpetrated against it. Rage with animal clarity.

I am standing in the street, opposite the largest cat in the world. I am what the largest cat in the world is facing, seemingly angry at some indiscretion that I could not have possibly perpetrated against it. This was the first time I had ever seen the cat. There was no time in which I could have antagonized it. There isn't a version of me that exists before reading *The Half-Time Sequence* by Rafael Muslani on the plane and forgetting it by the time that I got off the plane. There isn't a version of me that exists between getting off the plane and confronting the cat. There is nothing that I could have done because

there wasn't any time to do it in. It would be like folding the Earth over on itself to travel between California and New York in a single step and then an ant in Nebraska accusing you of stepping on it. There was no way to step on it.

John Vaillant wrote a non-fiction book about a Siberian tiger, the claws of which he described as a "hybrid of stiletto and meat hook." It's the most beautiful description of an animal ever put to paper. I should have read it again instead of *The Half-Time Sequence*. This cat's stiletto meat hooks were considerably smaller, but they were the stiletto meat hooks that were coming towards me, which made them infinitely more threatening than the 4 inch claws of a hypothetical Siberian tiger. I didn't run. The world didn't exist behind me and the cat nimbly speeding towards me offered no way past it without a swipe. I stood in the street and looked at the diffused reflections of the cat, the apartment buildings, and the streetlights on the still-wet ground.

The cat got within striking distance of me and pounced. I stood still. The cat hit the end of its leash. The elasticity of the leash gave it another few inches of distance as it leapt at me. Its face was inches away from my face. It never offered any look other than determination. Still, it did not strike out at me with its stiletto meat hooks. The leash snapped the cat back, away from me, with force disproportional to the force that the cat had put on the leash in the first place. It disappeared into the night, pulled by the tether that connected it to Rafael Muslani, author of *The Half-Time Sequence*. The cat was not free, after all. It was attached to the longest leash in the world.

The category of "the largest cat in the world" isn't a prestigious one, but rather one that has been narrowed down by human perspective. Siberian tigers are cats and they are larger than the largest cat in the world but nobody cares. Their size is commendable but not a common point of discussion. The largest cat in the world matters because of its ownership and the ownership of all other domestic cats. Without Rafael Muslani, the largest cat in the world would be a cat that was large based on its genetic expectations but too small to fend off whatever large beast in the forest felt like attacking it in the middle of the night. The title is proof of ownership.

I don't know where I'll go now that the cat is gone. There isn't anything behind me. There could be something in front of me. I could walk down the wet road. I could get on a plane and read another trashy airport novel. I could track down Rafael Muslani and ask him why he lets his cat roam so far from his house. I don't get to decide and I don't get to know until I am already doing it. There isn't any time between now and the next event. *The Half-Time Sequence*.