

The Case Against Vennessa Coulton

Once Again, The Inventor Writes Her Own Story

Rynn Acker

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1.

If you keep up with the news around 2089 you're surely aware of a case involving one Vennessa Coulton which, on first assumption, you might think reporters are blowing out of proportion. They often mention a great crime against the world, a massive, frivolous risk, and the very integrity of our entire timeline being at risk. Reading further you find that such a conclusion is a matter of hot debate to which I mean to add my impressions with this article, outlining a series of personal encounters with the defendant herself.

If you're unfamiliar, the brief of the case is that, upon discovering the fundamental principle of fragility, the Designer Erin Poulter committed suicide on the night of July 24th, 2013, in response, Vennessa Coulton invents time travel to achieve Erin's greatest dream, and her story spreads over the world. She never goes back to see her because, more than anyone (so the argument goes) she knows it's not right to interfere with the past occurring before the invention, including the disastrous risk involved. That is, she never goes back until last week, when records from her device registry indicate she finally revisited Erin nearly after 75 years.

The average person reading the case reports will be confused by its extensive and complex use of pre-dated loop theories and laws which rarely see application in everyday cases. Moreover, inconclusive actions from the government and various enforcement agencies make it difficult for outsiders to understand if Coulton's actions are really being condemned, as, due to the uncertain nature of the case, Loop Dissociation Forces are not able to act on the case, the reason for this being that we are not, ourselves, observably in loop time.

Thus we have the impasse at the center of the proceedings: since much of the case is based on physical conjecture surrounding the consequences of Coulton's actions it is difficult to source facts on the exact consequences of said actions. Reporters from the Times and Post regularly consult experts in the field to make opinions, though these are not admissible as evidence and the published statements are largely hearsay and incorrectly said to constitute something even close to a fact. As the limited court records show, there are no facts about this case other than those taken from the incident directly. All other statements rely on coincidence at best and conspiracy at worst.

No direct accounts from the defendant herself have been recorded outside of persistently confidential court records. But to truly understand the case, one needs such a first-hand account from *the* expert on the invention, which I am lucky to secure and reproduce here with complete journalistic fidelity.

One will find it enlightening not only about the case and its many narratives, but about the mechanics of science, time, grief, and public good, as discourse on the case as a whole tends to be. It is my pleasure throughout this report to be able to debunk and dissect many rumors and myths about the case with Mrs. Coulton, and I take great pride in the integrity of this piece, enough to mark it as the definitive report on the case against Vennessa Coulton.

Seeing as the intent is to be comprehensive and direct, supporting as many audiences as there will be readers, I provide the appropriate context for understanding the case and the

implications of Coulton's and my statements where appropriate. Otherwise I avoid ado and proceed.

On the first day we met I was primarily concerned with gleaning her side of the case and biography, seeing as the opportunity to visit her is rare among reporters as well as people in general. It was only with much persistence and equivalent luck that I was permitted to see Mrs. Coulton. Not only is the Inventor a deeply busy woman, but she is also deeply protected, her entire frame of existence is considered off-limits for any travel, including official business. I can only visit her after numerous appeals to the public good and having pre-existed at the time when the meeting was meant to occur.

Immediately upon arrival I find her complex as beautiful as it is lonely. It's mostly fences, walls, domes, and warnings until you arrive at a humble little family home with a massive yard that's a one-hundredth the size of the complex as a whole. Coulton lives in almost complete isolation aside from her aide and, formerly, her wife, who passes in late August of 2075. Both of the women in the house I enter are stout and spend most of their lives at desks.

I feel it appropriate to mention these living conditions so that readers have the rare chance to understand what it's like to live as the Inventor, that they might find it as striking as I do and pardon my often confused behavior over the course of these interviews.

Venessa Coulton is not the person I expect her to be, and our conversations reveal that much. When one imagines her, the image likely comes under the influence of the eternally young, rigid, and stoic woman that lives in the few photographs of her from presidential and other such dramatic meetings. She was rarely this woman for more than a few hours at a time, and certainly is not at the time I met her, instead being a strikingly perceptive and clever woman bearing a well-used face that seems accustomed to smiling.

She begins by inviting me for some tea, and when I ask her the fairly lighthearted questions of small talk interviewers make, she surprises me again:

"How are you, Mrs. Coulton?"

"I've been fine, dear, making do." She makes a friendly comment about how nice it is to see an unfamiliar face, though finding the circumstances of our meeting unfortunate.

Mrs. Coulton, I should mention, often, and inconsistently, uses the anachronistic past tense to refer to events previous to her own experiences, which some readers find confusing. She uses phrases like "the period before/after the invention" or simply refers to an event that took place in fixed time to refer to events predating or postdating her invention of time travel. I clarify minor points of confusion where they might occur, but one should keep this in mind when reading her statements recorded elsewhere, as her speech is frequently a point of lengthy discussion.

I get used to her habit as the tea steeps and we get through the rest of the standard niceties. Her personality is short and sweet in equal measure, just about what you would expect

from a woman of her age and background. My impression is that she wouldn't have brought up anything about her past, let alone the invention, without my asking. Her aide confirms that to me later on — it's not something she talks about much, most of what she says now is about her garden, her writing, or her reading.

Knowing, however, more about her image than her personality at this stage in the interview, I start with a statement that, on listening later, I recognize as wildly short sighted.

"I'd like to start by getting to know a little more about your life and the process behind the genius of the Invention."

She slips into a slightly less present tone, as if drifting a little upon having to remember. "Still to this day I don't think of the invention as very genius or myself as particularly bright. I was just stubborn. I challenged time forth, demanding it become something manipulable with such recalcitrance that it broke before I did. These days I'm not sure that was the best result."

"Because it had negative consequences?"

"That, yes, and some negative causes. That's what you're here to talk about, yes?"

I confirm. "Yes. I'd love it if you could start from the beginning about Ms. Poulter."

She takes a deep breath and begins, speaking with the kind of certainty one has when narrating a well-trodden memory. "I met Erin Poulter in university, where I was studying to be a mechanical engineer. I'd inherited a love for machines from my father and, being a long way from home, found a kind of replacement for his warmth in the lovable oddballs of the Engineering Society. I attended every meeting, half out of a want for company and half out of a lack of anything better to do.

"Erin had a more shoddy attendance record but after a while I learned her face. We really only formally met when we shared one of our second-year quantum classes together. We formed a little study dyad because our homework was absolutely unbearable. That's how it started, causally, almost incidentally, and just by chance I got to know her.

"She mostly kept to herself, just by nature. She was a bit awkward but definitely intelligent, intellectual, one of those people who are clearly very in their head. Sometimes that would make it feel like she was ignoring you completely when she just couldn't hear you over the buzzing of her own thoughts.

"When she *was* present enough to talk she always seemed very happy and very frank. Never wasted a word though. She meant everything she said and spoke slowly enough you could tell every syllable was considered. She would always call me a fool when I told her she was fascinating. For a long time she thought I was obsessive, she considered my friendship very human, and by that mark very foolish. To be foolish, for her, was to be human, I fool therefore I am."

I interrupt here to ask for a description of her in more detail, which Vennessa provides at length. She seems still to think very highly of her, and focuses very much on the enchanting way she would talk and a certain glimmer she found in her eyes. By all objective accounts her description is wildly incorrect, so I omit it.

For those readers who require a body to imagine: Erin was, in a sense, average beyond average: brown eyes, black hair, and of uncertain build, since in all videos and pictures she seems to wear the same sort of baggy clothes, in some cases visibly for a few days in a row. We have recordings of her voice, they are mostly inflected with the kind of slight monotone you would expect from someone who is only half-attending to what she is saying, wandering with the words a bit, though with a clear rhythm.

If there is interest in Vennessa's account of her, one can look elsewhere, as almost every other story on the subject depicts Erin with the unreal charm that Dr. Coulton remembers her with (often at the same great length).

"Anyway we knew each other for a while and one thing led to another. She became someone I could confide in. We found that we got along and, after some weathering, she lifted the veil a little, too. We were just chatting one day and she tells me, almost out of the blue, 'I think I might know how time travel works.' and I laugh a bit thinking she's doing a bit and she says 'Seriously!' and I say 'Erin that's not possible' and she says 'I'm sure it couldn't be either, but I think I'm onto something.'

"It was at this point that she was working on the theory of the fragility of the invention — that the invention inevitably closes itself in a loop because some unknown always interferes with the invention itself, be it a rogue traveler, the inventor interfering with their own life, or any other butterfly. The invention inevitably puts itself in peril, simply by existing. She was beginning to hypothesize about how to mitigate the conditions of that peril by various means. She comes up with a lot of ideas, we talked about them often after that.

"After hearing her out for a while I get around to believing she's totally right, and seriously dedicated to this project no matter what. Believing in her brain, I give every moment of my free time to helping her work on this. Once I'm caught up to her we bounce a lot of ideas off of each other and try to finalize some of the trickier last details of the work.

"Turns out she had been working on her theories here for years, I only really catch on towards the last two of our five years at university, when most of the groundwork was settled but she still wasn't quite sure what to do with the mechanics. We figured through a lot of good and bad information together. Most of it was trial and error.

"I only asked why she gave so much energy to this once, and she kind of dodged the question, but I learned much later from talking to her parents that she was always kind of haunted. Some close friend caught something that took her life — something like that. I never wanted to intrude by asking about the story, so I never did.

"As we go on I noticed her demeanor changing. Though I wouldn't make sense of it all until well after the fact, she started speaking differently, more quickly, more excitedly, messing up her tenses, missing more and more of classes and even of what I was saying. I thought it was just midterms and she was a bit sleep-deprived, and I left it alone because we've known each other for a while at this point — almost four years — and she was never too closed about if something was bothering her, so I assumed if something was wrong she would tell me.

“Our last conversation was on a notion she had been developing for some time — that because every condition of peril could be easily controlled by restrictions on the use of the machine, the primary condition to be mitigated was interference by the inventor. Simply put, you don’t invent time travel for no reason. Since any reason that one has for going back to a time before the invention itself destabilizes the invention itself, the inventor wanting to go back to a time in their life before they invented the machine is the cause and ultimately the negation of the invention itself. Or so it goes. Events are altered, the inventor becomes their own negation. You may know it as the intent butterfly hypothesis, though it’s a fairly niche subject now — as much so when she first came up with it.”

In the context of the case, this is a key fact. Our timeline avoids the possibility of looping because Vennessa is aware of the hypothesis before inventing the machine, and never goes back to alter the events of the past which might lead to the machine’s destruction. The stake of the case is that, according to the hypothesis, Vennessa’s actions put the timeline at risk as they could change the conditions of the invention.

Vennessa counters this: “What puts us in a unique position is that I invented the machine without the intention of going back *to change* something, and with the protection of the LDF, thus mitigating the conditions of peril. The invention is safe because nobody will *change* anything before the day of the invention, even me.

“People rarely comment on the fact that from the beginning the point of the invention wasn’t to change the past, but to engage with the future. It has been this way since the beginning, but people have stylized that out of the story, emphasizing the sentiments of my relationship with Erin as they rightly *fueled* the invention, but not the fact that always I invented it to continue her legacy, never alter it — that I was always aware of the hypothesis and fragility before even starting the project, and it couldn’t have been invented otherwise. I made the machine not to avenge the past, but because I was depressed and bored for fifteen years and it gave me something to do that didn’t leave me feeling hollow.

“The idea that I love her isn’t wrong *per se* but it diminishes the importance of my knowing that I could *never* change the timeline, that I lost Erin and mourned *before* going into the future. I was charged by the grief of loss, but never wanted to get it back by moving forward. That is where the controversy springs from, I think, people believing that the reason I made the machine or went back was to change things and save her.”

“So you admit that you go back to see her?”

“That’s not what I’m not denying I did.”

“What are you denying?”

“That I endangered the timeline — that I saved her.”

I say, with some indignation: “You go back and you don’t stop her?”

“How could I? So much has changed. How could I cling against such a sore old certainty?”

“You had a chance to save her life.”

“I didn’t have that chance for a second, not then or now. Her life has always been hers. I only wish she had done something better with it.”

“Do you respect her so much you think she could commit suicide with a clear mind, and that you wouldn’t change it?”

“I don’t pretend to know what she was thinking. I don’t want to. I just miss her being around, that’s all. I miss when the past was around. But I know I can’t wrench it back and pretend it’s going to be the same now. It’s enough to just miss her, for me. I went back because I wanted to see her face. It’s not about saving her. It’s about missing her.”

“You endangered the timeline just because you miss her?”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“For one I didn’t endanger anything. If I *did* save her, then saving her wouldn’t cause a paradox or a loop, just a split, where in one world she lives and in one she dies. We are already committed to one path, and nothing I did could merge us with the second. Then again, maybe I could have saved her life, but *I* didn’t. No use dwelling on that. Another me might have done it, but if I saved her then it was someone else. If I save her, it’s for another Vennessa, one who goes walking off into another world entirely, holding her hand, a world which I can never go into. The best I can do is save someone else the pain. I’ve written it all down but the courts refuse to let the paper be made public.”

“That directly contradicts the original hypothesis.”

“As genius as it is, the original hypothesis comes from the imagination of someone who neither experienced time travel as a reality or invented the devices which make it possible. It’s a limited theory, with a much more limited conception of time than the one we have now.

“The reality of this situation is nothing like it ever considered: while Erin’s suicide contributes to invention as such, it doesn’t achieve it, or anything, directly — interfering with it does nothing to entangle us with a non-traveling timeline. Travel into the time before and prohibited zones isn’t prohibited because it’s inherently destructive but because any negligent action could present peril by changing something important — it’s the same reason ordinary people can’t have nuclear warheads.

“I was as responsible as one could be. Even if you follow the original hypothesis without exception I did nothing wrong, it’s not like someone going back to kill me as a baby — I left space for the timelines to split. By all indications they did. If I had any effect at all, it certainly wasn’t in our timeline, and hasn’t caused a loop.”

“How can you be sure that there’s not a loop somewhere else?”

“Because I didn’t save her life — let’s not talk in circles please.”

“But how can you be sure?”

“Erin wouldn’t change that choice.”

“The prosecution argues that, Erin might, for example, not decide to commit suicide after that moment, but then—”

“I’ll stop you there. Another way this is different from the hypothesis: Erin knows about the hypothesis. Moreover, I’m not allowed to discuss court matters outside of confidence. Please refrain from bringing them up.”

At this point, she finishes her tea, and tells me she has business to attend to, and that she will see me tomorrow. Her aide guides me off the premises without more words, and I am already thinking about what I will ask tomorrow.

2.

Before continuing with it is evident at this point in my discussion that I must confess to a certain set of biases which you must notice affects my coverage and interviewing. I will try to be brief.

At the point I am giving this interview I have just lost my brother after his difficult struggle with alcohol led to fatal poisoning. His death, of course, leaves me broken, but because I am required to conduct this interview chronologically, without back traveling, I must suppress this feeling while conducting the interview.

Going through grief, as it does, leaves me wishing I had done more to help him, leaves me wishing for more time, leaves me wanting desperately to go back and save him.

I don’t. This time, at least. But I do think about it. I am thinking about it the whole time I talk with Mrs. Coulton. I know what it could change, I know I might never get the life I want, never be here, never write this, but I know, too, that I would forget losing him, too, that I wouldn’t have to suffer this, not now, at least.

So I go into these meetings thinking about how the invention has changed us, how it has given us the ability to make decisions with the clarity of retrospect, how it has saved us from disaster, freed us from inaccuracies and shortcomings of memory, and how it has made grief a choice. How it has made forgetting harder, and how it makes you cope with the knowledge that every day, you decide they stay dead instead of escaping into another reality, reviving them.

Much later on I’ll read Marina Ryder’s *Unstuck: Trauma After Time Travel* and resonate mostly with the pain inside it. I’ll get chills every time I think of the last line of the passage “[A]nd being free to choose has fundamentally changed the terms of grief as well. It’s not about coming to terms with the absolute reality we live in anymore, it’s about choosing to accept this specific, fragile reality and all the pain that comes with it. Many patients struggle with this act because it’s easy to feel like they’re choosing inaction, choosing to let the trolley roll on. I must make it clear to them that *the Invention hasn’t given us the power to choose our reality, it’s only given us a more convincing way to escape from and ignore any reality that discomfords us.*”

In more rudimentary terms I understand this already, and I don’t go back. I live with it, but I stay in the bargaining phase for a while, and some nights I dream I’m killing him myself.

I hope this will clarify that I respond to Vennessa not out of disdain or genuine opposition, but as an artifact of my own struggle, with which her story collides.

—

I am greeted more warmly than I expect after the abrupt end of our first conversation.

The aide walks me into a drawing room where Vennessa is already waiting for me, smiling as the door opens, hoping I rested well when I sit down. She is glad to have my company, and I am glad to be welcomed back.

I start the interview with “I was hoping you could say more about the invention itself, what it was like making it.”

She is surprised “Oh well I don’t know what I can say that hasn’t already been written down. The whole process is very well documented by now.”

“Yes, well, I mean, physically yes, but nobody really elaborates on how it felt.”

“Not like much. I spent most of the time lying down in my bed, chasing the echoes here and there as I found them. Sounds would pass into the apartment and I would go on drifting in thoughts about nothing in particular.”

“I lost so much in those years. There was much pain to be suffered. I was lucky to have people around me to whom all the suffering brought me closer. As much as I alienated myself into misery when it came to the invention, I found a community where it mattered, outside of the dim light of my room. They’re the only reason I had the drive necessary to finish it, though I never really got that until long after the fact.”

“You said before you had already mourned Erin before you finished the invention.”

“Yes, I didn’t want to get her back or change the past but that doesn’t mean the pain was over. I didn’t think it could be until I finished the invention, and to a certain extent that was true, though, for other reasons.” She looks up at an old lithograph of a barn hung on the wall to think.

“When I really got to work on the thing I was very alone. It was my last year of uni and I had just finished losing my best friend. I didn’t know what to do. I remember feeling so lost. I don’t know how often it’s reported, but all I had left of Erin were the things she left in our flat over the summer, mostly notebooks. Her parents got everything else — they were even supposed to get what I had but I pretended so much of it was mine, just to have part of her around.

“The invention only came back into my mind when I came to terms with the fact that she was really gone, that all I had left of her were those books. When I started reading them I found her again, little by little. When I was at my worst somehow part of me started to believe that this was some kind of plan, some experiment, some way of toying with reality to get her version of things to come about. And, bored as I was, I started to play the game. I didn’t want to, honestly, but the longer I waited the more I felt guilty, the more I convinced myself that this is what she wanted.” She looks back at me. “Does that answer your question?”

“Yes, but, well I suppose I’m wondering now about why the pain ended.”

“Well that has nothing to do with the invention, like I said. It won’t do much good for your story”

“I’d like to know anyway.”

She smiles a little. “Alright. It’s never easy to describe how one comes out of grief. I like to say I just fell into the arms of friends. I got lucky. Started going out more, met the love of my life, and felt happy. It’s not as intentional or hard or really easy as you would think it is, it just happens, not without effort but also not just on account of that.”

“You mean to say it’s a mix of luck, privilege, and effort.”

“Like anything.”

“What about the unlucky ones?”

All she says is “Poor, unfortunate souls. They get stuck.”

“What do you do for them?”

“Give them a chance. Let them know you’re there to help, You can’t solve everyone’s problems, but you can be there.”

“Sure. I mean, half the problems people have you never even hear about, even if you know them very well. Now sometimes that’s their problem, it’s a communication issue, an intimacy issue, they don’t share enough for you to know, but when you do know — you’re told, you ask, you guess — what then? “

“I know when I was hurting the last thing I wanted to hear was how simple the solution was — what did I want, then? Just to be heard. To love and be loved. To share videos of cats and get ice cream and laugh until it hurt, and I tripped into the arms of people who would do that with me. I was lucky.”

“You shouldn’t have to be lucky.”

“I know. I’ve done my best to make sure people don’t have to be. The invention wasn’t the perfect solution though. So now I just offer support.”

It is only well after that I find out that Vennessa is referring to a non-profit support foundation she funds. I never have the chance to ask her about it but apparently it still serves as a crisis center. It’s offered support to hundreds of thousands by this interview and she doesn’t even mention it. Not knowing this, I return to the invention and ask “What do you mean it wasn’t perfect?”

“Well I made it hoping it would ease the pain of loss by making it less complete. I was motivated by the hope that people would have the chance to see memories — that and the want to help the world get to a better future — but it turns out it doesn’t work that way, turns out people just use it to run.”

“Do you ever think about running yourself?”

“Yes. Well, I used to, if that’s what you mean. I used to think all about ways to get away. Not with the machine, of course, but in different ways. That kind of thing is just a fantasy though — you can never really get away from it, you can forget, sure, but I think somehow it always stays with you.”

“Doesn’t you wanting to escape overwrite your independence according to the theory of fragility?”

She speaks simply. “No, not really. Regardless of the situation I would have completed the invention, because no matter what I do, Erin dies. That event is completely fixed in time,

always has been. It's bigger than just me and her. You're forgetting that the invention isn't my fault, that Erin is the one who had to be (and was) independent according to her theory and I'm just enacting her plans — that's all I have to do. Besides," She blows at her cup,

"One theory can't explain everything." She looks at the steam still barely rising off of her tea. "You'll only hurt yourself straining to use it for tasks it's not fit for." Her voice is tempered and mild now, coming from a place low in her chest, echoing as if she is in another room.

"Are you saying she was wrong?"

"I've thought for a long time about the many ways she's been wrong — different ways of creating fixed points, alternatives to event-based fixity — and I know for sure she was wrong in a few ways — not the least being in her notion of an "event" as such. I know she thought of those ways too but couldn't accept them. I also know that, in her mind, at that time, she couldn't know. She's unfortunately as right as *she* could have been. By the end she's so sure of that that nothing can change her mind." She sighs lightly.

"Yesterday, you say that it's not about saving her, but missing her. Do you still miss her?"

"Of course. I missed her even when I was there with her."

"What do you talk about?"

"Nothing of much consequence."

"Then why go back at all?"

"To say goodbye."

"That's it?"

"Yes. Things don't always have to be complex. I miss Erin, always, and I want to be sure no one ever misses anyone like I miss her. And towards the end of my life, I don't want to miss her that way anymore either."

While I take these last words in, she stands and goes to wash our silverware. When she comes back she says "Thank you for visiting again, darling, I have to write some letters for the holiday. You're free to roam, but I simply haven't got the time to talk anymore."

It's a massive complex, she dreads that she is the only one who gets to explore it. I take the offer as an invitation to read the walls for anything meaningful she keeps around.

There is, of course, everywhere, the normal decor that one would expect in a well-inhabited home. Candles and knick-knacks, photos and paintings dated and signed by artists and family alike, along with instruments for every kind of art. I find no patterns in these things except that the images rarely show Vennessa herself, as she only occasionally appears next to her wife or family portraits, and even then these mostly show her absent.

I'm not shocked by the quantity of books I see around, but I am stunned by their diversity, ranging from A to Z on every subject and occupying anything that could be thought of as excess space on every table and shelf. Based on some of the spines I can tell she's read them all, many more than once.

Where I do find the sparing evidence of her fame or personal records, they are tucked away as if they were histories of another person entirely, categorized like everything else, split across many shelves and sections. I, of course, have a marked interest in seeking these things out.

There is very little, and, on top of that, not much I haven't seen, but a few unique articles of note stand out:

In an interview a few years after the invention, a reporter asks, after a number of empty questions about the process and her personality, "how did inventing the machine feel?"

She snaps, her voice goes high, as if to joke "Terrible! I mean it was probably one of the worst times in my entire life! I spent every single day investigating the fundamental principles of reality, trying to discern what was right and what was wrong and tease out any limits in my thinking, and sure the result was good, successful, but it was miserable to spend all my time swimming against the currents of knowledge, not being sure if there would even be land on the other side. I doubted everything about myself, every thought I had was subject to review, and I couldn't be sure there was even a point to be found in living."

The reporter tries and fails to get a word in edgewise.

Vennessa continues: "People look at this and see the final discovery without recognizing the crippling amount of scrutiny and error that goes into the process. They come out of it with a new understanding of truth to be accepted, the rift of the unknown closed just as it opened. I came out of it, after living in that rift for so long, needing rest. After spending so much life in the rift, I forgot who I even was, now knowing just one thing: there's a limit to how much examination of truth you can tolerate before becoming absolutely miserable."

There is only one article ever written about Vennessa's marriage, and it isn't published. She keeps a draft copy on a shelf lined with other various drafts she receives. On reading it one can immediately tell why it isn't released — there simply isn't much the reporter has to say, it hardly gets past the headline "THE INVENTOR: MARRIED," a contradiction in itself.

I can tell the reporter struggles to communicate how happy the moment is and keep the tabloid spirit up, trying to make some kind of happy ending narrative out of Vennessa finding a new life after the invention. It's hard to read.

By all accounts it looks like a normal marriage. Without the headline it's nothing special. The article is one of few in an era where Vennessa's life fades out of public interest and people start to forget. It's not until the beginning of this controversy that her name is consistently printed again, though there is a brief spike when she is widowed (it doesn't last, as her comments on this subject are always brief and well-said).

She looks happy in the inline wedding photo, and all her wedding photos, really. It is a small affair, the images show — all family — but a beautiful wedding day nonetheless.

Lastly, and my favorite find, in another unpublished interview when she is much older, she says "People want to believe I'm a tortured genius, and for a while, I wanted to believe that too, so I became one. Now I don't believe in that archetype at all, and I think of myself as a life-lover, a stupidly happy person, comfortable, always learning to dance with this uncertain reality."

I have to leave early in the afternoon as my appointment time is expired. I wander somewhat aimlessly home, hoping tomorrow will show me more of the person obscured, all these years, by a story we will not let go.

3.

When the invention is first publicized, columnists have one of two reactions, either (1) becoming absolutely terrified of how much power people have to influence the timeline, or (2) becoming absolutely terrified of how little power anyone has to influence the timeline. Writers from either side contest their points ferociously, but none of them openly consider how truly neutral an impact our individual actions have on the indifferent “timeline” they all presuppose to exist.

While we can write their tone, language, and the binary itself off as a peculiarity of their local culture, I think the debate in general is nevertheless indicative of a strain the invention has put on our world. It forces us to negotiate with big-picture facts about our existence and the role of coincidence in our lives.

While evidence shows that we are surely not “stuck” in one sequence of events, causes, or effects, we all still find ourselves tightly entangled with a particular future, which we get to not on a solid line, but on a path that emerges from the braiding together of our wills over time. We progress into the future not just by our own actions, but by the intersection of our actions with others. Thus our best means for understanding the timeline isn’t through selfish action of individuals moving on their own, but through empathy, seeing how groups and individuals move in relation to one another.

In other words, while one individual can certainly disturb the “timeline,” they cannot unweave it, they can only fray the edges, and even then only a little. For many of us, the difficulty is in understanding that this doesn’t mean we are powerless, just that we have limited power over our own lives and little ability to control who actually does have power over it. On the contrary we have much more influence over other people’s lives and should wield it carefully, lest we find ourselves fraying away the things closest to us.

I write about this now because it’s important for us to understand what Vennessa describes to me this day in the context of empathy and collectivity and not sequential causality and to believe, as Vennessa believes, that there is no undoing Erin’s death — at least for a while, as she gives her account.

—

I begin the third day of my interview with Vennessa hastily, hoping to get to the topic at hand quickly and unearth the missing details that I am seeking as soon as possible.

“I’d like to know more about you and Erin, specifically what you think leads to the events that take place.”

“Well, I don’t know what to say. Erin lived in a world where the truth was constantly under examination, and for a while I did too. I think that has something to do with it. Nobody can withstand that for long.”

“You don’t ask?”

“No. I don’t want to know. Part of me already understands why..”

“What do you do when you go back, then?”

“Talked. Just like this.”

“I’m sorry to be so forward but I was hoping you could give an account of what actually happens, what you experience.”

“Of course. I’ve been waiting for you to ask. Shall I begin?”

“Please.” I record the following exactly as it was said to me:

Well, first of all I arrived with the very confusing sense of doubled existence, something like *deja vu*, something you don’t really feel traveling normally, within the rules, which makes it immediately clear that you’ve arrived somewhere that you already exist, and fragility is still a question. So I took care.

To elaborate, a number of very talented artists have already explained what it feels like to loop, or just exist in a time when two versions of yourself are present. I couldn’t outdo them for style or accuracy. They’re quite right. There’s this immediate sense of your own ephemerality, your current existence feels insecure, implausible, as if you’re only half there, and really you are only half there, as you feel filtered twitches and senses of things you were feeling then but you now aren’t. You’re in two places at once, and you’re not at home in this world. Like a restless night where strange ghosts of feelings prick your nerves.

One thing that reading accounts of this doesn’t capture is the certainty of it. When you read some description your first reaction is usually analytical, no matter how much an author primes you against it you usually ask something like how does that happen, how exactly does it feel, why does it feel like that, and so on. Scientific questions. But when you’re there, feeling it, you know there’s no basis for even questioning it: it’s obvious.

It makes me think of an analogy from Ellis Morray’s *The Factor of Fiction*: when someone asks you to imagine what you would think if the sun started flickering like a lightbulb, you would probably assume your line of questioning would be fairly sane — something like “*oh no! why is that? how can we stop that?*” — but when you’re just imagining it you’re too detached to really accept that the absurd premise is actually true so you can’t predict what you would do when faced with the realization of such profound absurdity.

You assume you have the level of disbelief of a sane person who has just suddenly walked into an insane world. More often, when we lack detailed information about suddenly arriving insanity, it feels at first like the insanity was always there, leaving you more likely to infer that *you*, in particular, have missed something that someone else might have already known for a fact, so you think something accordingly insane — like “*oh no! how did I never know that the sun was a lightbulb?*”

I arrive, feeling this, in a quiet, somehow familiar room in Erin’s parent’s home that I’ve never been in. It’s her bedroom, that much is clear, and there she is, sitting at her desk, an hour before it happens.

It's any other night for her, she's writing in her journal, taking her time.

For the second I've been here I've been quiet, trying not to disturb. Finally, after that second, that eternity, I whisper, half stunned to find my own voice in my throat.

"Erin."

She wasn't shocked, she doesn't jump, she just raised her head slowly and turns to say, as if she had been expecting me, "Oh. Hello Vennessa."

"You recognize me?"

"Who else could it be?"

"Erin, I did it."

"Somehow, I knew that. How long did it take?"

"Fifteen years."

"You've waited."

"Of course. Following from your theory of the fragility of the invention, we only allow travel within the period after."

"So I *was* right, then."

"Naturally."

"And you're here illegally."

"Just for you. I don't want my life to end without saying goodbye."

She spoke with some haste, the same way I remembered, it was like talking to the memory itself. Of course, she said "I see. Goodbye, then?"

"No, no, not yet. There's some things we need to do."

"What?" She knew what. She just didn't want to say it.

"Well, which would you like to do first?"

She froze. "Use it."

"By all means."

"But what about the—"

"If we're safe, nothing will go wrong."

"I—"

"Remember, we can only watch."

"I know."

We were only there briefly but I could tell the whole time she was confused, as was I, at both the feeling of doubled existence and the reality hitting — we had really done it.

I omit much detail out of respect, but she looked at the girl sleeping in the hospital bed for a long minute. Quietly, so quietly, she went over, kissed her on the forehead, and whispered goodbye. She told me she was ready to go. She is solemn, but she never sheds a tear.

Back in her room, she takes a second to collect herself, no doubt distilling a thousand thoughts into a handful. I invite her to speak her mind, feeling so old as I do it, and now she began to ask the questions I knew had been heating in her mind since she saw me. They came quickly at first, then slowed down as she composed herself, contains the boil. She starts with:

"Does it make the world better?"

“In some ways. A lot changes for the better, yes, but a lot stays the same, too.”

“Does it change how people live, I mean?”

“It changes how people feel every emotion and know every memory, even those who travel rarely. Everyone starts to talk like you do. Only a handful of them know either of our names. A lot of people go on just living their lives, though, no great revolutions.”

“Are people happier?”

“In some ways. There’s always more healing to be done.”

“Does the planet survive?”

“Not sure, but I’m hopeful. Call me crazy but I’m hopeful.”

“So am I.” Something settles in her. She looks long at me, then the floor, then cuts a question before it starts.

“Go ahead, dear, I’m all ears.” I say, knowing what she must be thinking.

“Does my design for the converter work as specified?”

“You missed a negative on a chalkboard somewhere early on. Otherwise it was flawless.” She sighed a bit, looking at me with a face of apology. I’m not sure if it was about me having to rework that from scratch or something else.

“What do you remember the most about me?”

“Oh Erin. I think the most about those long nights I know you spent awake, like this one, the way I could feel your restlessness beginning to buzz in my own mind. I think about how we would stay up and think, just think together, and how often you would surprise me.”

If she flinched before this, I hadn’t noticed. She starts: “My parents, do they—” she can’t finish.

“They took it about how you’d expect. They don’t make it to the invention.” Somehow that seems to relieve her a bit.

“Does it hurt?”

“Of course it hurt.”

“Do you get my letter?”

“I didn’t. Your parents kept it.”

“Would you like to read it now?”

“No dear, that’s okay.”

“It’s meant to make it easier.” I’m not sure what she means by this, but it doesn’t change my answer.

“I don’t need that now.”

“Do you want to know why?”

“I’ve known why since I found out. I didn’t need to do all this to learn why, just to make it make sense.”

“Why come back then?”

“To say goodbye, like I said. I couldn’t let you leave without saying goodbye.”

“You’re a fool.”

“Proves I’m alive, at least.”

“Do you—” she looks at me, troubled, breathes out, slowly back in, asks: “Do you move on?”

“Yes and no.” I pause for words, wringing my hands. “As much as I can. I never really figure out what people mean when they say that they ‘move on’ from something. I mean, I get somewhere different, I live a life full of joy, but sometimes it feels like nothing’s changed. Like I’m walking forward but moving backwards at the same time, and I find in the next moment I’ve just arrived another way of recapturing what you meant, what you were, what we had. I’m sure you know the feeling.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s like there’s an empty space around you which you’ve grown around, keep tightening around, and if you pay attention you can feel that something’s not there.”

“But...”

“But it got smaller, or I got bigger.”

She mocks a kind of certainty “You get bigger.”

We just sat there for a while, each thinking about the particular emptiness we hold onto.

When the silence became louder in my mind than the memory of her words, I told her “I should go soon.”

“I know.”

“I love you.”

“This is it, then. Last time, Vennessa?”

“Yes.”

“I love you.”

She looked me in the eye, held my hands tight, and I was gone.

—

For a while I don’t know what to say. I just sit and think. I finally ask “You didn’t say anything that she couldn’t know, did you?”

“Not a word.”

“And the court knows this?”

“Yes.”

“And they still intend to prosecute.”

“That’s right.”

“Why?”

“People want me to save her. They expect a story of a damsel in distress, and I admit that I might have thought of it in a similar way before, but that was never the real story.”

“What is the real story?” I just want her to say as much as possible.

“A normal tragedy, the death of a friend. Nothing more. But that gets tied up in the fame of a high-profile story and suddenly it’s melodrama.”

“Is there anything you wish you told her?”

“Lots. For one thing she was wrong, horribly wrong about everything she understood time to be. Her theories are right only because they’re abstract enough to circumvent this but she imagined the future as it was presented to her, as a series of events, moments of passion and once-made-decisions that changed courses of history. It’s not like that, we know, empirically, it’s not like that — so much of time depends on the casual, the inconsequential, but she couldn’t see that, nor could she imagine a way out of it.”

“You’re saying her death wasn’t even the cause.”

“Correct. It achieved nothing, as expected.”

“That unsettles her whole theory.”

“And? I stumble into 10 new things I’ve been profoundly wrong about for decades every week. Nothing is absolute. We’ve talked about this.”

“Sorry, I just— Did it help?”

“Yes. It was everything I wanted.”

“There’s one last thing I have to ask, then: was it worth it?”

She thinks on it, scrunches her face, and says “Yes. Well, it’s hard to say. I didn’t get much out of it, if that’s what you mean. For everything I did I got a conversation and a court case. Both of which were probably more loss than benefit.” She smirks.

She continues. “But you know, time isn’t nearly as scarce as we thought when I was born — and not just because of me. I made the invention work because I was scared of losing time, but then it taught me that time’s not about what we get out of it, more and more I’m learning it’s about what we do while we lose it.”

“Time is so abundant now but we find ourselves so stuck to this version of it that — I don’t know — seems to think so much about how time is taken rather than it is given, seems to never have enough. Always wants more.

“Truthfully it’s my fault. I opened up time for the taking. For that I’m truly sorry.”

“I just hope that, perhaps in time, we will all find — as I have found — that the notion of science is broad enough and the fabric of reality is pliable enough that when we go out to probe the depths of truth we discover only what we wanted to know in the first place, and only because the probing made that reality come to pass. Science creates. It doesn’t discover, it imagines and wrenches truths out from among the infinite possibilities. We need only believe in these things, and they will be true.”

I am quiet. The whole day I am quiet but now I am silent. I can hardly murmur thanks as she collects the dishes and guides me to the door. The ride home is solemn.

I am quiet because somehow, against all logic, I think she knows what happens next, too. I think she understands the future better than anyone else and without ever seeing it in the way we do.

I look in her words for hints of this knowledge and find none. I sift through the tapes for a hint of a goodbye, for some final remark and it is in the silence between her words I find that she doesn’t know what’s coming, but somehow she expects it. Part of me understands what she must

have felt in the years just before the invention. Another part knows she lives in an uncertainty I cannot fathom. Soon she ventures into another, deeper one.

4.

Vennessa Coulton dies of natural causes while under house arrest, as I am writing this.

Seeing as the trial is still being prosecuted posthumously, I feel a compulsion to make an assessment of certain critical facts in this case. It seems that much of it comes down to conjecture as to the possibility that Erin Poulter might remain alive after her conversation with Vennessa. It should be clear that if Mrs. Coulton is being honest in her assessment of her late friend's character — if it is true that the act wasn't as simple as one night's decisions — then this was not even a remote possibility. The simplest proof of this is that we are not stuck in loop time by any indications.

However, the prosecution argues that we may be in a diversion from a time loop that Vennessa did, indeed create but which might theoretically exist. This is only the case if Erin Poulter lives after Vennessa leaves her for that last time, and the prosecution suggests that Vennessa's visit might have altered Mrs. Poulter's thinking sufficiently enough to change her final decision (they throw out Vennessa's assertion that this would not cause a loop as quackery, since it disagrees with a dogmatic legal interpretation of the theory of fragility). Thus much of the case revolves around interpretations of the intent underlying Ms. Poulter's suicide.

Frankly I believe the case proceeding as such laughs in the face and mocks the legacy of the two women who made possible the very invention around which the court legislates.

Moreover, the court's priorities laugh in the face of broad swaths of research that would show that travel is nothing like what they depict it as. They frankly rely more on the fantasies of time travel and its invention than the reality of it.

The allure of all the time travel narratives that were — those that inform the court — came from the fantastic hope that someone could change the past, make better choices, build a better world for themselves. Often, these stories pitted the singular interest of the time traveler against the collective interest of the world. The central dilemma of the hypothesis is a generalization of this clash of interests, the good of the world against the interests of one grieving inventor who must choose whether she destroys her future to live in the past or overcomes her grief to live in the future.

What these old stories failed to consider was that grief and pain could be untied from the inventive process, that the inventor could be motivated by acceptance and aligned with the collective interest felt by and actuated through her own grief. They might have been right that feelings are entangled with the creative and scientific processes, but they were wrong about the scope of what emotions factored into this. Any strong emotion can drive change, we as a society have simply retained a tendency to idolize neurotics for the frankness of their motivations.

If there's anything a basic curriculum in stories should teach us it's that stories are told to expand the imagination and liven curiosity, not constrain them. The original appeal of the stories we told about time travel wasn't the characters or the realism, but the ability to literalize certain

emotions as they stayed firmly committed to a linear understanding of time. As such, the reality of time travel is very different from these imaginations because *the authors were never interested in the possibility of time travel, they were interested in the implications it could realize for the characters they wanted to develop.*

That, or they were interested in the allure of a science that could defy reality and touch the past, but they were never particularly interested in seeing the reality of the future they imagined through, in anyone *living through* the fiction they told. As we live in those fictions, we notice how different dramas and conflicts come to the fore, and how lucky we are to see this fantastic reality come into being and be so capable of affecting it.

But as we hold onto the wrong parts of the stories that preempted our understandings of time travel, and as we wrongly transfer them onto the real stories of people who are much more complex than old, old archetypes, we forget that the world is a dark mystery even for the brightest among us. We too often forget that our greatest pathfinders were, and are merely wandering well.

Point being: since they lose in the realm of science, the prosecution falls back on an argument of archetypes, which is self-defeating. Vennessa Coulton defies paradigms. She was a pillar in imagining and building this future we live in, she is nothing like you'd expect, and she touches reality with an intimacy most people never dream of. Our reality is but an homage to her work, to all the accidents of her life. It is my pleasure to say I meet her, and my responsibility to advocate for her innocence simply by letting her voice shine through.