

Watching Xanadu

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Stop.

Rewind.

Play.

...

Stop.

Rewind.

Play.

...

Stop. Rewind. Play. ...

Stop.

It's all digital, of course, so there isn't really anything rewinding. It just jumps back to the start. I can even set it to loop endlessly – see?

Although you might not even be able to see that it's looping. Xan is standing so completely still in the corner – as I'd told her to do – that the end of the loop is exactly the same as the beginning. She would be standing there forever, if I let her.

I suppose you could argue that I'm lucky, in a way. Most

times things start to go wrong, for most people, they sail past the moment, not noticing. By the time things are bad enough for them to try to work it out, it's too far gone, so they never really know what happened; just that it happened.

Figuring out what happened between me and Xan might still be all tangled up in my head, but the *when* is right in front of me. If I turn the volume right up, you can actually hear it. I'd just moved the camera, and zoomed right out to get all of Xan in frame. Once the framing was right, I took a step back to watch her. I leaned back against the wall, and after a minute or so there's a sort of sighing, crumpled sound on the video. What I felt then was a bone-deep weariness – it comes back to me now, watching it.

I'd just punished her. The word comes with so many scare quotes in my head now, so many layers of encoding, that I can barely even write it. Looking at her standing there in the corner, still and straight and noble and completely fucking *beautiful*, there was a moment of perfect clarity. I might have spanked her, said all the right things and hit all the clichés, but she was so far beyond being *punished* by me it wasn't even funny. We were dancing the right steps, but it was all fake. Xan's capacity to give – need to give – was so much greater than

my capacity to take, and I couldn't sustain it any more.

After that, it did get messy for a while, but not unkind. I think she sensed the same thing I did, so we tried to be gentle with each other, even while our lives were wrenching apart. There was no particular goodbye moment, maybe because we both hoped that it wasn't that sort of goodbye. One day she moved the last box out of my place, and that was that.

It's important to be clear that I don't regret it. This wasn't a rejection of something that could have worked. Our eyes were wide open. It was healthy, in a way.

Four dull months later, I was tweeting something about heading into London for a weekend convention, and there she was.

xan_a_duu

@STColeridge Fancy dinner Sunday night, loser? M. is away on business. I'll cook you something nice. See the new place?
1 day ago

No hellos, no goodbyes. That's really where we'd left things, a friendly but careful detachment taking the place of any real feeling. She hadn't been following me – I'd have noticed – and still wasn't. The account looked new, and there wasn't much in it, just some oblique references to a new job, and a new squeeze, and followers I didn't recognise.

STColeridge

@xan_a_duu Sure. Meet where/when?

3 hours ago

xan_a_duu

@STColeridge Waterloo at 5, by the clock? It's a short train ride in/out. I'll come get you.

1 hour ago

STColeridge

@xan_a_duu Cool. See you then.

10 seconds ago

###

The con was flagging by three, so it was easy to bail and head across town to the station early. I wanted to see Xan from a safe distance before we met, so I could get my bearings a bit first. The sandwich place across the concourse was still open, even though the rest of the station had the lonely windblown feel of a city Sunday, so I got something and sat in a corner. People came and went. A girl in high DMs and heavy eyeliner got a coffee, sat for a while at the next table, smoking and poking nervously at her phone, then hurried off. A two-carriage workhorse diesel made a big huff and puff of disgorging just a few passengers, who ran into the arms of those waiting, or none.

But it passed five, and there was no Xanadu, by the clock or anywhere else. I carried my things to the barriers and looked

down the track as if that would help.

"So," she said, from behind me. "How many today?"

I turned. She'd changed her hair, but there she was. "Just three, I think," I said. "A newbie girl at the con, doing cosplay. She was so into it, but she looked a bit lost all the same. And another one earlier, over there, the full goth thing."

Xan smiled, god love her. "Always the waifs and strays with you, you hopeless fucking case."

"And then another one, just a few seconds ago."

"Don't do that."

"Although I wouldn't call this one *love*, exactly."

"Don't."

"I know," I said. "I'm sorry." Okay, so it hadn't taken me long to show that I hadn't changed much. Well done me. "Your hair's different."

She smiled again. "It is. I like it, I think."

"Suits you. You were late, by the way."

"No," she said. "I was early. Because I knew you'd be early and I didn't want you watching me."

"Okay. I think you just won."

"How are you, loser?" She gave me a quick but tight hug.

"Good. I'm good."

"Oh," she said, suddenly remembering something she'd clearly at no point forgotten. "Mark is eating with us tonight. He switched his flight for a later one so he could meet you. Is that okay?"

"Of course. Absolutely."

Mark. *Right.*

###

Three stops south was far enough to take us deep into Surrey. The house was solid Victorian redbrick on the outside and sleek Scandinavian on the inside. Mark met us at the door – confident, poised, firm handshake, tasteful tie and overdone men's magazine cologne. A drink was fetched, and they both busied themselves in the kitchen while I was left to do the conventional dinner party audit of the hosts' stuff. It was a picture of lives in balance, comfortable without being showy or precious. I didn't see anything of Xan's that I recognised.

They emerged, Mark smiling and wiping his hands. "Just another ten minutes and it'll be ready." He turned to Xan. "You should go and change, baby. There won't be a lot of time after dinner." I saw a flicker of surprise in Xan's eyes, and the beginning of an objection. "You hadn't forgotten that we need to talk about your behaviour before I go, had you?"

"No, sir, I just thought that..."

"What?"

Xan's chin actually dropped a little. "No, sir, I hadn't forgotten."

"Good girl. Off you go."

She disappeared upstairs, leaving the two of us to some clumsy male bonding over cars (I don't drive), jobs (he doesn't know anything about web programming; I don't know anything about marine insurance), and the convention (yeah, right). We were rescued by tentative footsteps on the stairs, and Xanadu reappeared as a perfect schoolboy, bare legs between grey school shorts and knee-socks, an old-fashioned stiff Eton collar keeping her neck straight and chin high, her new boy-cut neat and apt. She stood in front of Mark, arms folded behind her back, as he needlessly straightened her tie.

"Well then," Mark said. "Shall we eat?"

The food – pasta with chicken and garlic and sundried bloody tomatoes – was obvious but tasty. I just wasn't hungry. I watched them both, and barely even needed to pretend that I wasn't. It's not that they ignored me, or that I wasn't welcome. I just wasn't even really there. Mark had done his small talk; Xan was in his orbit. Towards the end of the meal, some cream

sauce fell from Xan's fork onto her starched white shirt, but barely even visible. Mark laid down his own fork, pushed his chair back from the table, patted his lap. She draped herself across it, without hesitation or argument, had the backs of her legs smacked for a good minute, and sat back down, flustered and blushing.

I was interested in the fact that I didn't feel very much. It was all as distant as the moon through the wrong end of a telescope. Frankly, it was a relief when I was able to correctly interpret Mark's mention of his need to finish his packing as my time to go.

Another firm handshake from him.

"Thanks for coming," Xan said, with a smile and a quick hug. "It was good to see you."

"You too."

And that was that. It didn't feel like I was coming back, but we don't really do goodbyes.

"Wait for me in the study, baby," Mark said to Xan as he took me to the door.

###

21:12.

The departures screen on the station platform beamed out

brightly in the dark. I wanted to bat myself against it like a moth, as if it could take me away like that. I was cold and tired and ready to be home. There was a train at 21:40, and another – the last – at 22:55. My laptop had plenty of battery left, fortunately, so it kept me company for a while. I played some bits of TV I'd torrented, but didn't really pay attention; they were just moving shapes on the screen. I started the last video of Xanadu, without really meaning to – just muscle memory, I guess. I stopped it and started it a few times. I moved it to the trash. I moved it out of the trash.

The 21:40 slid quietly onto the platform. Through its open doors the train looked warm and inviting, an end-of-weekend mess of newspapers and junk-food wrappers strewn around, but almost no-one travelling. It seemed to wait far longer than necessary, then the doors closed and it chugged on without me.

I packed my machine into its case, and into my bag, lifted the bag onto my shoulder, and headed back to the house in the cold and dark.

###

The Jag was still in the drive when I reached their house again. I sat on the low wall in front of the house opposite, watching. There wasn't a plan, exactly, but I suppose I thought I'd wait

for Mark to leave for the airport, then figure it out from there. I wanted to be gone, to be far away, but being gone seemed to presuppose at least a moment of *being there* first, a moment of real connection. And yes, fuck it, a proper goodbye.

I'm not sure anyone else would have heard it quite the way that I did, but on top of the carrier wave of the light wind among the trees there was a distinct *thwack*, and then, maybe thirty seconds later, another.

I crossed the road. The path along the side of the house was loomed over by mature *Leylandii*, which bought a lot of privacy for them, and for me. The end of the path opened out into a patio, onto which light spilled from the room at the back of the house through French windows, and widened across the lawn, as if projecting something. On the patio, a wide table and chairs were still covered in wintering canvas covers, which made a perfectly shadowed spot to sit and wait.

Thwack. Much louder this time. And...

Play.

I couldn't see the whole room from where I was, but I could see enough. Tall shelves of fat showpiece books lined the far wall, behind a working desk – a big old fuck-off one, not the IKEA restraint of the other bits of the house I'd seen. A few

lamps here and there provided a warm light. A second desk had been set in the centre of the room, facing the first, this one small but high, with a sloping surface. Xanadu was bent across it, her toes and fingers pointing towards the carpet, and the rest of her taut and poised, like a bow about to fire.

Mark paced backwards and forwards behind her, gesturing rhetorically with the long cane in his hand. The rumble of words that came through the windows was blurry, but I understood the familiar rhythms. It's always the same script – we just either believe in it or we don't. I could see Xan nodding, her head low. Mark settled himself to her left, drew back the cane in a slow, wide arc, and brought it down perfectly square. After the sound of impact, Xan tightened still further for a few seconds, then relaxed.

It felt like I could just reach out and touch her, she was so close. But she wasn't. And I couldn't stop, or rewind. I wanted to be there, and I wanted to be anywhere but there. Another two strokes, just as careful and precise. To a simple command, Xan stood, took down her short trousers and the white underpants underneath, then bent across the desk again, red stripes burning across her bottom.

I started to feel the weariness again – the weariness of

everything being so impossibly fucking difficult, so out of reach and right there in front of me, everything blurred and completely in focus. In between the cane strokes – harder now, on Xan's bare skin – the sounds from this garden, and the gardens surrounding, fizzed in my ears: owl hoots, and cat howls, and distant traffic and bins being emptied and a whole world in which I was sitting here watching Xanadu being beaten by someone who wasn't me.

And then Mark dropped the cane and unfastened himself and pushed apart Xan's cheeks and he was fucking her. He was pushing himself deep inside her thrashed backside and pushing and fucking and fucking and fucking her, Xanadu still bent across the desk, her legs finally kicking and shuddering, the desk rearing up on its front legs with each hungry stroke.

And there was an end. Mark stepped back to dress himself, face blank, as if fucking Xanadu had been just part of a punishment to administer, cold and regretful. Xan wasn't much more than a ragdoll draped over the desk, but she gathered herself at another low rumble, stood and walked carefully to the corner behind the big fuck-off desk. Mark took a minute to gather himself and pull a few things together into a brown travelling bag. He stepped behind the desk, tapped at the

keyboard of the PC, turned the screen towards himself. Then he bent over Xan, completely covering her body from view – whispering in her ear, kissing the back of her neck, I couldn't tell. But he swept out of the room, leaving her there. I heard the Jag's contained roar as it prowled away.

Suddenly there was real, deep silence, Xanadu and me. I wasn't sure how long to wait, so I just waited, watching her in the corner in the warm room, still and straight and noble and beaten and completely fucking *beautiful*. Five minutes, ten minutes, maybe fifteen, I wasn't looking, but she hadn't moved, so I came to the windows, tapped lightly. Nothing. I tapped again, and tried the handle, which turned.

"Hello," I said quietly, not wanting to startle her. "It's just me."

Nothing.

"Hello? Xan?"

She didn't say anything, but there was a movement of her back which signalled she'd heard. I stepped in.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, with an edge in her voice. "Did you forget something?"

"No. No."

"What are you doing here?"

"Can we talk?"

"Talk about what?"

"I don't know," I sighed. "Just talk."

She seemed to realize something, and the edge was much harder this time. "Did you come here to watch us fucking, you fucking loser?"

"Jesus, Xan, *no*." And then I suddenly had an edge of my own. "Did you invite me here to make me watch you fucking?"

"What?"

"Over dinner. He doesn't need to put his cock in you for you to be fucking, you know."

"That was two people into each other being into each other," she said. "I know that's not something you're used to." There was a bit of a moment, and she sighed. "I didn't plan it that way."

"I know," I said. "I'm sorry. Will you turn around and look at me?"

"No."

"Please."

"I can't."

"Please."

"I can't. He's watching."

"Who? *Mark?*"

"On the desk," she said. "There's a camera. It's on, and it's pointing at me. His phone is sitting on the dashboard of the car, and that's on too. He's watching me."

I stepped towards the desk, and there it was, clamped to the top of the screen.

"Cameras can go wrong, Xan," I said. "Cables can get unplugged."

"No," she said. "No. And this is why: I want him watching me. I like it. I like doing what he tells me, and I like him beating me, and I like him fucking me, and I want to be with him. So I stay here, and the camera stays there. Understand?"

"For how long?"

"Until he calls. However long that takes."

I looked at my watch. 22:34.

"Xan, the last train leaves in twenty-one minutes. I'm going to be on it, and I'm not coming back. Will you please turn around so I can say goodbye?"

###

The 22:55 slid into the station at 22:56. I got on it. It slid out again, and the lights of the station curved slowly backwards into the night. The convention hotel room minibar welcomed me

back with expensive chocolate and lukewarm Coke, and there was a message:

xan_a_duu

@STColeridge You put me on a pedestal, and then told me I was too high up for you. Be happy, Sam. x
6 minutes ago

We don't really do goodbyes.

###

Stop.

Rewind.

Play.

Another train, this one taking me home. Fields of green grass and bright yellow rapeseed flash by under a spring sky. Xanadu is on the screen, on the laptop, on the table, standing in the corner, and it's me behind the camera.

It occurred to me this morning, making the most of the warm bed before I needed to get up and pack, that Xan's webcam has to send content to a server somewhere. Even if it's a machine in their place, it still needs an IP address if Mark can get to it with his phone. So with an address, a username, and a password, I'd be in, and I could probably figure those out sooner or later.

And then I laughed. Once upon a time it would have been

something to hold onto, but now the ridiculousness of it just made me laugh. Fucking loser. This is a good thing, I think. *Be happy.*

Stop.

Rewind.

Play.

...

Stop.

...

Delete.

...

Empty Trash.

Notes

This is another story that was in my head for a long time before I finally wrote it, and which changed somewhat in the process. It's one of the most personal kink stories I've written, and edgy because of that, but not in ways that are immediately obvious. You'd need to stand on your head and squint a bit, and I'm not telling.

The surface inspiration was the Mull Historical Society song of the same title, which resonates in interesting ways with the story, and with a particular time for me, and it just sort of fits really well with the narrative, I think. Give it a listen.

The final push to get the thing written came from wanting to have something for an anthology of spanking/CP stories a friend was putting together for charity a couple of years ago. If you search for "The Spanking Collection" at iTunes, Lulu.com, Amazon, Smashwords.com, and other usual places, you should find it. Proceeds from sales of the book still go to charity, so if you'd like a nicely-printed and bound copy of this story and a

load of others, or something for your e-reader, it's worth your money. If you just enjoy the story and feel an urge to give a few of your local currency, there are plenty of places out there happy to take donations; cancerresearchuk.org is as good as any. Thanks.

(P.S.: This version of the story is the same as that in the collection – minor formatting tweaks aside – except that I removed a single sentence. It's something I'd added very late to the original, after it was finished, and it was a mistake; it clobbered home a point that was better not quite so clobbered.)

– P.B., August 2013