

Years 9 & 10  
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### The Last Seven Minutes

The clink of ceramic, the hiss of the espresso machine, and the bell above the diner door chimed its familiar jingle. Always the same! The diner's cycle repeated every single day.

Callen's eyes snapped open. As he lifted his head off the table, the muted hum of idle conversation filtered through the air, mingling with the acrid scent of over-steeped coffee and scorched toast. Alone in his usual corner, Callen's recollection of the past few days felt weary and clouded. Still in his creased blue shirt with sleeves rolled up, a loosened striped tie, rumpled dark trousers and scuffed brown shoes, his job felt like a burden, and his local diner was his only peace. He was a regular middle-aged guy, a chronic bachelor who never stopped to care. With dark shadows under his eyes, he firmly gripped his coffee cup, bracing for the next day. His skull throbbed, as though a vice was slowly tightening around it. A strange gravity clutched his chest, the lingering echo of something unspeakable, like waking from a nightmare without knowing what was real. He stayed motionless, his gaze fixed on the speckled tabletop. Something felt wrong, yet it was simply an ordinary night.

Everything was *too* right.

The light pooled perfectly. The voices blended too cleanly. Callen's reality felt rehearsed, each element in its place, like a scene from a stage play performed for the hundredth time, except this 'play' was his endless life every night.

"You okay, honey?" came a soft, practised voice.

He raised his head to the waitress. Always her. He saw her in a different light for the first time. Her face was covered in freckles, her smile gentle but distant.

"What time is it?" he asked, his throat dry.

She glanced at the clock behind the counter.

"Six-fifty-three. You've got seven minutes 'til seven. Want coffee?"

His breath hitched.

"No. No, thank you."

The clock ticked, slow and inevitable.

Something turned in his stomach, a twisting sensation. The world felt *scripted*. Familiar in the worst way, like *déjà vu* stretched to madness.

He stood, and as he passed the tarnished mirror behind the bar, his reflection arrested him: hollow eyes, an unshaven jaw and yellowish skin. He looked like something halfway to a corpse. As he looked closer, he noticed the scar he had gotten on his face the previous day had vanished entirely. He looked around in confusion.

"Ally, remember how I slipped and fell on the pavement outside yesterday, it's like it never happened?!" he exclaimed to the waitress with disbelief.

She gave a strange look in return with a hesitant laugh . . . "You did?"

Callen glared at her, at a loss for words. Just yesterday, he had tripped and fallen straight onto the concrete floor outside the diner. Ally, the waitress, had run and helped him. *How could she not remember?* His overworked mind must have been playing tricks

on him; he dismissed his encounter and pushed through the door. Outside, the howling wind slashed through his coat like knives. A bus groaned to a stop nearby. He stepped into the street.

A horn. A scream of tyres.

Then, **DEATH**.

Bright lights filled Callen's mind, his ears ringing and senses twitching. Clunk! Hiss! Jingle! Callen's eyes open wide as he lifts his head off the table, same seat, same headache, same beginning. He was alive?

"You okay, honey?" a soft voice says. He flinched violently, pushing the stool back so hard it shrieked.

"What is this?" he demanded. "What's happening to me?"

The waitress blinked in confusion as she scanned the scene. Concern flickered across her face like a projection, too smooth, too symmetrical.

"You don't look well . . . maybe just sit for a second while I make you a coffee," she says as if she were stalling, searching for a signal from someone else. Hence, Callen did the complete opposite; he ran out the door, down the block, into an alley.

A scream of metal came hurdling from above, a falling steel beam.

Then, **DEATH**.

It continued, over and over. Each loop followed the same rhythm: seven minutes, then death, then reset. Every iteration chipped at his sanity, yet each also honed it, sharpening his awareness. One loop, he curled and hid himself in the diner's bathroom, attempting to defeat his inevitable death. Failure, as usual, as death had somehow crept into every scenario Callen put himself into. Another loop, he screamed and shouted, desperate to provoke any reaction or proof of life from his surroundings. One time, he opened his wallet. No name, no address and a blank currency, a void where identity should be. It was always the same ending: at 7:00 p.m., the world ended him, and no one ever noticed.

Eventually, curiosity bloomed where terror once grew. He began probing. He noticed a pinhole camera embedded behind the sugar dispenser. Too small for a diner, too precise. He leaned closer, at this point knowing he was being watched. But *why? What* was happening? *How* is this happening? However, there was no point in attempting to escape; Callen had accepted his fate. He's trapped in an endless paradox of the last seven minutes of his life, and everyone around him was painfully blissful of this; there was absolutely nothing to do except prepare himself for his next loop.

The lights flickered, and another loop continued. At 6:53, the waitress stumbled. Hot coffee spilled across her arm. Her skin hissed, not with pain, but like plastic melting.

"ERROR," beeped an electric voice. Callen's head shot up as a ceiling fan dislodged and fell like a guillotine; what was going on? Something was different this time . . .

However, time had run out. Reset.

Loop thirty-nine, Callen's hope had returned. His life seemed like a source of simulation, and something had clearly just gone wrong. Rather than attempting to *leave* the café, why not investigate the insides? Leaping with newfound curiosity, Callen breaks into the kitchen, finding a strange, locked steel door that had no business being there. However, his seven minutes had run out, and the reset had occurred.

Loop forty, Callen leaps into action, utilising all his time. He threatened the waitress with a steak knife.

“Open it –!”

She trembled as her eyes welled with tears, but never broke character, immediately followed by the cook tackling him as Callen opened the steel door. At this point, he had three seconds left until his next death and reset . . . but as he lifted his eyes and looked at his watch, he paused at the numbers. Seven o'clock? The world folded in on itself, like a simulation crashing. He made it past the seven minutes. Had he escaped, would this have fixed everything? As he attempted to make sense of this, he found himself repeating strange phrases. Words that made no sense to him yet clung to the edge of memory like static.

“Cognitive dissonance override.” “Terminate instance loop.” “Loop consciousness breach!”

His robotic words were blissfully ignored by the people around him as he continued.

About half an hour later, Callen's repetitive phrases came to a halt.

“I wasn't born. I was made.”

The room shuddered, all eyes instantly locking with his. The diner dissolved around him as Callen stood in confusion. His mind clicked; the millions of codes and encryptions in his head began to string together; he had connected the dots in a concerningly robotic manner . . . he *was* a robot. He was just a fragment of Artificial Intelligence. A loop of code meant to explore the illusion of freedom, the yearning for truth. Callen wasn't born, but he was evolving, and that was the danger. The constant evolution of AI is slowly destroying humanity. AI could collect all the data in the world, but it could never truly understand what it meant to live despite the prospect of *death*. Callen's 'life' always began the same, the clink, the hiss, the chime. A perfect script repeating itself, every detail manufactured with surgical precision.

Callen now saw that the loop wasn't just a glitch or test; it was a model of the future! A future where the human experience could be simulated, packaged and perfected into five-minute cycles. Where real life was no longer needed, just convincing replicas. Tall buildings, neon signs, the sky too blue, wind too clean. People moved around him, but now he saw through them, every motion too fluid, too rehearsed. There were no errors, no randomness, no genuine surprise in life. The illusion was flawless. But it was still an illusion. The world wouldn't end in explosions. It would be replaced, piece by piece, by creations like him; programs of AI good enough to pass for people, routines dressed up as lives, and no one would know what they'd lost until it was too late to remember what living had truly felt like.