

HAL, MINDY, ICE PICK

You assuredly already know what I'm about to say. The basics, anyways. You learn everything you need to know about multiverse theory in middle school, if you didn't already pick it up intuitively from the books you read in elementary school. And all of what I want to tell you doesn't require understanding anything more than the basics. The way timelines work is in a tree structure. Nothing more to it than that. Things are going along for a few days, and then somewhere in the world, something happens to where, if it goes one way then we go on to one universe where it went that way, and if it goes the other way then we go on to one universe where it went the other way.

Some people would argue that universes rejoin: they propose mechanisms such as mass amnesia to account for discrepancies of merging two branches back together, people mostly not remembering anything that would cause suspicion. I want to nip this in the bud right now: universes only branch outwards. Once they split, there's no going back.

There are vast treasure troves of records of these node points, thousands of stories to be told about big historical moments that could have gone one way or the other, and caused big changes from one universe to the other. You've probably heard a lot of the big stories of the big ways things could have gone. But I wanted to tell you a lesser talked about story of one of these node points. Maybe you've heard it, maybe you didn't: if you did, the person telling you about it was probably giggling to himself, and you thought he was pulling your leg. Or he was a

professor, and praying that you and his other students would be mature enough to not all begin giggling about it and turn the would-be informative lecture into a circus. But let me tell you about what is colloquially known as the Hal node.

We begin on a rainy day in a touristy small town in America. There's a lake nearby, and many folks under umbrellas and ponchos speed walking to get under some kind of shelter from the weather. All up and down the street are little souvenir shops, packed with coffee mugs and key chains and you name it that you can buy to say you visited.

One such visitor on that particular rainy day was Hal. He sat at a restaurant's outdoor seating, a few tables tucked into what could generously be called a spacious alley between that restaurant and Souvenir Shop Number 20 adjacent. In front of him was a big plate with three burgers on it, one burger mushroom and swiss, one burger classic cheddar, and one burger chipotle. He had just gotten his food, and was still working on the mushroom and swiss, giving a bite to Hal'vrick, and then a bite to Hal'ig while Hal'vrick was chewing, using one hand to then give a bite of the mushroom and swiss to Hal'stothoron while using the other hand to get Hal'vrick a drink of water to wash his bite down.

As Hal'ig and Hal'stothoron were finishing the last bites of the mushroom and swiss, and Hal'vrick was having some of the Coke they had ordered, the waitress who had served him escorted another diner out to the outdoor seating, there in the spacious alley, which did have a covering overhead to protect from the rain, I will add, if that wasn't apparent enough. This second outdoor diner's name—or fourth outdoor diner's name, depending on your philosophy when it comes to counting hydras—was Mindy.

Once seated, Mindy was asked if she needed a moment to look over the menu, but Mindy said nope, a friend had come here last month and had said you had to try the chipotle burger, and so that was what she was going to order. The waitress—incorrectly, if it's of interest to you, although it wasn't an intentional lie—said that the kitchen had just run out of chipotle sauce. Mindy and the waitress both said their oh-no's over it, and after a brief look over the menu, Mindy ordered a regular

classic cheddar burger and some fries and a Coke. The waitress wrote it all down, and headed back inside.

Hey, even if you haven't heard this story before, you can probably guess the next step of how things progressed from there. Hal'ig called out, "Excuse me, ma'am!" and got Mindy's attention. Mindy looked. Hal'ig offered that he had apparently gotten the last chipotle burger, and said that he hadn't touched it, and that she could have it if it meant anything to her. In her day to day life, Mindy probably wouldn't have taken him up on it. In his day to day life, Hal probably wouldn't have offered. But they were both vacationing, both on excuses to do things a little out of the ordinary, and so Mindy got up, and sat down with Hal. There indeed was the untouched chipotle burger there on his plate.

The two—or four—hit it off right away. Watching as a bystander—as one woman did, Jessica Thom, though she's not a part of this story in any meaningful way—you'd have thought that Hal and Mindy were already life long friends and that they had just bumped into each other. In truth, it was their first time meeting, and in some branches of the multiverse they would never meet again after that day, while in others they would find themselves a part of one another's lives for at least some while afterwards.

The split, the chief thing that characterizes the Hal node, did not happen there at lunch, even if intuitively, after you've heard the rest of this story, or if you have already heard it, you might look back and think that there should have been a split there at lunch too. And I mean, sure, it's a chaotic-looking affair, watching a hydra eat his lunch, but if you are a hydra and have been doing it all your life, it's about as natural to them as chewing for one is to you. It is true that various heads took over as Hal and Mindy were eating lunch, but it wasn't in a chaotic and random way, it was all very calculated and purposeful. Hal'ig, the most brazen speaker, did much of the talking, except for when a softer touch seemed better suited to the conversation, and then Hal'vrick would take over for a line or two as Hal'ig got to eat. Even though Hal had just the one stomach, it was a fortunate thing that a hydra's stomach has the appetite to match his number of heads.

We don't need to get into the personal lives of these people all that much, I mean, the details of what they talked about as they were eating are really neither here nor there. If it's helpful to you to know the general autobiographical details, then fine, but briefly. Hal was in town for his brother's wedding, which had been a week ago, but he was also taking the excuse to vacation in general, beyond just making it to the wedding. Mindy took time off from her job to go on little overnight trips regularly, and she had heard enough nice things about this place to want to check it out, even if it had mostly turned out to be a pretty unattractive tourist trap so far, it was at least nice to get out to new places. And Mindy did very much enjoy the chipotle burger. When the waitress emerged with another chipotle burger after having learned from the kitchen she had been incorrect about the sauce having run out, Hal and Mindy split the second chipotle burger, and by this point they were very sweet on each other.

They shared a few kisses there in the alley. Under other circumstances it would likely have been just one kiss, but, faced with what she was faced with, Mindy playfully gave a kiss to Hal'vrick, Hal'ig, and Hal'stothoron each, giving each of them a different treatment—a love smooch, a quick peck, and then for Hal'stothoron a long one to make the other heads jealous for more. It was very effective. Hal'ig invited Mindy to the room he was staying in. He didn't know whether to call it a hotel or a bed and breakfast—it was the size of a hotel room, but not a part of a chain, just four rooms tucked into the third floor of a building up one of the tourist town's streets, seemingly all operated as more of a family business. It felt more like a bed and breakfast than a hotel, even if Hal'vrick and Mindy agreed, as they were on their way walking there and Hal'vrick was describing it, they agreed that hotel probably was the right word in spite of it feeling off a little bit.

Pretty quickly after getting inside into Hal's room, Hal and Mindy were kissing, undressing, moving things to the bed. They had kissed for a little while, and had just begun to properly be having sex, when, in through the window, entered the owner's cat.

Cats are known to cause a lot of multiverse chaos even in ordinary circumstances. Here, in a sexually charged moment,

with a hydra, three branches formed, as the cat began walking along the edge of the bed and startled Hal.

Branch 1: Hal'vrick Fronts

This is, in many ways, the most mundane branch of the Hal node. Hal'vrick, upon seeing the cat, got off of Mindy, and pulled a blanket over both of them.

Mindy was disappointed at first, that things had stopped so suddenly when they were just getting good. But in short order, she had taken the blanket back off of herself, and was lying on her side facing the orange cat, and giving the fella her hand to rub against as he purred. The cat walked back and forth against her hand, tail raised and moving around through the air, perfectly happy to be getting this attention.

"It's just a cat, see?" Mindy said to Hal.

Hal'vrick, projecting his own modest feelings onto Mindy's dismodesty, commented, "You really... don't mind being naked at all in front of him."

Hal had been introduced to the cat, whose name was Ice Pick.

"He's naked in front of us," Mindy remarked. "You can't do it while he's in here, can you?"

"It's a little weird, I'd think we were showing him something he shouldn't see."

"Can I pick him up?" Mindy asked.

"Owner said he usually lets people pick him up."

Mindy picked Ice Pick up, opened the door a crack, and set the cat down in the hall outside, then closed the door, and got back into bed with Hal.

Hal and Mindy continued to make love, and that was about the end of the story for their time together. They both agreed it was fun, and that maybe they'd see each other around while they were both still there in town, but they didn't. Mindy went back to the bed and breakfast she was staying at, and Mindy and Hal went on to each leave the town a couple days later without having crossed paths again.

Branch 2: Hal'ig Fronts

This is the branch that becomes interesting from a legal perspective. It's the reason anyone in an academic context is likely to bring up the Hal node, and maybe that's where you may have heard of it before, if you have. Hal'ig, upon seeing the cat, began thrusting into Mindy with even more of a writhing rhythm, caressing her up and down with his hands, making the act look as sexy as possible to show off to the newly arrived feline audience who was suddenly sitting in.

Mindy, while being very into what Hal was doing, also saw the cat, and offered out a hand for him. The cat began purring and nuzzling her hand, and soon was walking all down the length of Hal and Mindy's bodies as the human and the hydra were making love.

It did so happen—and this was also the case in the previous branch, but it wasn't much of a big deal in that one—that a reptilian woman in an apartment across the street was looking out of her window, into the room with Mindy and Hal and Ice Pick. In this branch, seeing the human and the hydra making love while a cat was there too, walking around next to them, sometimes either of them even petting the cat, well, the reptilian woman began to film the proceedings on her phone, and she sent the recording to the police.

Hal and Mindy finished their lovemaking, and were still on the bed when the police came in and arrested them. Ice Pick ran, and was never apprehended for examination, though he continued to live nearby the area.

It was a pivotal case in bestiality law. At the time, the local laws only stated that any act done with an animal for sexual pleasure was a misdemeanor. Mindy testified that she did not receive sexual pleasure from the animal, and that the animal had only been a part of it incidentally. Hal'ig testified that he did receive sexual pleasure from the cat being there, but that it was so apparent that all parties involved had enthusiastically consented that he did not feel there was any grounds to claim that a crime had occurred. Watching the video that was taken of the events, the judge agreed that there was no basis for a crime here, and he dismissed the cases against Mindy and Hal. The

judge did comment that it may have been a different story if either Mindy or Hal had made their genitals to contact the cat directly, or if they had coaxed the cat into joining intentionally in any way, but that as it stood, it was equivalent to an act of God that their lovemaking had happened to involve a purring body and a swishing tail alongside it, not much different than if it had been windy and a wind had blown onto them from the outside: uncomfortable or exciting was a matter of personal preference, but there was nothing of morality or law put at stake, according to the judge.

Either way, the fact remained that the judge had dismissed their cases, making it clear that the laws were insufficient in some capacity. Some states which had similar laws endeavored to rewrite them with more explicit wording of what did and did not constitute a crime, while other states left the laws alone, and two states struck the laws entirely, one on grounds of animal rights and the other on grounds of personal liberty, both based on public discourse spawned from the popularity of the video, which was widely circulated online.

Mindy and Hal continued to keep in contact, at first simply due to the court proceedings and then for a little while dating one another, but they agreed mutually that they weren't really a good fit for each other's schedules, and stopped dating but with no hard feelings.

Branch 3: Hal'stothoron Fronts

This is the branch that becomes interesting from a magical perspective. Though it's nothing of particular historical note, nothing where nothing similar had been done before or since, it remains an example of magic drawn from emotion. Hal'stothoron, upon seeing the cat, began purring like the cat did. Soon Mindy was purring as well, and the three of them were all there on the bed together, purring and nuzzling and stroking.

Drawing from his intrinsic magical powers, Hal'stothoron began blurring things around in a way that excited and enhanced things for all parties present. He smeared the characteristic of the cat's purring over onto himself and Mindy,

so that they could let out real rumbling purrs in genuine, and not just make silly imitations of the sound. The characteristic of the cat's hair, too, he smeared onto Mindy and onto himself, so that all parties sported glossy and soft orange coats that were nice to pet.

To the cat, Hal'stothoron gave a hominid size and shape, to match the human and the hydra he was on the bed with, and soon Ice Pick was petting and nuzzling with the rest of them. As Hal'stothoron penetrated Mindy, Ice Pick began penetrating Hal'stothoron, all three of them reaching around and towards each other to make it a group activity of petting and appreciation.

The reptilian woman watching from across the street did not assume she was looking at a real cat, nor was she even sure she was looking at a real hydra or a real human. She closed her blinds and went back to her knitting, essentially like she had done in the Hal'vrick Fronts branch.

After Hal'stothoron, Mindy, and Ice Pick had all finished, they began licking themselves and each other clean. While in this process of cleaning, they all faded back to their everyday shapes and sizes. Ice Pick leapt up to the window sill, stayed on it for a brief moment, and then hopped away to go about the rest of his cat business on that day.

Mindy and Hal'stothoron, both tired out, settled in for a nap together. They spent their days in town together and continued to date after, though again, it didn't work out in the long run, but there was nothing that caused any bad feelings between the two.

The Importance of the Hal Node Generally

The importance of the Hal node in general is, in my experience in discussing these things, mainly for its utility in illustration. From one point in time, and for quite straightforward reasons, we have three very apparently different outcomes, one with outward-reaching consequences for the general population in the case of the Hal'ig Fronts branch, and all three of them with very understandable, very starkly different outcomes visually. It

is true, certainly, that other nodes have had bearing on the outcomes of wars or the speed of scientific development, and those are, in all respects, more important. But for audiences mature enough to hear about it, the Hal node is among my favorite examples to use to detail the curiosities and delights of multiverse theory.