

# Little Differences [Story 2 of the Loose Ends Saga]

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Dion was singing “Abraham, Martin, and John” on the radio.

Jeff was making breakfast.

When Dion got to the part about Bobby, Jeff took the egg he was about to crack and threw it against the wall. Then he did the same with another. Then he took the whole box and smashed it on the floor, and stomped on it for good measure.

He was still mopping up the mess and crying when Laura walked in a few minutes later.

“Honey! What's wrong?”

Jeff shook his head, said nothing. They'd been over this before. He had to steel himself against this kind of thing. He'd never make it to 1986 if he broke down every time he heard a song about an assassination he could have stopped. But there was something about that last verse—

Laura pulled him up into her arms, kissed his neck, drew his arms around her.

“I still have egg on my hands—”

“It's ok, baby,” she said. “Shhh, it's ok.” She kissed him again.

“It's just that last verse.” Jeff said. “I don't think ‘Abraham, Martin, and John’ was originally written that way—with the verse about Bobby. They just tacked it on, after he was killed. That's why his name's not in the title. It's bad enough I was here when JFK and now Martin Luther King were murdered, and I did nothing—”

“You tried with JFK,” she said. She stroked his head. “It wasn't your fault.”

“I tried and I failed,” Jeff said. “And now Bobby. If his name wasn't in the song at first, maybe he wasn't supposed to die. Maybe I, we, were supposed to save him. And I did nada—nothing!”

“We've got to stay focused on the Challenger,” Laura said.

“I know,” Jeff replied.

“That's the key to all of this,” she continued. “If we don't stop it from crashing into that schoolhouse in Florida and killing all of those kids...”

Jeff knew she was right. Nothing else mattered compared to changing that reality from his timeline to Laura's, from a world in which the space program died a final death to one in which just the astronauts died in the Challenger, and the space program limped along and took wing again in the following decades. Still...

"It's just—this has been one lousy year, event-wise," Jeff said. He looked at the calendar on the refrigerator. It was on its last page—December, 1968. He'd be glad to pull it down and throw it in the trash with the rest of the year.

"Well, at least we'll have Apollo 8 circling the moon this Christmas, and Armstrong and Aldrin on the moon next year," Laura said.

"Yeah," Jeff said, "and Nixon in office. He'll throttle the Apollo program barely out of its cradle, and then give the Shuttle such poor funding that it's amazing it didn't blow up long before 1986."

"We'll just have to do something about that, then, won't we," Laura said.

Jeff hugged her, eggy hands and all, and thought, yeah, and maybe we can still do more than that too.

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"God, these hamburgers are gonna kill me, but I love 'em." Sam McKenna smiled across the table at Jeff, and made a stab at wiping some of the grease off of his chin.

"Part of the charm of the South Campus Cafeteria," Jeff said. "Lousy food, cold spilled coffee on your table, a good shot of getting boiling-hot coffee on your hands. But, hey, there's always a chance of picking up a juicy tidbit of conversation about another professor, maybe even about yourself, from unknowing students at a nearby table."

Sam chuckled and eyed the table next to them. "Not likely," he said, "they seem to be talking about dead Greek philosophers. I don't think any of them have tenure here."

"Well, at least we know they didn't die of South Campus hamburgers," Jeff said. "They probably aren't as bad for you as you think, anyway. There are dozens of cholesterols—"

"I don't wanna hear about cholesterol," Sam said and waved Jeff off. "Let's get back to what we were talking about—the space program."

Just as well, Jeff thought. Now that he was finally in line for a tenured position himself in the Sociology Department, there was no point jeopardizing it by dropping too many hints about a future only he could know. It was enough that he was discussing the space program with Sam—the sharpest professor in the Political Science Department, and someone Jeff had become quite close to in the past year.

"I think you're way off in your concerns," Sam continued. "Politicians are crazy about space—everyone loves it. Hell, LBJ sent framed photos of the earthrise—the shot taken by Apollo 8—to heads of state around the world, including Ho Chi Minh!"

"Johnson's out of office next week," Jeff said.

"You think Nixon's going to risk hurting the space program with the Vietnam War on his head? Scuttle the only bright thing he's got going for the American image these days?"

I know he is, Jeff thought. Not that the Democrats weren't responsible too. He'd studied Mondale's 1969 speech in Congress, to be delivered just a few months after Apollo 11. He'd gone over it and the

entire Congressional record leading to the Challenger very carefully before he'd left—that was, what, almost six years ago, before he'd come here from 2084 in the Thorne? Seemed like more than a lifetime. But he could hear the screen with Mondale's words as if they were right in front of him now. The Senator from Minnesota had been talking about the NASA proposal to go to Mars in the 1980s. *I believe it would be unconscionable*, Mondale had said in that deadening twang of his, *to embark on a project of such staggering cost when many of our citizens are malnourished, when our rivers and lakes are polluted and when our cities and rural areas are dying*. Right—but the only thing that had died had been human exploration of space, its home beyond Earth. And Mondale, for all his talk, was just a senator then. Nixon as President had been the one.

All Jeff trusted himself to say to Sam was, “I think Nixon's going to surprise you about what he'll do—in Vietnam as well as in space.”

“Oh, I have no illusions at all about Nixon and Vietnam,” Sam said. “He says he has a plan to end the War—I'll believe it when I see it. We'll be lucky if we're out of there by the time the next Presidential election rolls around. But on space ... look, tell you what. A friend of mine at Georgetown told me Nixon already has plans to set up a taskgroup, as soon as he assumes office, to map out the path for the space program post-Apollo. Surely that shows a commitment to space?”

“You're missing the point, Sam: *post*-Apollo. Why not continue it? Why not get some manned missions going to Mars?”

“So maybe he's just looking for a new name,” Sam replied, “so he can distance the program from Kennedy, because missions to Mars deserve their own Greek god. Look, I'm going down to Washington for an association conference next month. Why don't you tag along? I could introduce you to my friend.”

The conversation at the other table was heating up.

“The Greeks haven't done anything in two thousand years,” one of the kids was saying. “Even politically, you people are the weakest country in Western Europe today.”

“Papadopoulos can change that,” someone with a Greek accent replied. “He's a great man—for Greece and the world.”

The first student guffawed. “Papadopoulos is a jackass—another dictator with delusions of grandeur.”

Another voice with a Greek accent spoke up. “The Spiro Agnew—*he's* the greatest Greek in the world today!”

A strange feeling went through Jeff—one which he'd been trying to suppress, ignore, for the past few months. But it was getting harder to give it no for an answer.

The new Vice President was known in the future for his advocacy of the space program—his almost lone-voice advocacy in the Nixon Administration. Agnew would be Chair of Nixon's Space Task Group. The one that would propose NASA missions to Mars for the 1980s. The proposals that Mondale would ridicule and Nixon would kick aside in favor of the undernourished—unconscionably underfunded—Shuttle.

But what if Agnew were in a position not only to propose, but to start implementing NASA's schedule for Mars?

“I'd love to,” Jeff said to Sam. “Let me just check with the board of directors at home to make sure we don't have any conflicting plans.”

\* \* \* \*

*I'm just rapping with my friends, Ron...*

How many times had Jeff heard Nixon say that, or something similar, in the mirror imagisms he'd seen as a kid—"the mirrorim: more pixels per byte, the retina's delight"—Nixon in stark vivid detail in new productions and copies of holoscans and videos and movies made decades or more earlier? After JFK, Nixon had been the 20th-century president the 21st century had held in greatest fascination. And with good reason.

*I'm just rapping with my friends, Ron ...* Nixon to his Press Secretary, Ron Ziegler, who had come upon the President talking to a small group of anti-war protestors at the Lincoln Memorial, in the early hours of the National Day of Protest in Washington, five days after the slaughter of four students at Kent State. Except the kids at the Lincoln Memorial were neither his friends, nor was Nixon "rapping". He was barely communicating with them at all—babbling, instead, about college football scores, oblivious to their anguish.

Nixon, with little or no Secret Service protection at that Lincoln Memorial before Ziegler had arrived—accounts differed, but all agreed he had impulsively left or snuck out of the White House, bent, perhaps, on explaining himself to whatever protestors he might encounter, or maybe just wanting to spend a few minutes with Lincoln, but certainly without the usual Secret Service complement.

About as vulnerable as a president could be.

But that was still more than a year away...

"Jeff Harris?"

Jeff turned, and extended his hand. "Good to see you again, George."

George G. Landry had bushy black eyebrows and a big moustache that looked out of place to Jeff, pasted on, but at the same time appropriate, even familiar. Then again, that's the way just about everyone had looked to Jeff since the day he'd arrived in 1963, more than 20 years earlier than his team had intended to send him, to stop the Challenger from exploding. Nothing about this world seemed in its proper place to Jeff, yet it all seemed so well known to him—like Jeff himself, when he looked in the mirror. An historian's dream come to life—except he was the history now.

"Quite a President," George said, and looked up at Lincoln. "Don't make them like that anymore, do they."

"With the rosy vision of hindsight they all look pretty good," Jeff said.

"Well, not all," George said. "I doubt our incumbent will come out of this presidency smelling like a rose. You would agree, am I right?"

"Who are you?" Jeff hadn't intended to be so blunt with Sam's friend, who had had some very interesting things to say to them about the Space Program at lunch today. Sam had a plane to catch back to New York right after the meeting. George had asked Jeff if they'd like to resume their discussion a bit at the Lincoln Memorial, since the April evening promised to be balmy. Jeff was delighted to agree. This was the third time Sam and he had been in Washington with George in the past few months, and Jeff was eager to find out more. All he knew about George and his moustache at this point is that they toiled in some murky, unnamed division of the President's "staff".

George breathed in deeply. "I can still smell the tear gas," he said, "from the October 1967 march on the

Pentagon. Armies of the night. They were just kids, for crissakes. Exercising their constitutional right to assembly. Country's going to hell. Going to get worse."

Jeff thought about asking who he was again, but decided not to push it. Let him keep dropping these intimations of the future.

"I'm no one—at least as far as history is concerned," George said. "No rosy wisdom of hindsight to see me in. I'm off the screen—you gotta be seen in the first place to be seen in rosy hindsight, right?"

Jeff said nothing.

"You hate this war?" George asked.

"Yeah," Jeff replied. "The bitterness it's created in this country, the fusing of Vietnam and military and space in the public mind, poisoned the space program. I'm sure of it."

"And you're right. But you gotta hate the war itself. Do you?"

"Well, it's wrong," Jeff said. "It's unconstitutional—"

George grabbed Jeff's shoulder. "There are things in this life more important than laws and even constitutions," he said in a harsh urgent whisper. "You better think on that, my friend, before you do what you plan to do."

Jeff stared at him, started to speak—

George interrupted again. "The Vice President is much better than Nixon on space—you were right in what you said this afternoon. But is he any better on the War? You think Agnew will get us the hell out of there any faster than Nixon?" George's voice had risen to something more painful on the ears than a whisper.

"We were just talking hypothetically," Jeff equivocated.

"I'm not going to belabor the point," George said. "And I have a dinner engagement." He made a show of looking at his watch. "So, with regrets, I'm going to have to terminate this interview. But you need to think: Which is more important to you: Vietnam or space? And, if both are important, you'll need to think of a better way." George half smiled, nodded, then turned with a flourish and strode away.

Jeff was alone in the Lincoln Memorial. Thirteen more months to May 9, 1970, when Nixon would be here, almost alone.

Jeff breathed in the blossom air. Maybe he could smell some of the tear gas too. He wasn't sure.

"Space!" He shouted up to Lincoln, his fist clenched, his voice ringing. "We've got to get free of this planet!"

Laura was right—that was the only damned freedom that really counted in the long run. Why couldn't this world see that?

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Jeff was on the computer again, hands massaging the console like he was driving a car, kneading Rena's back, making love to her face with his thumbs and his palms and his lips. He strained to see what was on the screen, but he couldn't quite make it out. Words ... that didn't spell anything.... They never did, this far away.

Something soft snuggled up behind him. He could feel taut nipples pressing against his neck, breasts warm upon his back. He turned. Rena ... No, Laura...

She kissed him softly on the eyelid. "Time to get up," she said. "It's way too early for man or beast, but you'll miss the bus if you don't get up now."

"Ok," Jeff said. He kissed Laura full on the lips, then leaned back, and ran his hand through her hair. "I guess I was dreaming."

Laura put her head on his chest. "Comes with the territory."

"It's still in the future when I dream," Jeff said. "I've been cut off from it almost totally since I've been here, yet it's still in my dreams. Like a man who still feels his feet after his legs have been amputated."

"Lots of people maimed in the War—lots of people killed," Laura said. "I don't blame you for wanting to demonstrate in Washington. I'd just feel better if I came along—"

"No," Jeff said. "I want you here."

"So who's going to make sure you don't do something foolish? If you get yourself arrested, and the police start asking questions, looking into who you really are, where's that going to leave us?"

"That's exactly why I want you to stay back here," Jeff said. "I won't do anything foolish. I just want to ride down with the demonstrators in one of the buses, get a feeling for who they are—I can't just hang around here waiting another decade for the 80s to come along. But if something should happen to me, it's key that you be out of it, safe back here in New York. You're the only one, other than me, who has any inkling of what's going on."

Laura laughed, without joy. "We're worse than the blind leading the blind."

*I'm just rapping with my friends, Ron...*

"True," Jeff said, and hoisted himself out of bed. All too true. But maybe something still could be done to change that. Up until the past months, he had been thinking of his role, and Laura's, solely in terms of how they could change specific events known to have happened—JFK's and the other assassinations, the Challenger explosion. Jeff was tired of just reacting, of trying to dis-invent the tragedies that psychos, idiots, and god knows what else had made.

Today, he would try something more direct. He had no idea how many chances he would get to influence events back here, but directly doing something, rather than attempting to prevent something, seemed a surer way of getting what he wanted.

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The bathrooms on the Jersey Turnpike and the inside of the bus all blended into one for Jeff. He looked at the blonde napping next to him, felt the gun in his pocket, and shivered. Easy enough to get a gun in Harlem, even in 1970, even for a white man. This was the world his ancestors were making for this girl. Drugs in the bloodstream, death on the street, people crowded with despair on a dirty planet with nowhere to go but down. The kids deserved more. The Earth deserved better. Could Jeff, with an act of violence which was anathema to all he had been until now—with a gun which was itself part of the illness he was trying to cure—make it all not happen? The girl opened her eyes for a moment and smiled at him.... He believed he could.

*Are ya lis'nin' Nixon?* Mercifully, there was no tear gas in Washington today. Just an echo of Pete

Seeger's voice, questioning Nixon in song as it wafted across the lawns, a refrain from an earlier demonstration, emanating now from a kid with a banjo. History had been right about all those earlier protest marches—Nixon hadn't listened, the politicians never did. But what did it even mean to think that history was right, when the thinker was about to change it? Jeff was determined to make this demonstration, of May 9, 1970, a little different...

He walked for hours, taking in the shifting, gathering crowds, until the light began draining from the sky. Would that the soldiers could be so easily coaxed to leave Vietnam! Would that Nixon could be made to see that he was slamming the door on the sky, bleeding it dry, with every budget cut he inflicted on the space program.

"Hey, you were sitting next to me on the bus, right?"

Jeff turned to see the blond girl, who was holding a boy's hand, a good looking guy with skin the color of coffee.

"Yes," Jeff said, and smiled at them.

"I think it's gonna go pretty good tomorrow," she said. "Reports on the radio say the crowds are huge already."

Jeff nodded.

"They're handing out cokes and pretzels over there." She pointed to a knot of people, far away.

"I'm ok," Jeff said. "You two go get something to eat. I'm gonna spend a little more time here."

"Ok," she said. "You take care. Hey, I don't even know your name. You said you were a professor right? Who knows, maybe I'll take a class with you someday."

"Arthur Bremer," Jeff replied. The name just popped out of his mouth. He hadn't given it any thought—but he didn't feel good about saying Jeff Harris. Bremer seemed an appropriate name to use under these circumstances. He, or someone else using his name, would take a shot at George Corley Wallace in just a few years, after having allegedly stalked Nixon...

Jeff walked faster, then slower, back and forth, edging closer to the Lincoln Memorial. Nixon was still many hours away—if the historical re-enactments were right, he wouldn't show until 4 AM—but Jeff wanted to be in position. He cursed his inability, as he had so many times, to consult any records of his history—*his* history, the future from the perspective of here, the one he used to have at his fingertips when he lived and worked in the second half of the 21st century. He had to assume that Nixon could appear any time now. It was already dark. He'd watch for the black limousine pulling up to the steps of the Memorial.

Jeff thought again about his life, his former life, as an historian in a world that didn't exist yet—a world he had come back to change. He'd had no idea when he'd stepped into the Thorne in 2084 that he'd ever wind up at this time and this place. Just as he had no idea he'd be sucked back into 1963...

To be knocked unconscious at the airport in Dallas when he was minutes away from perhaps saving JFK. Who—what—the hell had done that to him? Didn't matter, Laura said—whoever, whatever, just rotten luck—it was an act of the universe—a universe with a stubborn streak, determined in some profound way to keep its timeline unmolested by time travellers.

But who could tell the difference between what was, and what was supposed to be?

Jeff looked around him. The Memorial steps were almost empty. Good. Fewer witnesses...

Whatever happened, he had to do better here than he had with Kennedy.

He thought back to the Kennedy-Nixon debates of 1960, also immortalized in any screen that could show anything audio-visual. Kennedy looking so cool, Nixon sweating, shifty-eyed like Mephistopheles. Neither man could have had an inkling then of the transcendent roles history had consigned for them—or the role, in Nixon's case, that Jeff had planned for him and history now.

Jeff kept walking, around and around. Eventually he pulled out a sandwich he had acquired some time in the afternoon, a long time ago, and wolfed it down. His eyes scanned the people, the trees. For the first time since he'd been here, the trees were in the clear majority. He saw a woman walking alone. She looked like Rena. Why did so many women look like Rena to him? He had loved her and left her in 2084. And she had come looking for him in the past. And had died in 1964.

The sky was much darker now. He looked at his watch—it was 3:25 in the morning. Nixon would be here very soon. He felt his gun. It turned his stomach.

A car pulled up. A man got out. Then another.

God, it looked like Richard Nixon...

Jeff squinted—why hadn't he thought to bring binoculars?

Who was the other man? Manolo, Nixon's valet. Had to be. No Secret Service anywhere.

The two men were slowly walking up the steps.

Jeff touched his gun. He could run over to them right now. He could fire. And do what? Shoot Nixon in the back?

He felt his hand sweating on the weapon. He wondered if the wetness could ruin the firing mechanism. His breaths cut like little knives—

“Jeff...”

He jumped, nearly pulled out his gun and fired.

“Please.” Laura put her hands on his arm. “You can't do this.” Her voice was desperate.

“I have to,” Jeff said.

“No,” Laura pleaded. “You're not a murderer. You're better than that. Don't let, whatever it is we're in, don't let it do that to you.”

“You're wrong,” Jeff insisted. “I'm the one who's doing this thing—nothing's doing anything to me!” He kept his eyes on Nixon and Manolo. They were up the steps now, inside the Memorial, under Lincoln's shadow. He tried to move a little closer—

Laura was blocking his way. “You can't just kill someone—even Nixon!”

“No? Would you stop me if I had a chance to kill Hitler as a child?”

“I don't know,” Laura said in quavering voice. “But Nixon's no Hitler—”



“Four students were shot dead at Kent State because of him!” Jeff said in a low growl. “He calls them ‘bums’. They’re just kids—they take my classes, I rode down on the bus with them. That’s good enough reason for me.” And Jeff was close to tears too.

“You don’t know that Agnew will be any better,” Laura said.

“You sound like ... ah, that’s who told you about this. That’s who told you I’d be here. What’d he do? Phone you? George G. Landry?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Laura said. “What matters is I’m not going to let you kill anybody.”

Jeff shook his head and looked at the Monument. A bunch of kids were in there with Nixon already...

*I’m just rapping with my friends, Ron...*

“So who says I’m going to kill the son of a bitch?” Jeff rasped. “Maybe I’ll just disable him so he’ll have to resign. Agnew supports the Mars proposal—hell, he’s Chair of the Task Force that presented it.”

“You don’t shoot well enough to know how to wound him,” Laura said. “You’re liable to kill somebody else. You don’t know shit about guns.”

“She’s right, Jeff,” another female voice said from behind him. “Didn’t you pay any attention at *all* in the training we received? Guns are strictly a no-no.”

“Rena...”

\* \* \* \*

A thousand questions screamed in Jeff’s skull. Rena was killed in 1964—he’d held the damn *Daily News* with her face and the article right in his hands—how could she be here now? Was the newspaper wrong? Had Rena somehow come here first? But why? And how? Laura and he had figured out the irresistible magnet that 1963 was to time travellers ... or thought they’d figured it out...

The only thing Jeff was sure about was that this wasn’t a dream, he so glad to see Rena ... that, and his time somehow had passed to shoot Nixon. It was a subtle thing, but Jeff knew it was over.

He looked at Lincoln. The entourage was still there, but Jeff felt sapped, almost drugged, his circuits too overloaded with questions about Rena, with joy at seeing her again, to even pull out his gun, let alone shoot anyone.

He was a very different person, a detached part of him realized, than he had been just a few seconds ago.

Which was the more real?

Rena tugged on his arm. “Forget him, Jeff. That’s not you. You were meant for other things.”

Laura took his other arm.

“I’ve got the car nearby.” Jeff thought he heard Rena say. “The pickup on these 20th-century models is amazing.”

The car seat felt comfortable indeed after this long day. Jeff’s head felt muzzy. Rena drove, Laura gave him some tea.

He had so many questions. Had Rena come here in a Thorne? That opened up all sorts of possibilities. His Thorne had disappeared in that vandalized student lounge. Laura's had vanished a few days after her arrival, sucked back at the behest of who knew what force or command into its Artificial Worm Hole...

Like the nothingness his brain felt it was being sucked into right now.... His eyelids put up a desperate rear-guard action to stay in touch with what was happening. But they were hot pasty lead...

The last thing he heard before he gave in to sleep was Eddie and the Cruisers singing "Season in Hell" on the radio...

\* \* \* \*

Jeff woke up the next morning, mind clearer than it had been in years.

Laura was in the kitchen making breakfast in their New York apartment.

"You drugged me last night," Jeff said.

Laura looked at him, nodded.

"Twice," Jeff said. "Once when you first grabbed my arm near the Lincoln Memorial." Jeff touched his arm with his fingertip. "I can still feel a little puncture mark here—what was it, some sort of contact needle? And then in the tea you gave me in the car. Tea's supposed to keep you awake, not put you to sleep."

Laura said nothing.

"How the hell am I supposed to trust you at all now?" Jeff barked.

Laura stared very hard at him. "You can trust me to drug you and do anything else to stop you from murdering someone—even Nixon. You can count on my not letting you become the very people you despise. You risked your life and even the Challenger plans once to stop Lee Harvey Oswald. You've been miserable about not trying to stop Sirhan. Yesterday you were this close, *this* close, from becoming one of those monsters yourself!"

Jeff looked away. "Where's Rena?" He wheeled around, saw the bathroom was open and no one was in it. He could see the foyer and living room were empty too.

Laura took a shaky breath. "She's gone."

"What? You let her go—"

"It was what she wanted, insisted on doing," Laura said. "The Thorne only has room for one. Who else could have been the one to get in that? Your going back would cause much more of a disruption at this point—remember in my reality, my future, in which the Challenger doesn't crash into the schoolhouse, you never returned to 2084. And as for me ... I just couldn't ... I mean, I didn't want to go and just leave you here."

Go and leave me nice and cuddly with Rena you mean, *that's* what you didn't want, a voice in Jeff said. But he said nothing aloud. Laura's reasoning was not wrong. "Why did she have to leave so soon? We could at least have talked this over."

"She wanted to get to 2084 as soon as possible," Laura said. "She was back here looking for you—one of the ads you placed in the papers a few years ago made it through to the future after all. So she knew

your address. When she showed up yesterday, I knew who she was. I told her about your being in Washington, and she realized immediately what you might be up to. I guess I knew it too, but didn't want to admit it. But as soon as Rena said it, we got on a plane, and I caught a cab to the Lincoln Memorial, and she got the car—”

“Ok, ok, I know that already,” Jeff said. “Why'd you let her leave, today?” He slammed his fist on the table.

“That's what she wanted. I couldn't stop her,” Laura said. “She thinks she's going to 2084, and then to 1986, to stop the Challenger.” Laura put down what she was doing. “For all we know, maybe she is. What was I to tell her—don't go, don't ever get into a damn Thorne again, because, if you do, it'll bring you back to 1964, where you'll be run down by a goddamn bus? Is that what I should have told her? Would she have listened?” Laura was sobbing.

Jeff found himself consoling her. “I guess we can't know that for sure.”

“We don't know a damn thing for sure,” Laura said. “Maybe we were wrong about the 1963 magnet...”

“I don't think so,” Jeff said. He closed his eyes, tried to picture himself standing near the Lincoln Memorial yesterday, Laura and Rena rushing to him from two different directions, bent on stopping him from doing what he was surely about to do.

“You two were like antibodies plunging towards me yesterday, set upon me by the Universe's immune system to protect the status quo. You were pulled out of New York, Rena out of the time flux. That's part of what's going on at the end of 1963 too—why the terminus there for time travel is so deep, so well worn. So many people going back to try to prevent the assassination of JFK. But even more, I'd bet, a lot more, pulled into there to make sure the assassination takes place.”

“That's horrible,” Laura said. “Why must the status quo be Kennedy's death?”

Jeff shook his head. “I don't know.”

“What's the status quo that the Universe is trying to protect for the Challenger?” Laura asked.

“That's a good question,” Jeff said. “It's like there's a deeper reality, a core realm of events, that nothing can change, that all forces stand ready to protect. All we seem able to do is push around the film on the surface of the pond.”

“Rena had a plan,” Laura said.

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Right, but one of the twisted advantages of time travel, Jeff had found out the hard way, is that you find out right away when your plan has failed—you see its ruins staring you in the face, in the same damn world unfolding just as you did not want it to.

Rena's plan was logical enough: Her Thorne had landed her in 1970, so she reasoned that whatever the power of the 1963 basin of attraction that had sucked Jeff back in his Thorne and its AWH to the eve of the JFK assassination, it could not be all powerful. True enough, apparently. So Rena thought she could take her Thorne back to 2084, and tell the team what had happened. Get them to build two fleets of Thornes. Even if that took five years, a decade, that wouldn't matter to Jeff and Laura, because from their vantage point, when one of the two fleets arrived, no time would have passed. And that fleet, by virtue of its sheer numbers, should create enough attraction in 1970 to offset at least somewhat the immense power of the 1963 basin. Jeff and Laura could then each take a Thorne back to 2084, where

they could live happily ever after (Jeff could hear the slight sarcasm in Rena's voice as he imagined her saying this to Laura). Meanwhile, the other fleet of Thornes would aim for 1986—where, again, by virtue of its numbers, it would presumably offset the pull of 1963—and it would do in 1986 whatever was necessary to stop the Challenger explosion.

But obviously something in that reasoning was wrong. Rena hadn't been aware of Jeff's "antibody" theory for why her Thorne had come back to 1970—she'd drawn mistaken conclusions about the strength of the 1963 basin. It was not omnipotent, true—but it took some sort of extreme crisis, like the endangering of an historically very significant President like Nixon, to counteract its weight, to attract whatever was necessary for the job, including a time traveller like Rena pulled out of a fall to 1963 for a stopover in 1970. And when the job was accomplished—Jeff's rendezvous with Nixon aborted—the stopover was no longer necessary. So when she stepped back into the Thorne she went not where she wanted, to 2084, but to where she was originally being drawn, to 1963.

To her death.

"You see, I knew that Rena wasn't coming back, that no fleet of Thornes would ever appear, the minute you told me about her plan," Jeff said to Laura, time and again. Because Rena and the Thornes would have been there already that very morning had they ever been going to appear. The days, months, years that followed were just a redundant chorus of confirmation.

And the space program continued in its invisible decay, its fixation on the deathtrap shuttle, the road to the Challenger paved with good and not so good intentions...

"Our problem," Laura said one morning in the early Spring of 1972, "is that we have no way of telling, at this point, just when the fork occurs in our two different realities—yours in which the Challenger not only explodes but takes out a whole schoolhouse of children in Miami, mine in which it explodes just after takeoff and kills only the astronauts. Presumably the space program survives in my reality because no other people were killed in my Challenger explosion—the closest it came was a solid rocket booster, still carrying propellant, headed straight towards New Smyrna Beach after the blow-up. But the Air Force detonated the booster's destruct package by radio signal at 100,000 feet."

"Right," Jeff said.

"But you and I are both here in 1972, and this reality seems the same so far for both of us," Laura said. "It's exactly, at this point, as each of us grew up in the 21st century knowing it. So the question is, how do we know if this is my reality or yours? The answer to that affects what, if anything, we do to make sure this stays my reality, or leads to it."

"I still think the third choice of changing the political structure altogether so that Mars not the shuttle spearheads the space program is the best bet for the future," Jeff said. "But that's obvious—if apparently not possible."

"Not so obvious," Laura said. "If we try for that future, we risk losing my future, in which the shuttle is still center stage, but with just the limited explosion and consequences—and the beginning of some serious Mars exploration at last in the 21st century."

"I guess," Jeff admitted, grudgingly. "Not to mention that we already missed our best opportunity for getting the Mars program in motion—Nixon's still in office. 'I have decided today that the United States should proceed at once with the development of an entirely new type of space transportation system...'" Jeff did his impersonation of Nixon's announcement to reporters at San Clemente on January 5, adding in the shifty eyes, shaking jowls, and Nixon's patented hands-raised-above-his-head-in-a-victory-gesture for good measure. "He had the gall to say he was especially pleased about the shuttle because it would

make space work 'safe and routine'! Do you believe that?"

Laura poured Jeff some tea.

"If we're stuck with the shuttle," Jeff said, "then we need to get word to NASA about the O-ring problem. But even that's a lot more complicated than it seems—the O-rings were the culprit, as far as we know, in both your and my history. But who knows, maybe there was something more at fault in yours or mine. And there's the question of just when should we contact NASA. The plans I brought with me from the future are almost useless until 1984. If I approach someone at NASA now, and say, hey, don't give Thiokol the booster contract, you're on your way to building a Russian-roulette killing machine that will break the heart of America, I'll likely be laughed off as a crank."

"There were plenty of flaws in addition to the O-rings," Laura said. "The very first shuttle flight—Columbia's—lost some of its heat tiles. One of the fuel cells failed in the second flight. The astronauts' spacesuits were defective in the fifth flight—even though the contractors gave them their seal of approval. Fortunately, the crew abandoned their spacewalk because of upset stomachs—had they used the suits, they would have exploded. The engineers were dead-tired for a later flight and missed that a sensor from a fuel hose had broken off and was lodged against a valve. That little oversight, discovered by accident, could have caused the engine to blow up. The list goes on and on."

Jeff shook his head. "The wisdom of hindsight again—except we goddamn have it and still haven't a clue what to do."

"Well, maybe we should start with something a bit easier—like whom at NASA or wherever should we contact," Laura said.

"Is that really easier?" Jeff asked.

"I don't know," Laura said.

Jeff sighed. "The only one I can think of seems to have disappeared. I'll ask Sam about him again. I still think George Landry may somehow be a key to this."

\* \* \* \*

*No need to be afraid....* One of the things Jeff had really loved about spending the 1960s at City College in New York was the scraggily group of kids singing Beatles songs in the Alcove behind the North Campus cafeteria. All that La Jolla seemed to have was this one guy, leaning up against the pastel grey building that housed the Western Coordinating Sciences Institute on Silverado, singing his song. But his falsetto gave Jeff the chills.

Jeff carefully slid a five-dollar bill under the guitar case. No sense letting it blow away in the warm ocean breeze.

"Thanks mate," the singer said.

The security guard inside looked at Jeff, then at the picture of Jeff he somehow already had a copy of on his desk, and motioned Jeff to the flight of stairs in the far left corner. The building only had two stories, and there was nothing but the pantomime guard on the ground floor, so Jeff assumed that the second floor would have what he was looking for.

It did, and more.

"Been a while, hasn't it," George G. Landry said and extended a calloused hand.

Jeff took it, and tried not to wince from the vise-like grip. “I appreciate your seeing me,” Jeff replied. He didn't say “on such short notice,” because it had in fact taken two months of intense hounding of Sam to make this happen.

Landry pointed to a chair. “Make yourself comfortable,” he said to Jeff. “And let's get down to business. You'd like my thinking about the space program.”

Jeff nodded. The chair was indeed comfortable, but nothing else about this meeting was. The office itself looked wrong—like Landry had just put it together for this meeting. But Jeff reminded himself that although he was an historian he was certainly no expert on 20th-century office decor—certainly not what passed for it in late 20th-century California.

“I'm going to be blunt,” Landry said. “You wanted this meeting; here I am; I'm going to tell it to you like it is—as some of my current colleagues like to say. You're an amateur. You don't know what you're doing. You'd be better off keeping the hell out of this.”

Jeff knew better than to ask Landry who he was. He remembered Landry's non-answer at their last encounter. Nor did he ask just what this Western Coordinating Sciences Institute “coordinated”—he had a feeling he would find out soon enough. “Go on,” Jeff said.

“I told you last time that you were barking up the wrong tree trying to remove Nixon on the hope that Agnew would be better for the space program. The problems with space run deeper than that. And Nixon and Agnew are both the source of other threads that need fixing.”

“Some of them would have been fixed with Nixon gone,” Jeff said.

“True,” Landry said, “but you went about it the wrong way. You can't make history go your way by blowing away presidents—hell, you can't make history go your way by attempting to *stop* presidents from being blown away either. You of all people should know that.”

Jeff reddened. “Who the hell are you?” Now he couldn't stop himself from asking.

Landry sneered. “I'm someone who knows how to get things done in this business. We do it quietly, in little ways, when no one is watching. You know, the nail that fell off the shoe of the horse and the damn nag broke its leg and the army lost the battle and the war and the empire collapsed and all that. Except we remove the nail, or slip in a defective one—a little break-in in a hotel room, a little tip-off to a lucky security guard, that's the way you get rid of a president. Get my drift? No bullets, no bullshit, no bloodshed.”

“I'm a fan of none of that,” Jeff said. “But Nixon's gearing up to beat McGovern in a landslide, and still hasn't ruled out nuclear weapons in Cambodia or North Vietnam.” Upset as Jeff was, he still realized that he was better off not revealing certain explicit brutal facts about the near-future. Nixon's nuking of Cambodia in 1976 was the only use of nuclear weapons other than Hiroshima and Nagasaki. That secret devastating mission, no secret to Peking, had come razor close to starting a full-fledged nuclear war—only the death of Mao that same year had sown enough confusion in China to forestall it till the crisis had passed. “Even without the space program, there are a dozen reasons Nixon should be out of office,” Jeff confined himself to saying.

“And what I'm telling you is that that's going to be taken care of,” Landry said. “Nothing we can do about the landslide, but we're on top of the nukes in Cambodia. That won't happen—I can assure you. Nixon will be preoccupied with other things. And he'll be long gone—via *legal* means—by the time the next election comes around. You'll just have to take my word for it. Watch the news next month.”

“We’?” Jeff asked.

“Never mind who we are. You and your girlfriend just stay out of our way, let us do our work. You understand?”

“What about the space program?” Jeff insisted.

“You’re going about that the wrong way too,” Landry replied, tiredly. “No one’s going to pay any real attention to your concerns about the shuttle’s safety. You’ll get through to a few intelligent engineers, they’ll look into it and see what you’re saying is right, but their reports will be ignored. They’ll be filed away somewhere. That’s the way *that* can of worms works. Too much political pressure on NASA.”

“So what are you saying?” Jeff asked. “It’s all hopeless? No real chance for space after all?”

George G. Landry gave Jeff a long, cool stare that seemed to cut not only through Jeff’s eyes, his brain, his soul, but through the past nine years that Jeff had been here, years of fog in fast retreat now from the sun.

Finally, Landry spoke. “Are you willing to do what’s necessary?”

\* \* \* \*

Jeff stepped out on the balcony of the Century Village apartment he had managed to sublet in West Palm Beach. The weather was gorgeous this Sunday—sunny and warm and just what one would expect of a late January morning in Florida. Jeff squinted at the sky, in the direction in which the Challenger would be taking off. Today would be a perfect day for the launch. Unfortunately, it wouldn’t happen until Tuesday, when the weather would be cold enough to prevent the crucial expansion of the O-rings.

Jeff wished there was a way he could heat up the sky. Converge the requisite lasers over a suitable area—shunt the sun’s energy from warmer climes. But those techniques were nearly a century away from being invented. Much like Jeff himself.

But here he was. Gone from 1972 to 1986, with barely a call goodbye to Laura, via a time travel device that made the Thorne look like a Model T. Except “don’t let the glitz fool ya,” Landry had advised, “the chassis may be sleeker, but the vehicle obeys the same underlying laws, the same physics of time travel, as your Thorne.” Meaning it was just as subject to powerful basins of attraction. Rena’s Thorne, attempting to move forward to 2084 from 1970, had been sucked back to 1963—as had Jeff’s and Laura’s Thorne, travelling back from 2084 and 2094, in the first place. “The pull of the 1963 basin is almost irresistible to vehicles travelling back from anything approaching a century or more in the future,” Landry had told him. So Laura and he had essentially been right in what they’d concluded in what seemed so long ago now, in 1964—when they had first realized that perhaps their presence in the past could make a difference, and mitigate the worst of the Challenger disaster.

But the Fall of 1972 was apparently just far enough away from November 1963 that a time-travel device attempting to move forward could break free—as Rena’s in 1970 apparently had not. That was Landry’s theory, anyway. For Jeff, to have been drawn back to 1963 again would have been a nightmare so agonizing that he was by no means sure his sanity could have survived it. But he’d held his nose, clutched his hopes, and put Landry’s machine and the theory that came with it to the test. He’d been willing to do what was necessary to get this far. And here he was.

But as Jeff looked at the sky—blue as a new-born’s eyes—that would soon see, hold, so much fire, so much pain—he couldn’t say with certainty that he had what was necessary to finish the job.

\* \* \* \*

“Small things,” Landry had stressed, over and over, “that’s the only way to get around the universe’s damned resistance to time tampering. You can’t do it by assassination, by preventing assassination, by causing a shuttle to blow up on television, by preventing it from blowing up. That’s all beyond our reach. The most you can do is re-direct the explosion—cause it to happen a little sooner, over a different area, with a different result...”

Yeah, that jibed with Jeff’s experience with his great-great-grandmother in 1964. A small thing—still wonderful, and hurtful, to think about. He had asked her to convey word of their brief meeting to her grandson, Jeff’s grandfather, in the hope that he would in turn pass that word on to Jeff. And his great-great grandmother did, and his grandfather had, giving Jeff a tiny but irrefutable proof positive in his mind that he could indeed do something in this past that could alter the future.

Small things. Landry’s people had learned that two things had caused the Challenger to explode and crash into that Miami schoolhouse filled with kids in Jeff’s reality—the reality that was still on cue to happen now in less than 24 hours, unless Jeff did something to prevent it.

At T plus 0.678 second—.678 of a second after takeoff—photographic evidence showed a puff of first off-white then grey smoke spurting near the aft field joint of the shuttle’s right rocket booster. This was the first indication that the O-rings had not slipped into place. The result would be the catastrophic explosion just after T plus 73 seconds of flight. There was nothing small about that. There was no way to stop it once the O-rings failed. And there was no way to stop the O-rings from failing. Landry had been all too right about that—every warning had gone unheeded.

But a second malfunction had caused the Challenger to veer way off course, to Miami, before the explosion. Wind shears encountered at T plus 36.990 seconds—greater than any experienced on previous shuttle flights—had defeated the adjustments of the computerized navigational equipment onboard. “The most dangerous weather phenomena affecting aviation,” Ralph Nader once had written. The result would send the Challenger on its deadly course to Miami.

Landry was betting that that errant path, the result of powerful winds and impotent automated guidance, was something that human intervention at just the right moment might avoid.

A small course correction, made by a human pilot at just the right time, forewarned and forearmed. Was it small enough to escape the Universe’s unblinking attention?

Small things worked. Whispers to great-great-grandmothers. Not murders.

What Jeff still wasn’t sure about was suicide...

“Jeff Harris, Western Coordinating Sciences Institute, good to meet you.” Jeff extended his hand to an attractive brunette, whose press-pass fixed just above her bosom said *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. She had taken the last remaining seat next to him, at the end of a long cafeteria table.

“Mary O’Brien,” she said and smiled. “Western Coordinating ... I don’t think I’ve heard of them. A new news service?”

“Sort of,” Jeff replied. He sipped his tea and silently cursed the taste of styrofoam for the thousandth or more time since he’d left his century. “It’s a new online service—a private operation for chief executives and other important people who have personal computers and modems.”

“Online? Ah, you mean like The Source? I was talking to someone here last month who said he sends all



his stories in that way—his editor has an account on the system.”

“Exactly,” Jeff said.

Mary nodded. “His paper got so disgusted with all the Columbia's delays that they brought him home, ruined his Florida fun. God, there were so many problems with that one that people began calling it ‘Mission Impossible’. NASA was none too pleased.”

“They're under a lot of pressure,” Jeff said. “Hard to operate on the strangulation budget Nixon left 'em.”

“Yeah,” Mary said. “At least Reagan seems more gung-ho. Well, let's hope they get this one off the ground soon—those poor astronauts must have pains in all kinds of places lying out there on their butts for four hours.”

Jeff didn't reply. He knew it wasn't going to happen today.

The announcement came over the loudspeakers a few minutes later, at 12:35 PM. Today's launch was cancelled—crosswinds above the runway were clocked at more than 10 feet-per-second above the highest allowable speed.

“Jeez,” Mary said, and got up with dozens of other reporters from nearby tables. “Well, they're right to be careful about those wind shears, though. Brought down that Delta in Dallas last August, remember? Killed 135. And the Pan Am in New Orleans in 1982? Winds slammed into it, tossed it around like a toy. Only 9 survived that one—153 died. I covered both those stories. Jeez, one of the nice things about doing the Shuttle is we don't have to worry about those kinds of things, right?”

Jeff looked away.

“Well, good talking with you,” Mary said. “Let's hope for better luck tomorrow. Maybe we'll run into each other again.” She smiled.

“Sure,” Jeff said, and smiled back. But he knew that wasn't going to happen either.

\* \* \* \*

Mission Impossible ... the press's sarcastic name for the seven-times delayed Columbia 61-C flight, the last shuttle mission before the Challenger, which indeed had finally flown a successful mission in January, though its delays had pushed back the Challenger's original launch date of December 23, 1985. Jeff wondered if the combination of that and the original TV series, or the later movies and mirrorims, had given Landry and his colleagues the idea for the plan that now was Jeff's to implement.

The plumbers and what they had done to Nixon with Watergate were after all classic *Mission Impossible*. Jeff had read up on all the pertinent new history in the several weeks that he'd been here. Impressive. He had to give Landry credit. And Landry had assured Jeff that his people would take care of all the relevant details for the Challenger.

Except, of course, the most important one.

Jeff looked in the mirror.

The use of masks to make the MI operatives look like other people had been a fundamental mechanism in all of the show's incarnations. Of course, in the early TV shows and even the first series of movies, the mask technology was more science fiction than reality. But by Jeff's time, skin weaves from DNA banks with huge varieties of features were commonplace. And Landry's technology was even better.

Construction of an utterly lifelike face-mask that looked like someone else was no problem.

Landry's team had indeed covered the other details. Jeff had studied the conversation logs of the Challenger's astronauts on this fateful day, and had memorized all of his lines. The medical records would show that the voice of the astronaut he was impersonating had had a slight cough and a sore throat on this day, and that would account for any perceived difference in voice quality. Tiny puterwafers inserted in appropriate places in Jeff's skin would generate false readings consistent with the general medical data of this astronaut. Jeff was already the same height, and the age was right. They were both about 40.

There was no way of stopping this mission. Jeff had no choice but to believe that now.

He had failed to prevent the assassination of JFK, he had failed to kill Nixon, and he had been unable to stop this mission—the specific circumstances were different in each case, but all had hit the same unfathomable brick wall. He had spent months and months after that first meeting with Landry in La Jolla, trying in vain to get NASA, Thiokol, anyone to listen about his warnings about the O-rings. Most of his calls, his memos, his letters, never seemed to get through. And when they did, they seemed to have no effect at all. The Shuttle continued on its inexorable trajectory to tragedy.

In a few hours, Thiokol's engineers would recommend that the launch not proceed due to the very O-ring problem in the cold that would cause it to explode. Made no difference—the managers outvoted the engineers anyway. Jeff was certain that had he been there with a videotape of the explosion, those plumes in the sky, that burning schoolhouse in Miami, it would have made no difference either. Somehow the launch would have proceeded anyway.

Small things. That was all he had left. Like being inside the Challenger, after its launch, to make a little, manual course correction so that, when those vicious winds began blowing with the O-rings gone, the Challenger would go nowhere near those kids in Miami.

Jeff had been trained intensively for ten weeks. The simulation had been exactly like the inside of the Challenger, with the wind shears projected in all their force and fury. Far too strong, and sudden, for the nav computers to handle—even if they were performing at peak efficiency, which Jeff knew was no sure thing, given the spotty record of so many other systems on the shuttles. NASA had been right to postpone the launch yesterday. And today's wind slam would be even more overwhelming—and unexpected. Microburst out of nowhere, down-draft from the base of the cloud, wind smacks the ground and comes back up like an inverted mushroom and the Challenger's hit fore and aft by headwinds and tailwinds, spun around indeed like a toy to Miami, a toy with tons of explosion. But Jeff with the wisdom of hindsight—this time all too terribly clear—would know just what to do.

Landry's people would help Jeff take the pilot's place. Jeff was glad at least that one of those astronauts, heroes to the rest of the 20th and the 21st century, would survive this.

But not Jeff.

He looked again in the mirror, tears in his eyes, and saw the face of Michael J. Smith.

\* \* \* \*

Jeff waited in the bathroom. Souped-up security passes courtesy of WCSI and a mask of his own face worn over Smith's had gotten him this far.

Mike Smith, Jeff knew, was finishing his breakfast. Soon the Challenger pilot, anticipating his first trip in space, would make a quick last pitstop in the bathroom. Jeff carefully peeled off his own face so that he once again looked like Smith. As soon as the shuttle pilot entered, Jeff looking like Smith would hustle

out of the bathroom and join the others in this mission. Landry's people would see to it that the real Smith was safely and quietly escorted out of the bathroom and off the premises.

Jeff heard a noise at the door and tensed.

Someone walked in. The height was right, but from what Jeff could see of the man's face, as he turned to the urinal, this was not Smith.

Jeff looked at his watch. Mike Smith should be here any minute. He hoped the man at the urinal concluded his business quickly.

The goddamn guy was humming now as he finished up. Jeez, the voice sounded familiar. Jeff tried to stay focused. He'd heard lots of voices around here as he'd checked out the place as best he could in the last few days. But something about the glimpse he'd caught of the guy's face, just a quick profile at most, ate into Jeff as well. He'd studied photos of hundreds of NASA people who worked here, and of course of all the astronauts, but this guy seemed none of those—

He flushed, rinsed his hands in the adjacent sink, and dried them. Then he turned and looked straight at Jeff, who was standing in a half-open stall near the door.

Sweet God Almighty!

“Hello,” the man said. “There's no easy way for us to be introduced, so let's just leave it at here I am.”

Jeff was unable to speak.

“The first thing I need you to acknowledge is that my being here shows your plan to go up in the Challenger won't happen,” the man said.

Jeff could see that was true. But he also knew that some aspects of the future were nonetheless subject to change. He might still be able to get on the shuttle, sacrifice himself as planned, and then the older version of himself that he was now confronting would never have been here. “This must be very painful for you,” Jeff said. “I still carry the turmoil everyday of what it was like to change my—our—memory when I met our great-great-grandmother.”

“Yes,” Jeff's older self said. “It's painful, though I prepared myself as best as I could for the sudden rush of memories I knew I would have when I met you. It's like I'm living this twice, for the first time.” He shuddered. “Let's get out of here now, shall we?”

“If I go with you,” Jeff said, “if I don't take Mike Smith's place today, then the Challenger will kill all those children in Miami, and the future of the space program too. We'll have my future, not Laura's. But that's what I've been working for these past 10 years to change. Please. You already know that. Don't mess up the last chance we have.”

The older Jeff shook his head. “There's no time for me to spell it out to you now. Just come with me.” He took a few steps towards Jeff, and pulled out some sort of weapon.

“Keep away!” Jeff moved a pace towards the front door. He managed a derisive smile. “I *know* you're not going to kill me with that. And if you stun me—how are you going to explain lugging Mike Smith's body around?” But Jeff knew he was on shaky ground. He had to stay conscious if there was to be any chance of his making the switch with Mike Smith. He couldn't even afford a tear in his outfit which might attract attention. He looked out the door. Smith should be here any second. He looked back at his older self, who was still approaching.

Jeff had to do something quickly. He smiled weakly at his older self, as if acquiescing, then turned on him with a ferocity he never knew he had. He smashed his older's self's arm against the wall, then battered it with his fist until the weapon fell. He punched him repeatedly in the solar plexus. His older self sagged blue-faced and breathless to the floor.

Jeff walked out and closed the door behind him. For a moment he hoped he hadn't hurt his older self too badly, then realized how absurd that concern was: what he was about to do would eliminate his older self from existence entirely.

But how would he make the switch now? He couldn't continue waiting in the bathroom. But neither could he just burst in on the Challenger crew at breakfast with Smith still there. Where was the pilot already anyway? Why wasn't he here?

It didn't matter.

“Please come with us, Sir.”

Three men suddenly were in back of him, around him, escorting him away. One had a gun to his side.

“Where are you taking me? Look—”

Jeff received a slight but firm shove in response.

“If you're with Landry, you've got the wrong person,” Jeff spoke quickly. “You're here too early—I know I *look* like Mike Smith, but he isn't here yet. I'm Jeff Harris.”

No reply.

Jeff savagely elbowed one of his escorts, broke free of another.

The third pointed a small, snub-nosed pistol in his face.

“Listen to me,” Jeff said as slowly and deliberately now as he could, “you're making a very big mistake.” He looked the man in the eye. The expression he saw was even less compromising than the barrel of the gun.

Then he felt a twinge of something in the back of his neck, and all he saw was a swirling, darkening blur of red, brown, black.

\* \* \* \*

“Jeff...”

He opened his eyes to a series of faces, like a carousel of corneas being fitted to his eyes, except each showed a different frame, a different face...

Rena ... Laura ... Landry ... Jeff at 10 ... Jeff at 50 ... Jeff at 40 ... Michael Smith ... Rena ... Christa McAuliffe ... JFK ... Bobby ... Dion ... Laura...

“Jeff...”

The spinning got slower...

Rena ... Laura ... Landry ... Nixon ... John Lennon...

*I'm just rapping with my friends, Ron...*

*No need to be afraid...*

And slower still...

Rena ... Laura ... Jeff at 40 ... Rena ... Laura ... Laura ... Laura...

“Laura,” Jeff said. But she looked different, older. “What’s—”

“Shh, baby.” She put a finger, cool, to his lips. Jeff felt tears on his cheek. He realized they were hers.

“I missed you so much,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” Jeff said. “I know.”

“I tried to track down Landry,” she said. “No way I could do it in the 70s—he and that Western Coordinating Institute left no trail. So I had to take the long way home to you—live these 13 years day by day. But I never gave up hope I would find you.”

“I’m sorry, angel, so sorry,” Jeff said again, and he hugged her. “What time is it?” He pulled away.

“It’s 11:30,” Laura said. “The Challenger lifts off in a few minutes. We’ll be able to see it from here.”

Jeff looked around, saw he was in the front seat of a car, passenger’s side, parked along some field with shrubs. “We’ve got to stop them!” He moved to get out of the car. His body ached all over.

“It’s too late for that,” Laura said, tears in her voice as well as her eyes.

“It’s *not* too late,” Jeff insisted, and opened the car door. He turned back to Laura. “All we’ve been struggling to accomplish—limit the damage of the Challenger, save those little kids! We can’t let it happen!”

Laura appeared not to hear. “I tried so hard to stop the whole flight—call it off—get the O-rings fixed. I tried so hard, so many things. But it just wasn’t possible—something always seemed to get in the way.” She shook her head, looked back at Jeff, put her hand on his. “But I think I may have headed off the worst.”

“How?” Jeff looked at his watch. It was past 11:30 indeed. No way that either of them could stop anything having to do with the Challenger now.

“I spoke to Mike Smith years ago,” Laura replied. “He thought I was crazy—this mission hadn’t even been scheduled then. He wasn’t even an astronaut then. But you know, I guess if you’re cut out to become an astronaut, you have a sense of what science can accomplish not only now but in the future. So I told him who I was, about the Thorne, how I got here, what would happen to the Challenger one day, everything. I think he still thought I was crazy—then. But he heard me out. And when the wind shear hits 37 seconds after lift-off, he’ll see it on the instruments, and I think he’ll remember what I told him. And he’ll do what needs to be done. He’ll make sure the Challenger flies far away from Miami.” And she broke down into sobs and tears.

Jeff came over to her side of the car, pulled her out and into his arms. They both were crying.

“How’d you know where to find me?” Jeff asked. “I mean, Landry’s people—”

“I finally managed to break through to part of Landry’s operation just a few months ago. I saw some of

the plans. I knew you'd be here. I knew Landry's men would be kidnapping someone—you, an astronaut, I couldn't get to that piece of the plan. But I figured I'd hire my own team, intercept Landry's, and see whom they'd taken. Maybe it would be you. And I got lucky." She touched his face. "That mask only fooled me for a moment."

Jeff touched his face too, realizing that the mask was off.

They turned in the direction of the Challenger. It was starting its liftoff.

And they looked at the sky, hands clasped, eyes singed from the smoke that would soon plume far from the Earth, far from the schoolhouse, close to the heavens.