

LOOSE ENDS

by Paul Levinson

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Jeff felt a certain hardness under his backside, like he had fallen asleep on a plush chair and come awake on a park bench somewhere.

He opened his eyes and stared at his destiny: a large and messy lounge of some sort, outlines indistinct in what must have been the reflected light of evening street lamps. There was no doubt about it. The broken-down couch in the corner, worn wooden study tables to the right, books and papers and misshapen armchairs strewn around like some old rummage sale -- this was a far cry indeed from the cool flowing continuum of the control room. The Thorne had worked after all.

Jeff strained to keep his adrenaline in check. Not even a cleaning person in the unlit room. Good. It was late at night, maybe even a weekend. No one to bump into. He pulled a low intensity firefly from his pocket. In the weak approximation of daylight, the lounge looked even more 20th century. Remarkable! On the floor near his feet, he noticed a ratty looking issue of Look magazine. The August 23, 1963 date on the cover caused another rush in his veins, but told him not enough of what he needed to know. The magazine could have been lying around for years by the looks of this room.

He had to know the exact date of his arrival. It would tell him which of the eight plans to implement. Clutching his deliberately nondescript suitcase, he walked quickly to the door. He noticed a torn Time magazine dated October-something, 1963, and frowned.

Jeff delicately opened the door and patted the shirt of his janitor's outfit. He was an academic with strong ties to the working class -- his great-great-grandparents had slaved in sweatshops -- and he welcomed the prospect of testing out his jargon, costume, and identity on the local populace. Unfortunately -- or fortunately -- no victims were in sight. He walked out, carefully closed the door behind, and strode in search of an exit.

"Sher-er-ry, Sherry baby. She-er-ry..."

For some moments now, Jeff thought he had been hearing a faint falsetto whining. He walked down the last flight of stairs, out into the street, and recognized the shrieks as "Sherry" -- an early rock hit by the Four Seasons. More inconclusive evidence, not particularly heartening. He'd done a special lecture on the Seasons and the Beachboys just last year, and knew for a fact this song came from the summer of 1962.

The air felt chilled, like maybe early October. A '59 or '60 Fairlane 500, from which the Seasons' song seemed to be emanating, was no more help in establishing an exact date than the song.

The street beyond the Fairlane looked clearer and uglier than he'd expected -- a bright messy watercolor spilling onto itself. He wondered what his expectations about this place were really based on. Probably more on Andrews' "Village Square" hit of last year than the hours of 1980s film and photographs he had

reviewed till his eyes had burned with fatigue.

He spotted a blonde girl in what used to be called dungarees walking towards him. "Uh, pardon me, Miss," he said as nonchalantly as he could, "do you know the time ... and the date please?"

She gave him a strange look and glanced at her watch. "A quarter to twelve," she said, without slowing a step.

Well thanks a lot, Jeff thought. "Excuse me, Miss, I'm sorry to bother you, but if could you tell me the date as well..." He found himself shouting after her. She just kept walking. He shook his head and walked the other way.

The chill was beginning to eat at him as he made his way towards West Fourth Street and Washington Square Park. There the usual complement of derelicts and weirdos -- some things never change, he smiled -- were keeping the late-night vigil. No point in trying to get a straight answer about the date from that crew. He sighed, then noticed the quaint old phone booth on the corner. He picked up the receiver and pumped in eight quarters in rapid sequence to make sure he would get a connection. "Hello, Operator, could you tell me what today's date is?"

"The date, sir? I'm sorry, but we're only supposed to give out numbers."

"Well, is there a number I can call to find out the date?" A faint odor of urine permeated the booth.

"Checking, sir. No, I have a number for the time, but I don't see one for the date."

"Well, then, do you think you could be a human being instead of, uh, a com-puter, and tell me the date anyway?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but we're only supposed to give out numbers."

"And have you no function in the universe or reason for existence other than giving out numbers?"

"I have no function, sir."

Jeff slammed the phone down and shook his head. I'd make a great diplomat, he thought. At this rate, I--

"Having trouble with the phone, Jack?" Jeff turned to find himself addressed by -- was it a slacker or a hippie? -- about 25 years of age. "The phone company's been hangin' everyone up lately, man."

"Yeah," Jeff smiled, "it's getting worse and worse. Look, I wonder if you might be able to help me. I'm disoriented, I've got to know what the date is." Jeff leaned out of the booth, deaf to the quarters that clanged in the coin return.

"I can dig it, man, really."

"Good, then, can you tell me what the date is?" He inhaled deeply of the less tainted air outside the booth. Compared to what he had just been breathing in, it smelled like perfume.

"Well, like, that's a difficult question, man. I mean it's November 21st now, but it'll be November 22nd in a few minutes. And of course for the cats over in England it's already been November 22nd for a few hours, and--"

"Ok, good," Jeff said. "And the year?"

"The year?"

"Right, the year -- as in 19..."

"Oh, well that's the same everywhere, man. 1963."

"What?"

"I know it, man, time flies faster and faster these days..."

Jeff walked dazedly down the street, fighting to think through flashes that spat at his brain. What the hell was this?

He was supposed to have emerged some time in the Fall -- the end of November was cutting it a little close, but ok, that still gave him at least some weeks to get to NASA, Morton Thiokol, whomever. He knew the Thorne wasn't perfectly precise. How could it be -- generating the kind of savagely powerful local field needed to keep the Artificial Worm Hole open long enough to operate across time. So it couldn't be that exact. But 23 years? What could he do to prevent the Challenger explosion back here in 1963?

He shook his head and it cleared a little. He had no choice now but to return to the lounge, activate the mechanism for return to 2084, and try the damn thing again. He retraced his steps to the Student Building. But his legs moved slower and slower, as if they opposed the decision to return. Finally he stopped.

He stared at the Student Building across the street. He focused on its gargoyled facade and played with a quarter in his pocket. He pivoted suddenly and walked quickly again in the direction of the Park. A hundred and twenty-one years was a long time to have traveled into the past just to rush right back. He could take a few more minutes to think this over.

He wandered towards Sixth Avenue, then inside a coffee shop. He sat down and read the sticky plastic menu without comprehension. The cracks in the red leatherette upholstery jabbed his thighs.

"Had a rough day, huh honey? What'll it be?" The dyed blonde waitress was right out of a turn-of-the-cen video. Upset as he was, Jeff the cultural historian liked this.

"Just a tea with milk, please." By any conceivable logic, he ought to return as soon as possible to 2084, so he could try this again, and with any luck arrive at least a few months before January 28, 1986. To do that, he had to go back now to the lounge in the NYU Student Building from which he'd emerged, the exact same place, that was the way the Thorne worked.

But something in Jeff rebelled against this logic -- something in his nature which said, look, you've gotten this far, it's not good, but you may never get this far again, so you better take what you can of this chance to save the space program...

But how?

He'd have to improvise.

He thought about the endless careful plans his team had made for him to avoid getting caught up in some paradox -- keep the loop clean, don't do anything in the past that might undermine the very foundation of this project. Steer clear of everyone's great-grandparents... Jeez, how the hell was he supposed to do that back here, 23 years earlier than he'd planned to arrive, when he had no idea where everyone he was supposed to avoid was?

Jeff rubbed his head. Every second that he stayed here was a knife at the throat of his future. He was off the screen, way out of equation-range -- a single word to a wrong person, some land-mine of the past, could set in motion a chain of events that erased his colleagues, maybe even him, from existence. True, he had no close family, no one that he really loved deeply anymore -- well, maybe still Rena, in a way -- but he certainly hadn't undertaken this job to kill his friends, make himself a martyr to a reconstituted future that might never know he'd existed in the first place.

On the other hand, how really likely was it that he'd run into such a land-mine? Painstaking tests had shown that the effects of most interjections in the past were sooner or later washed out in the myriad of everything else that remained the same. And how could anyone from his vantage point truly know what was intended all along? Maybe he'd always been supposed to arrive here back in 1963 -- maybe he was ordained to help the space program, or humanity, in some way other than stopping the Challenger. Maybe that's why the Challenger blew up after all, because there was no way he could influence events this far back to stop the explosion that took the heart and soul out of the space program, had set up the 21st century to be little more than an age of commentary looking back on the Golden Age. His head spun. He could feel the sweet buzzing vortex of paradox whispering in his brain, drawing him in... No, I have free will, I'll do what I damn well choose, I don't have time for paradox now, I only have time to act.

He looked at the clock on the wall. Twelve minutes after twelve. Too much lead time for the Challenger -- the shuttle had barely been conceived of in 1963. He supposed he could live the next 23 years in normal time here, and devise a new plan to thwart the explosion. Thiokol Chemical Corporation had been awarded the NASA contract to build the shuttle's solid rocket boosters on November 20, 1973 -- just about 10 years from where he was now -- so if he could hang on for a decade, he might even be able to begin doing some good then. Leroy Day had been picked to head planning for the shuttle in 1969, a few years nearer.

But this didn't seem appealing. Ten years, even five, was a long time to stay out of trouble. And he couldn't even be sure that the Artificial Worm Hole would remain operational that long. The most their tests had confirmed was safe return after 18 months in the past.

He of course knew exactly what else he might try to do on this date. He knew its obvious significance. He didn't have to be a cultural historian by training to know it. Jeez, he'd arrived at the edge of the oldest cliché in the science fiction CD. Everyone and their great-aunt Martha had written a story about it.

What was the likelihood that some error in the team's calculations, some unexpected flux in the AWH, had landed him here on this of all dates? Maybe it wasn't an accident that he'd somehow been dropped at the doorstep of what Time nearly a century in his past and 37 years from now had dubbed one of the top five murders of the millennium.

But if so, what was its deeper purpose?

Surely not to stop the events in Dallas tomorrow -- there really wasn't enough time. He was in New York City, after midnight, on November 22, 1963. Way too soon for Challenger. All but too late for JFK.

All but too late ... But what else could he could do back here, then? What else had he perhaps been meant all along to do here?

He shook his head.

Did they even have air service to Dallas this late at night? He didn't know. What kinds of planes? Propellers? No, probably jets already.

Dallas was a thriving city even back in the 1960s, and at the very least he would probably be able to get a businessman's flight early in the morning. But would that leave him enough

hours? What was the point of flying all the way to Dallas just in time to hear that JFK had been shot?

But what was his alternative if he didn't use the AWH to return to his starting point? Sit around like a jackass and wait for Walter Cronkite's tear-choked voice to announce the assassination on TV?

Blondie arrived with his tea. Fortunately it was lukewarm, and Jeff was able to drink it down in two gulps. He pulled a crumpled bill out of his wallet and left it on the table. Some bank clerk in the next few weeks would be stunned to see a 1981-issue ten-dollar bill with Donald T. Regan's signature, but he had no other money, and had to take a chance that such a minor anonymous anachronism wouldn't disturb the time-line. Loops could be perfectly clean only in theory. The bill would likely be dismissed as a clumsy counterfeit or a joke. Or who knows, maybe it would be lost before it even got to a bank teller.

He walked out onto Sixth Avenue and surveyed his options yet one more time. The city was harsh, the air stank, he didn't belong here. The sensible thing to do was return to 2084. And yet...

He flagged down a passing cab. "Kennedy, uh ... Idlewild Airport. On the double, Chief." As the cab pulled away, Jeff recalled George Bernard Shaw's line that the reasonable man adapts to his surroundings, the unreasonable man attempts to change his surroundings to suit himself, and all progress depends upon the unreasonable man.

There had to be something more to this than Dallas, but at this point Dallas seemed the only way to get to it.

Inside the coffee shop, the waitress stuffed the bill in her bosom pocket and laughed. "I tell ya," she said to the fat man stuck behind the cash register like a melon, "these actor types are all the same. They never remember to wait for their change. I'm gonna keep this for good luck."

"Tunnel or Bridge?" the cabbie grunted through chewing gum.

Jeff wasn't completely sure what he was talking about. "Do what you think best, Mac. Just get me to the airport as fast as you can." He shifted his weight on the springy seat and looked through the dirt-caked window ...

"Just got off the late shift, right? My brother-in-law does the midnight-to-eight shift for Helmsley. You gotta do what you gotta do to make a living these days, right? What's the use of talking."

"Yeah, the inflation's impossible," Jeff agreed. Can't go wrong in any century griping about inflation. And he made a note to himself to get out of the janitor's outfit as soon as he got to the airport.

"Yeah," the cabbie growled, "ain't it the truth."

Jeff felt in his pocket for his reassuring puterwafer but got no comfort from it. He knew he was fully on his own now, plans pertaining to 23 years in the future all but worthless. In a worst-case scenario, if all he could catch was an early morning flight, he'd have maybe an hour or two to get to the Book Depository Building in Dealey Plaza after his plane arrived in Dallas. If he could somehow get to the Building by 11, he'd stake out the upper floors and try to intercept the gunman ... or gunmen ... or gunwomen. He wondered whether he'd find Lee Harvey Oswald up there by those windows. Historians would give their right arms to know. A hundred-and-twenty years of

theorizing had left them no closer to knowing who had killed Kennedy than the unsatisfying "lone nut" explanation of the Warren Commission.

One thing Jeff did know: the assassination of JFK probably did more to ultimately harm the prospects of humans in space than even the horrible Challenger disaster. His team had briefly considered sending him back here to 1963 in the first place, but rejected it on the grounds that too much was still unknown about the assassination for them to mount an effective plan to stop it. So here Jeff was without a plan anyway... rushing like a moth to a flame that he had little chance of extinguishing, but was too attractive to resist...

"Any special terminal, Mac?" The grunt drew Jeff back to the real world, though this ride seemed scarcely more real than his musings. He looked at his watch and whistled. This old gasser had gotten him to the airport in under an hour. "American Airlines, Chief, and thanks." Jeff set his watch to the time on the foolish-looking clock pasted on the cabbie's dashboard. It was now 1:07 in the morning of November 22.

He paid in dirty dollar bills printed 20 years in the future and sprinted into the terminal, a garish but not uncharming combination of wine red carpet and shiny chrome trimming. It reminded Jeff of early technicolor movies. He ducked into the men's room, unpacked clothes from his suitcase, and shortly emerged a stylish 80s businessman. He expected this wouldn't cause too much of a problem -- if his clothes looked a little odd, people would likely chalk that up to his dressing European. There was more difference in hemispheric styles in this century.

He approached what appeared to be a mock-wood ticket desk. The pert red-headed kewpie-doll behind the counter added to his feeling that he was in an ancient film. "Am I in time for the late-night flight to Dallas?" he asked with his friendliest smile.

"Oh, I'm very sorry, sir, but our last flight to Dallas left at 12:30. Our next one leaves at 8:00 this morning, and I believe that Delta has a flight that leaves at 6:20. Shall I make a reservation for you?"

Damn. "Could you tell me what time the Delta flight arrives in Dallas?"

She pulled out a paper directory and checked. "Nine fifty-seven Dallas time, sir. Shall I make the reservation?"

"Yes, please do," Jeff said, "and could you point me in the direction of the airport hotel?" Jeff paid in cash -- he had a bunch of credit cards too, but they were all hopelessly out of date, in the wrong way. She counted the money and Jeff held his breath. The bills were small denomination, suitably soiled, from the 1970s. She didn't notice anything askew.

Jeff walked slowly to the end of the terminal. It would be ridiculously close in Dallas -- even if the plane landed on time, he'd barely have an hour to get to the Book Depository and stop the killing.

The bed in the International was unexpectedly comfortable, though the room like the airport terminal had some faintly artificial smell. Jeff fell soundly asleep, and dreamed he was in a classroom giving his "Earth Was Never Room Enough" talk while Dion's "Abraham, Martin, and John" played in the background. Rena sat in the front with her legs seductively crossed, but her face looked a lot like Sandra Dee's. He could

hear someone talking just outside the classroom, going on and on and utterly ignoring his lecture. It was James C. Fletcher, NASA administrator who had had the most to do with the shuttle program. Jeff was screaming at his students to pay attention when the phone rang.

He fumbled with the ungainly receiver and dropped it. Then he smacked himself in the mouth with it. "Hello," he finally managed, rubbing his eyes and looking in vain for the viewer.

"Good morning, Dr. Harris! Five thirty wake-up call!" a female sing-song voice chimed merrily.

"Thanks." Jeff replaced the receiver with great effort and sat up. He rubbed his sore lips and fought off the impulse to go back to sleep for just another 15 minutes. He could sleep for 15 days the way he felt, but he dragged his body out of bed and quickly dressed. Last night's businessman with maybe a blue knit tie to go with the grey wool suit would do fine.

The coffee house was a zoo. He hadn't much appetite, but forced himself to eat the soggy eggs for strength. Looking around, he realized again that there was a lot he didn't like about this place. Historians like their history from the safety and convenience of the future -- the past on a platter with all the comforts of home. Not like this...

"Excuse me, sir." The waitress startled Jeff as she leaned over with the check. "That's an interesting bracelet you've got on there. My husband's a jeweler, and I don't think I've ever seen anything like it."

"Uh, thank you." Jeff glanced down at his watch, scooped up the check, and quickly left the table. "My, uh, kid's studying electronics," he said half over his shoulder, "and it's something he designed for me." Great. He'd been wearing this flector for six years now, and with all the departure commotion yesterday he'd forgotten to take it off. Hustling to Delta Departures, he removed the silver sliver from its embed on his wrist and placed it in a side compartment of the suitcase. Then he took out the clunky Timex analog someone had given him, and stopped a moment to set it and strap it on his wrist. He shook his head in self-disgust. First the future bills he was handing out everywhere like candy, and now this. The money he had no choice about, but the flector was sheer stupidity on his part.

He sighed. It didn't really matter. If by some wild luck he could stop the JFK assassination in Dallas, nothing that he did now would make much difference. If not, well...

The Delta was a sardine can, and Jeff sat white knuckled in a window seat waiting for take-off. Finally it began making taxiing noises, the comforting rumblings of some great beast's innards, and Jeff leaned back and tried to relax. The stewardess had a tight skirt on, pitching her derriere right at him, better view than the window.

Well, so far his rating of 1963 was food and decor not too good, women a distinct possibility. This seemed in line with that refrain from the classic Woody Guthrie song about the social fallout of relativity: Can't go North, can't go South, or up, down, anymore. But I can still go in and out, Mr. Einstein, I can still go in and out...

It remained to be seen whether he could get in and out of the Book Depository in time.

The 707 pierced like a needle through the remnants of haze over Dallas. Jeff peered through his peephole at the airport below as the captain announced they'd be landing momentarily.

He had so little time. Everything depended on his getting to the Book Depository as quickly as possible. He'd shove through lines, jump over turnstiles, knock down people if he had to. No gesture of asinine civility could be allowed to slow his exit.

The screech of aircraft hitting the ground hiked his pulse. He felt the seconds ticking, each in phase with his pounding blood. He braced for the performance. He could see nothing but taxi at the end of the tunnel, the taxi that would bring him face-to-face with God-knew-what at the Book Depository.

The plane shuddered still. Its doors grumbled open. Debarking passengers spilled like mindless ooze into the terminal. But one of their number was more minded than he'd ever been in his life: single-minded in his determination to dive into that cab. Get out of my way, you goddamn fools. I don't have time to say sorry.

Jeff swam in powerful strokes through the current, half-way through the terminal, now three-quarters through and almost out. Every shred of his being, every ounce of his purpose, was focused on closing this last little gap to the exit. He was almost believing that maybe he would stop the assassination after all, maybe this was the way indeed that he was destined to save the space program. He saw JFK's face before him, superimposed on the Challenger, superimposed on the flames, superimposed on innumerable stars...

Which was why he never saw the towering cart of luggage that fell upon him less than three feet from the glass doors, and knocked him unconscious.

He opened his eyes to a throbbing headache and blurry white of what must have been a hospital room. Fumes of formaldehyde hung in his nostrils and made him gag. "I see you're awake, Dr. Harris," a lazy Texas accent jarred him. "You ran into a rack of luggage at the airport and sustained a moderate concussion, but you're going to be just fine."

Jeff leaned up on an elbow to get a look at the nurse. "Where am I?"

"Dallas General Hospital. We'll need to run a few tests on you, and if everything's all right you'll probably be able to leave in the morning."

"I..." Jeff fell back on the pillow and tried to breathe slowly. He felt cold and clammy and slightly in shock. He took several deep breaths, and tried to focus more clearly on the nurse. Her eyes looked red and puffy. Outside his room he heard what sounded like a radio or holocenter blaring in the corridor -- a tumult of loud talking and wailing. "What's going on out there?"

Nurse K. Arthur burst into tears, and Jeff got a sudden feeling in the pit of his stomach that he knew exactly what the ruckus was about.

"They killed the President," she sobbed. "I really shouldn't disturb you with this. They rushed him to Parkland Memorial, but he was too far gone." She heaved with tears. "He was so young, so beautiful. Why would anyone want to do something like that?"

Jeff reached out to comfort her. "Ow!" Pain cut through his back like a stiletto.

"Here, let me help you." Arthur leaned over and gently eased Jeff back into bed. "You probably wrenched a muscle or two." She puffed up the pillow and smiled. "There. I'll tell

the doctor you're up and I'm sure he'll look in on you a little later." Her smile suddenly wavered and tears welled up again in her eyes. "They wounded Vice President Johnson and killed Governor Connally. They say it was one of those Communists. What's going to happen to the country now?"

"I don't know," Jeff barely answered, too tired to tell her that although her information was wrong, her sense of impending catastrophe was all too on-target.

He slept fitfully the rest of the day, pestered and punctured by a procession of interns and orderlies bent on waking him up, taking his temperature, and telling him he needed more sleep. He asked for a TV or radio at least five times and got nothing. The phone by his bed was broken. He couldn't tell whether the morgue-like atmosphere was standard or a consequence of the assassination. The assassination -- every time he thought of it, he felt like retching. A leaden, queasy thickness of despair seemed to hang over everything.

He fell asleep at last into something deeper that let him dream. He watched a team of 19th century surgeons, long hair and whiskers and bitter-sweet alcohol smell in the room, work over what must have been a very important patient. Straining his head closer, he could see that the patient was a fish, cut open and spread apart down the middle. The Chief Surgeon produced a mallet and began pounding the fish, while others cut off pieces and put them in little bags. "Oh, I'm only joking, old boy," the Surgeon turned to Jeff and said in a crisp British accent, "this is dinner, of course!"

Jeff sat up sharply in bed, awakened by yet another nurse come to stick something in him. "What do you want now?" he rasped, wincing from the pain that came as he propped himself up.

"Just some intravenous for the evening, Dr. Harris. It'll help you sleep." She wheeled some torture-like contraption over to him. She was a big-boned, handsome, light brown woman, about 35, who spoke with a lilting accent.

He shook his head to clear some of the cobwebs. "I already ate your lousy supper. Why do I need intravenous?"

"Pity the nurse who has a doctor for a patient," she said in the mildly scolding tone of voice that seemed a part of every nurse's repertoire. "Now why don't you just lie back like a good boy and let me get this working." A strong arm pushed Jeff back gently but firmly, and she began applying alcohol to his skin.

Once again the door flung open, this time admitting two burly black men carrying an impossibly fat TV set.

"I tell you what, Nurse, ah, Daniels." Jeff freed himself from her grip. "I'll take this intravenous only if it's prescribed and administered by an intern or resident. So you want me on that, you call in a doctor, fair enough?" This should buy him a little time to think this through. There was something he didn't like about this nurse, not to mention that he wasn't particularly partial to the prospect of being festooned with intravenous needles and tubing, 1960s style, carrying who knew what kind of viruses and sub-vees they didn't even know about back here, and he might not have been inoculated against.

Daniels looked at the two men hooking up the TV set and then back at Jeff. "No meat off my behind, honey," she said, and abruptly wheeled the equipment out the door.

Good -- she'd apparently decided it wasn't worth making a

scene in front of the techies. "Thank you, gentlemen," Jeff told them as they finished up. "See? It's not true what they say about the media always causing problems. Sometimes a TV can be very helpful."

They looked at him like he was crazy, and left.

Jeff pivoted gingerly in the bed, placing his feet on the floor in slow, exaggerated motions. Pushing himself up shakily from his seated position, he found he could stand. He walked unsteadily to a chair by the window, and sat himself down with the utmost caution. The pain he expected in his back was mercifully slight. He reached for the suitcase lodged neatly against the window and fished inside for his clothing. Thank God the case wasn't lost at the airport. And a good thing, too, that it had been programmed to open only in response to his and no one else's sweat. Otherwise he'd have had some explaining to do about some of the contents.

He had to get out of here right away. He had to get back to New York, back to the student lounge. He reached deeper inside the suitcase. The rough fiber of the janitor's uniform finally chafed his fingertips. He doubted that an NYU janitor looked anything like the hospital variety, but this was still his best choice. He dressed very carefully, praying that his body would hold up long enough for him to walk out of this horror-movie of a hospital -- this horror-show of a world.

Suitcase under his arm, he tiptoed to the door and opened it a crack. His room seemed to be in the middle of a long, orange-pink tiled corridor that stretched in either direction with no one in sight. Peering out a bit more, he could see what looked like a nurse's station down to his right. He hesitated. His mind felt swollen and paranoid, he had no confidence in his judgements. He didn't feel good about just walking out, but he felt much worse about staying. He opened the door and strode as casually as he could to the left.

He slowly became aware of voices ahead of him. He took a few more steps, then stopped and listened. They were definitely moving closer. He looked down the corridor the other way. Too long a distance to try returning to his room. He glanced quickly around at the rooms within reach and tried the door of the nearest one.

Locked!

He tried another one.

Same result!

His hands grew moist and his head light and the voices louder. He felt nauseated, as if he was about to vomit and pass out. He breathed deeply, steadied himself, and tried another door.

It opened! He leaned against the inside of the door, thankful and quaking, until the entourage passed. From what he could hear, they seemed to be just a team of porters.

Relaxing a bit, he groped for the light switch to see upon whose room he had intruded. This was an extremely stupid move, he realized just as his hand flicked the switch, for the patient might well begin screaming. Fortunately the room seemed to be some sort of storage facility.

He looked around and stopped on a lumpy something stretched out in a far corner. Again his heart started pounding, for he suddenly was sure he was looking at a dead body. He forced himself to walk over and focus. The lumpy something was a long bag of stained linen.

He resumed his journey down the corridor, this time with a

bit more assertion in his gait. He turned randomly down several connecting passages, passed several orderlies and nurses and made a point of not avoiding their gazes, and eventually wound up at what looked like a service elevator. The doors were open. He walked in and pressed Lobby and hoped for the best.

The elevator wobbled its way down, Jeff envisioning himself a dead man dangling from a slowly descending rope. The doors finally opened on a poorly lit hallway that said Ground Floor. He walked a few feet, and was glad to see the hospital lobby. He wondered why the act of leaving a hospital always felt like escape from a high-security prison.

He hailed a cab and said take me to the airport. The cabbie talked Kennedy, but Jeff was too tired to give more than grunts in response.

He sank into bed in the motel room, utterly drained. He closed his eyes and looked again at the lumpy bag in the hospital laundry room. It was a woman's body, face down, wearing only a 20th-century bra and shiny beige panties that clung tightly to her rear. She looked familiar. He turned her over and found eyes staring blankly up at his. He tried to scream, but his throat stuck. The eyes were Rena's.

He sat up in bed, broken out in a cold sweat, and shuddered for a long time...

I guess I'm not as cut out for time travel as once I thought, he thought. But how could anyone know that beforehand? You had to actually live through these loops, bristling with serrations, to know the toll they took.

Twelve hours later, he was on a plane for New York. Staring out of the window as the engines revved up, Jeff realized he was losing a golden opportunity to stop the killing of Lee Harvey Oswald. He looked at his watch. That would happen tomorrow. He toyed with the idea of making a last-minute dash from the plane and calling the Dallas police. He'd have plenty of time and ... No! For once he'd do the cautious thing and return to New York and then 2084. No chance the police would take his call seriously anyway -- just another crank come out of the now festering assassination woodwork.

Of course, a crank who knew about Oswald's murder would be someone Jeff would want to meet. Wasn't there some story that the Dallas police were indeed warned by someone about the shooting of Oswald? Was that someone Jeff? Or someone else on trespass from the future?

He fidgeted with his seatbelt. Maybe the attempt on his life in the hospital last night -- if that nurse with the intravenous was indeed trying to kill him -- was intended precisely to stop him from interfering with Ruby's murder of Oswald. No, that sort of reasoning would get him nowhere. It was paranoid nonsense. Yet he was here on this plane leaving the scene of the crime of the century, when there were plenty of things he still might do...

The plane's lift-off ended his reverie. Jeff tried to direct his thinking to what awaited him -- going back to 2084 through the Thorne, then into it again, through a new AWH, and out again in 1985, the time he should have arrived in the first place, to stop the explosion of the Challenger. He stared steel-eyed out the window. No one could help JFK -- that should have been obvious all along. You can't change history on that major a level. But the Challenger -- that was more mechanical, presumably an accident of technology, not of sick human

intention, more amenable to the time traveler's ministrations.

That was what he kept telling himself, but it gave him little comfort. Obviously, travelling back to 1985 wasn't as easy as he and his team had thought -- if it was, why was he here? There were things about time travel they didn't understand.

He laughed bitterly. The last thing he wanted to be was a "Fourth Magi" -- that additional wise man from the East who had gotten a late start in his journey to give the infant Jesus a gift. The potentate then spent the next thirty years in a vain search for Jesus, always arriving in places a few hours after Jesus had left. When he finally caught up it was too late -- Christ was already on the cross. Just as Jeff had been with JFK. Would he be that way with the Challenger too? Arriving just in time to see that horrendous explosion that took so much else with it? Impotent witness wasn't the role Jeff had trained for.

He landed at Idlewild in the early evening. The sadness in the air was thicker than pollution. Soon it would harden into the cynicism and outrage that disrupted the sixties and deformed a good deal more of the times that came after.

It's not my fault, Jeff kept telling himself. My job was to stop the Challenger tragedy -- I never really had a chance to stop what happened in Dallas. I wasn't properly prepared. It was crazy even to try.

He took a cab back to the Village, the same trip he had taken 48 hours ago, in reverse. Everything was different. It was Saturday night, and throngs of people were out, but the sounds and colors were drained of vitality -- like someone had pulled the plug on the watercolor, and all of its light had leaked away.

His cab pulled up to the Student Building. Three green-and-black police cars huddled like ugly roaches near the entrance. Students were milling about, five or six officers were conferring on the side, and the night air crackled with the sound of police bulletins and the glare of pulsing lights.

"What's going on here, Officer?" Jeff demanded, more sharply than he'd intended.

"Who the hell are you?"

Jeff fumbled for his faculty ID, crafted to look like a 1985 edition, and hoped it would get by the beefy, florid-faced policeman. "Sorry, Officer. I teach at the College of Liberal Arts and Science here."

The cop eyed the ID, Jeff, and softened. "You're a teacher from another division?"

"Right," Jeff said, not really knowing what that meant.

The cop nodded. "The student lounge was broken into two hours ago and severely vandalized. These kids got no respect for property. Hey Professor, you ok?"

Jeff felt his knees buckle. He reached out to the police car for support. "Officer, I've got to get up there right away. I ... there are some important papers that I must get a look at." He was pleading.

"Out of the question." A big arm restrained Jeff, already in motion towards the building. "The place is a mess. Glass and garbage all over. Someone torched that whole floor -- probably some kid didn't like his grades. Believe me, Professor, it's not safe."

Jeff pulled free of the blue arm. For a second he

considered making a run to the building. But he knew it was hopeless. He hadn't the vaguest idea what was really going on, what had happened in the lounge. But he knew with cloying certainty that his life was now seriously derailed.

Maybe the AWH had imploded, maybe some kid had torched the place as the cop had said, but whatever had happened there was no way that soft shimmering light would be there for him -- surely no way he could code it for use and enter it even if it was there now, without a dozen witnesses looking on. A few dozen bills out of time he could take a chance on leaving back here; walking into the AWH with 1960s people as an audience, maybe even trying to follow, was insane. He couldn't risk what that would do to reality -- might do to his very existence.

So he turned and walked shakily down the street. The cop might have said something but he couldn't hear it. The off-key amusement park quality of the Village congealed now into a proper smarmy nightmare. Jeff staggered a bit further, then grabbed on to a corner lamp pole. Then he leaned over and did what he had wanted to do for nearly two days: he threw up what seemed like every ounce of substance in his stomach.

He looked at the mess he had made on street, and wondered what part of that food might have come from 2084. Would be a long, long time if ever, he knew, before he was likely to see any of that again.

A Beatles' song was playing somewhere in the distance. A DJ was talking. No historical moment, no hushed build-up. Just the Beatles...

Jeff opened his eyes. He looked out of his window at the street below. Mid-April sunshine coated the sidewalk like clarified butter.

"...traffic light in most places but still heavy on the Kosciusko Bridge," the radio continued. "HOA halfway through the third shift with you on WABC. Good morning!"

Jeff hoisted himself out of the easy chair. His clothes felt stale and rumpled -- he had spent the night in them -- and he needed a shave. He stripped, showered, shaved, and approached the pile which served as his wardrobe closet. Today would be a special day. He put on a blue buttondown shirt, dark brown corduroy slacks, and pulled his Navy blue knit tie into a loose fitting double-Windsor, the only kind of knot he knew how to make. He slung a corduroy jacket over his shoulder and ambled down the three flights of stairs.

Jeff played with his scrambled eggs at the Yorkville Restaurant and considered his situation for a thousandth time. He pushed three pieces of egg to one side. His arrival 23 years earlier than planned, the luggage accident in Dallas, the destruction of the student lounge -- were these all related, or three pieces of random, rotten luck?

He couldn't accept his being a Robinson Crusoe in the past. He understood his predicament, his utter stranding in the 1960s, logically enough. And yet some part of him had waited these past five months, hoping that one of his team would one day miraculously appear to rescue him. He'd imagined Rena in this role, but how could she? The mouth to 1963 had been sealed with the implosion or trashing or whatever had taken out the lounge. He'd been back up there several times, when no one was around, but the lounge had been totally reconstructed, with no sign of the AWH.

The team had no way of knowing he was even here --

presumably all they would know is that he hadn't succeeded in stopping the Challenger disaster. If they sent anyone else back, it would likely be to 1985, where he was supposed to have gone, not here. And who knows if Rena or whoever would succeed any better than he. Maybe Steven Hawking was right in his chronology protection conjecture -- maybe the universe protects itself from alterations via time travel -- removes unwelcome Thornes from its side -- whether by misdirecting travellers, blowing up AWHs, both, more.

So he was probably stranded. But maybe not totally without options. He had to gingerly probe the contours of time travel -- see just what small things it might allow, and then perhaps he'd try a few larger things. What he had in mind for today was the first modest step in this direction.

Jeff paid for his breakfast and walked out into the cool morning sunlight. His money problems were finally over -- he had a job with a decent salary. Some parts of the team's exhaustive planning had worked out after all, had survived his immersion in a time 23 years earlier than expected. Their massive search of historical records had uncovered fourteen Harrises who had done graduate work at universities in the mid-20th century. One, named Geoffrey, had earned a Ph.D. in social psychology from the University of Edinburgh in 1958. Their names and academic disciplines were close enough that Jeff with a mixture of Geoff's credentials and his own knowledge of the field would have been able to demonstrate a convincing identity in 1985-86 -- the team's reason for coming up with this. But it turned out to also be enough for Jeff to land a job back here as an Adjunct Professor at the third school whose ad he'd answered, his act sufficiently polished, hinting just enough knowledge of new trends in the field to kindle admiration without suspicion. It was a last-minute Spring teaching appointment, to fill in for a regular Professor unexpectedly on leave, that required only cursory credentialing. But it was a foot in the door, and it paid real money.

He squinted at the sun and inhaled deeply. The polluted air still bothered him, and he sometimes felt as if little pieces of black soot were burning holes in his chest. He wheezed slightly. But the day felt promising, even beautiful, and he caught the crosstown bus to the IRT subway on West 86th Street. This would take him to the "Intro to Sociology" class that he taught at City College on 137th Street in Harlem.

Further up the subway line, near a place called Pelham Parkway in the Bronx, Mrs. Sarah Harris also made her way to work. The day was beautiful to her too, and she also wheezed a bit -- from asthma -- as she walked down the block to Saperman's Bakery where she worked behind the counter. Her mind was filled today, as it was on many days, with images of the Ukrainian countryside around Kiev, and with pictures of her father. She could see him as clearly as if he were standing right in front of her, even though she had last seen him more than 60 years ago and a continent away. Her brown eyes, still keen and always wise, glistened a drop, not from soot but sentiment. Those eyes were almost identical to Jeff's. She was his great-great-grandmother.

At City College, in a place presciently named Harris Hall, Jeff labored to make a concluding point about McLuhan. "So you see, it's not what we watch on television that's important,

it's the fact that we're watching television -- rather than reading a book or listening to the radio -- that McLuhan says really counts. This is what he means by 'the medium is the message.'"

Jeff looked at the students, most of whom were scribbling his words without the slightest comprehension. The three girls from Queens who smiled at him certainly hadn't the vaguest idea what he was talking about. Neither did the foreign kid, his mouth continuously hanging open, who at least made no attempt to disguise his puzzlement. But a few in the class did seem to have some tiny understanding of what Jeff was saying. The girl in the back with the soft brown eyes seemed to be in touch with him. Anyway, Jeff liked the way she looked at him.

"Ok, that's about it for today. Read the pertinent sections of Gutenberg Galaxy, and I'll see whether I can get you some advance copies of Understanding Media." Jeff grabbed his corduroy coat and strode out the door, smiling at the girl with the soft brown eyes.

He hurried to the subway at 137th Street. He looked at his watch -- the flector model, for Jeff no longer cared about keeping such minor aspects of his cover. In fact, he hoped future artifacts like this might attract someone's benevolent attention, maybe someone else from the future, who could help him. He'd have gladly kept spending his 1980s money too for the same reason, had he not been afraid that sooner or later some good samaritan would have him arrested for counterfeiting.

It was 11:56 -- more than enough time.

But the subway took longer than expected, and it was 12:35 when Jeff ran down the long flights of stairs at the Pelham Parkway station in the Bronx. Saperman's was only a few minutes away by foot, so Jeff wasn't too worried. Still, he half-walked, half-ran.

He was sweating when he reached the bakery. He realized this was more from anxiety than exertion. His great-great-grandmother had died in 1992, at the age of 97. His grandfather, whom Jeff had spent some of the most satisfying times of his childhood with, had been just 6 when Sarah Harris had died, but grandpa carried memories of her warmth and voice and summers they had spent together in their cottage on Cape Cod Bay, and Jeff felt he knew Sarah through this.

But he stopped, suddenly not sure he could do this. What would he say to this woman? How would she react? A smell of apple strudel permeated his thoughts -- grandpa's strudel, an old family recipe grandpa had loved to bake -- and this gave him courage. He walked in.

"Hello," he said in the direction of the three matronly women who stood behind the counter and looked up at him as a clanking bell on the inside of the door announced his presence. Not a single one of them looked anything like his great-great-grandmother. "Can I help you?" one of them said in a soothing Jewish accent that he'd heard only in the movies.

"Uhm, yes ..." he began, not quite sure what to say. "Does a Mrs. Sarah Harris work here?"

Just then he heard a rustle from the back. His great-great-grandmother walked out from behind a curtain, carrying some sort of cake in an open box.

"Sarah, a boichik to see you," one of the women said with a laugh.

Jeff felt like shouting with joy. He suppressed this, along with the urge to jump over the counter and hug her. She

looked great -- like her best picture, from someone named Sol's bar-mitzvah, come to life.

Sarah was smiling, a wonderful smile he had seen in his father and some of his aunts and uncles and his grandfather. "You look like I know you," she said. "You're one of Louie's grandsons?"

"Right, Louie," Jeff answered quickly. His mind sped through family history. Louie was Sarah's older brother. The two had come with a middle brother -- Hymie -- to New York around 1900. Sarah was a little girl then, about 5, and Louie was like a father to her. Her real father and nine other brothers and sisters she would never see again. Louie -- Uncle Louie, Jeff's grandfather had always called him -- had moved to the West Coast after World War II. He had fathered a big family himself, and Jeff recalled that these in turn had given Louie dozens of grandchildren who from time to time showed up at weddings and bar mitzvahs on the East Coast. Good. Jeff for now would be one of them.

Sarah took off her apron and moved out from behind the counter. "I'm taking the rest of the afternoon off," she said to the matrons. "You tell Murray I'll make up the time this weekend, ok?"

"No, no, please, Mrs. Harris," Jeff raised his hand and smiled. He didn't think he could take more than a few minutes with his great-great-grandmother in this first meeting. "I've got just a little over an hour before an appointment downtown, and I don't want you to lose time from your job. How about we go for a cup of tea at the Dairy Restaurant by Lydig Avenue. It's Kosher, right?" He had checked out this whole neighborhood a week ago.

Sarah laughed heartily. "It seems you know me and this area very well. OK, let's go to Lydig. Tell Murray I'm back in an hour," she said over her shoulder to the counter.

"So it seems you know my name but I don't know yours," Sarah said as the two walked the half a block around the corner to Lydig Avenue.

"I'm Jeff. Jeffrey Rosenberg." Jeff was 99% positive that Rosenberg was Sarah's maiden name.

Sarah's eyes widened in pleasure. "Yosef was the name of my father. Wonderful of Shlomo to name you after him. We have only one son, and we named him after my husband's -- Yitzhak's -- mother. So you're Shlomo's boy, then?" Now Sarah's eyes furrowed in some confusion. "Or are you Harry's?"

Jeff smiled and thought frantically as they entered the restaurant. He ushered Sarah to a table, and once seated, ordered two cups of tea -- with lemon for Sarah, milk for him -- from the elderly waiter who looked like he had about five minutes left to live.

He knew that Sarah prided herself on perfect recall of every relationship in her extended family. Right now she was probably realizing that as far as she knew, Shlomo had no son named Jeffrey, and neither did Harry. Jeff breathed in sharply. Time to talk about the impossible.

"I'm not really Louie's grandson," he said slowly.

In another time and place -- in fact, in most times and places, including this one -- such an admission would have been cause for alarm for Sarah. But her powerful intuition told her this was not a stranger to be feared -- not a stranger at all.

"You're much closer to me than Louie's grandchildren," Sarah finally said. Her eyes looked loving, not challenging, to

Jeff.

"You've travelled very far in your lifetime, Sarah," Jeff said softly. "Do think it might be possible to travel across years, across time, just like you've travelled across great distances?"

Sarah chuckled. "You mean like angels? Or maybe like the _meshugenas_ on the Twilight Zone?" She pronounced the "w" like a "v," so the show sounded like "Tvilight Zone."

Jeff couldn't help laughing. He would have sworn that the only TV this woman would have ever watched other than the news was the Lawrence Welk Show. "Yes, something like that." Jeff felt much better after laughing. He put his teacup down. "Sarah, I'm going to tell you something now. You're a very intelligent woman, and what I'm going to tell you will seem totally crazy to you. But please hear me out. It will take just a minute. And then I'm going to ask you to do a very important favor for me. You don't have to agree now, but please promise me that you'll think about it."

"It's about what Hitler did in Europe?" she asked with a cry in her voice. Her hand shook, and she spilled some of her tea, though the cup was only half full. Jeff suddenly felt very guilty. His great-great-grandmother looked so much younger than he had pictured her, seen her in her pictures, that she had seemed at first not so old to him. Now she looked every one one of her sixty years, and Jeff felt terrible that he was stirring up these demons about the holocaust and who knows what else. But he had to finish what he had started here.

"No, it's not about Hitler." He paused. "I'm your great-great-grandson, Jeffrey Harris."

A small shriek came from Sarah, and the blood left her cheeks. "Sarah, please." Jeff took her hand. "I have to leave now. But I need you to do something for me that is very very important -- my life may depend upon it. In 25 years, you'll get to know my grandfather, when he was just a little boy and you'll be much older." Jeff realized there were tears in his eyes. "And you'll be a wonderful grandma to him, believe me. But I want you to promise that you'll tell him -- your little grandson -- about this meeting. I'm not asking you to believe me now. You can tell your grandson that you had this meeting with a crazy man who claimed to be your great-great-grandson years ago. But everything depends on your telling him something -- something about me, about this -- 25 years from now."

Sarah's head shook -- not no, but from tremors. Her eyes were a confused mixture of anger, uncertainty, love. Now she slowly shook her head no. "I don't know you," she whispered.

"I know. But I'm part of you -- I'm your DNA, your blood." Jeff stood up, then leaned over and kissed her. "I love you, Sarah, I always will. Go by your instincts in this." He put a five dollar bill on the table, and hurried out the door.

Now the April breeze caught his face, seemed to move him along. He walked in a daze, not really knowing where he was going, to the Pelham Parkway station. He paid his fare, walked through the wooden turnstile -- nearly getting a splinter in his thigh -- and sat down on the rotting green bench to wait for the train.

And then he remembered. His grandpa swinging with him on the hammock. Talking about a summer he'd spent years ago when _his_ grandma was still alive, on Cape Cod. He was four, maybe five, so it was 1990 or 1991. His parents and little sister had gone out to Cooke's for supper. He'd had a bad cold, and had to

stay in the cottage. Grandma Sarah stayed with him. It had started raining -- very hard -- an August Cape Cod storm that seemed to drench the beach and every living thing. And she told him about the strange man who had come to her long ago in Saperman's, the bakery where she used to work...

Jeff was shaking. Thank you, Sarah -- you came through for me. He felt like running back and hugging her, but didn't dare, lest this somehow throw a curve into what he had just accomplished here.

He was sure this memory of what his grandfather had told him about what his grandmother had told him hadn't existed before. It proved that he was real in this convoluted past -- that he could do things here which could indeed change the future, even if the change were as slight as a grandmother's words in a Cape Cod storm some 60 years before he'd been born. But those words, his memory of his grandfather's conveyance of them, meant everything. Sarah Harris had given him his first real hope. If he could change the future through her, he could figure out a way to somehow contact his team, and get back to where he belonged.

He was crying. For he also realized that in a deep, indescribable way he missed Sarah Harris even more than his world of 2084, and he knew there was no way he ever could have both.

"I think he's very attractive," Carla Caplan of Flushing said. "You know, not in the Marlon Brando or Paul Newman way, but in a cuddly way. Like a teddy bear." She stroked her left thumbnail with an emery board.

"Oh, I don't know," Amy Jacobson replied. "His accent is a little strange. And anyway, he never pays any attention to us. The only girl he ever looks at is the girl in back of the class."

Carla moved her hand along the nylon stocking on her leg. "That's not true, Amy. I've seen him look at us lots of times."

"The two of you are ridiculous." Sandy Greenfarb shook her curly brown hair. "Besides, teachers don't date students in this pathetic school. City College is too old-fashioned for that."

"Who said anything about dating?" Carla replied. "And you're wrong, anyway. Didn't you hear about Atwick in the Bio Department? They say he got a girl pregnant. Put some Spanish Fly in her drink."

Sandy blushed. "That's absurd. And anyway, Professor Harris is nothing like Professor Atwick. He's much more refined -- more of a gentleman."

"How would you know?" Amy jumped back in.

"No one knows much about Professor Harris. He just started teaching here this term," Carla said.

"He's not married. That's all Carla needs to know." Amy laughed.

"Shh," Sandy said as Jeff walked into the room.

"Late as usual," Amy whispered.

"Well, I've read through most of your papers." Jeff slouched into the chair on wheels and stretched his feet out on the desk. "And I'm sorry to say that they were more gruesome than I expected."

A murmur of irritation rippled through the class.

"Now to begin with..." Jeff began, as one student, even later than he, hurried through the door. It was the girl with

the soft brown eyes, who bit her lower lip in an apologetic smile and slipped into a rear seat as inconspicuously as possible.

"Miss, uh..." Jeff inquired, returning the smile.

"Laura Chapin."

"Yes, uh, Miss Chapin, I was just telling the class that most of these papers on the McLuhanesque interpretation of the Beatles missed the point entirely. But there were a few exceptions. And yours was among the most refreshing."

Amy shot an I-told-you-so glance to Carla.

Laura's eyes dilated with delight. "Thank you."

Jeff finished the class five minutes early and headed quickly out the door. "Professor Harris," Laura called after him. He stopped a few feet down the hall and turned to face her. Jeff realized she looked taller and older than he had thought, her brown hair jostling invitingly around her shoulders. "I wanted to thank you for what you said about my paper," she said, slightly out of breath.

"You earned it. You have a fine mind."

She smiled without looking too embarrassed. "I was wondering if we might be able to get together and talk sometime -- in your office -- I, um, have some questions I'd like to go over with you about grad school."

Jeff looked at his watch and gestured Laura to walk with him towards the stairs. "Look, I'd ask you to join me for lunch right now, but I've a departmental meeting to attend. Why don't we have lunch together next Monday?"

Now Laura's face flushed a bit. "I ... that would be very nice, but I've got labs starting at noon that run to four o'clock. Do you think it might be possible for us to meet in your office at 4:30 on Monday?"

Jeff stopped and looked steadily at Laura for a moment. Those eyes were alluring. "Monday at 4:30 it is, then," he said crisply, and strode away.

"I almost didn't keep our appointment today," Jeff said, sipping the third glass of red wine he and Laura had partaken since they'd adjourned their meeting from his office.

"Oh? And what possibly could have kept you?" The wine had lowered Laura's voice to a quiet, warm contralto. The cafe, five minutes on the subway from his office, had the smell of fine spirits and food.

"I didn't want the aggravation," Jeff said.

Laura considered his deadpan face, then burst out laughing. "Well thank you very much."

"What would you say if I told you that I could predict the future?" Jeff asked off-handedly, taking another sip of his wine.

"You mean in a socially forecasting way?"

"I mean in every way."

"Well, Professor Harris, you told us in one of your lectures that for very good reasons no one can ever really know the future. So I would say either you were lying ... or speaking metaphorically."

"Good," Jeff nodded, "but let's say I stubbornly insisted that I did know the future, and that this in no way contradicts what I said in my lecture about no one ever being able to know the future. What would you say then?"

"I'd say you were kidding me or crazy." Laura thought for a bit. "I don't think the future exists yet -- it doesn't exist until it's actually created, in the present -- so there's no way

you or anyone could really know it in the way that we know we're here in this little bistro on Broadway, for instance."

"Fair enough." Jeff waved to the waiter for another round of wine. "You're sharp. But let's say I were to tell you that Lyndon Johnson will beat Barry Goldwater by a landslide this November?"

Laura shook her head. "No. Not good enough. Everyone expects Goldwater to get the nomination, and there's no way that Johnson won't win big with the Kennedy sympathy vote. You'd have to do better than that."

Jeff smiled and rubbed his lips with his fingers. The Beatles' "Thank You, Girl" played languorously in the background. "Ok, how's this: Let's say I tell you that in about a year and a half from now, the Beatles will have a hit record called 'Help' from a movie by the same name?"

Laura laughed. "You've got imagination, I'll say that for you. But I still don't think I'd be convinced. How do I know that you're not a personal friend of George Martin's with some special information about the Beatles' plans?" Laura frowned for a moment then snapped her fingers. "No, I've got it! You tell me what number on Billboard's Hot 100 a non-Beatle record -- one that won't almost certainly make Number One -- will be in 1966, and I'll believe that you know the future!"

Laura extended her hands in a triumphant gesture, pitching over a nearly full glass of red wine onto her shirt in the process. Jeff jumped up, napkin in hand, and began patting Laura's soaked sleeve dry. He progressed from her sleeve to her cheek, and suddenly was less than an inch from Laura's upturned face. Her eyes were rosy with wine, her mouth soft and parted. He touched his lips to hers, gently at first, then found himself lost in a realm of warmth and darkness...

He finally pulled away. "Well," he managed, gasping a bit for breath, "no one can ever say that I don't give my students personal attention."

"I'd be glad to write you a letter of recommendation," she said, smiling. "Now you see why I didn't want to have lunch with you."

"You found this aggravating?"

"Quite the opposite," Laura replied.

Still standing over her, Jeff touched her hair with his finger. "I've got a lot I need to tell you," he said softly. "By the way, no one but a record producer would know the exact number on the charts of a record even now, so your test of my knowledge of the future is too demanding."

They walked hand in hand a few evenings later along groves overlooking the Hudson River. Across they could see the Palisades of New Jersey, carved whole out of stone as if by some supreme civilization, and near them the palette of Wave Hill Park in the late Spring. Wave Hill -- home of Mark Twain, of Toscanini, and an Easter parade of a notables across a century. In the late 1800s, William Appleton had lived here, amidst his publication in America of Darwin and Spencer. JFK had lived in a house across the street in the 1930s. Recently a British ambassador had donated most of this to the people of New York.

Jeff knew it wouldn't especially help his larger predicament to get involved with Laura, to tell her what he was about. On the other hand, what harm could it do -- set in motion a jagged timeloop which would wink him out of existence? Not likely. And the smell of her neck and his need to talk had

been compelling. So he'd told her. And here he was, still around, and feeling fine.

He breathed in slowly. Fragrances real and recalled bathed his brain. "You know, when I was a kid, my grandfather used to tell me about summers he spent on Cape Cod when he was a kid himself. At night, sometimes two or three in the morning, he'd walk along the beach and gradually leave his cottage in the distance. Sometimes he'd turn around and, still seeing the light of the cottage, would walk further until it was completely gone. Then he'd close his eyes and think, there's no difference between what I see with my eyes open and my eyes closed. He'd sit in the salty water, a foot or two deep, and feel the cold fluid pulse of the cosmos throbbing through his clothes. Then he'd get up and walk again, cold but not shivering, until he made contact with that spot of light that was his cottage. He was never sure until it happened that he would see that light again. But when he did, he'd walk with the satisfaction of knowing that after having gone out to the very limits and beyond of his usual reality, he was about to enter it again. I never really fully understood what my grandfather was saying to me -- until now."

Laura looked at him, stroked his face with the center of her palm. "You're serious about this, aren't you?"

"Serious about what?"

"The time travel," Laura said.

Jeff said nothing.

"I can be with you anyway," Laura said. "I don't have to believe it's real. I can pretend to believe it's real, play along that you're from the future, like you say you are. I'm not sure there's all that much difference between really believing and pretending to believe anyway, if you pretend sincerely enough."

"You've got some philosophy there," Jeff said.

Laura took his hand, put it to her lips.

"And you're not worried that I really am crazy -- maybe dangerous?" Jeff asked.

"Oh, you're dangerous all right," she said, grazing her teeth over his index finger. "And as to your story -- my feeling is that whatever the truth of it, you're a good man. I feel right about that."

Jeff sighed. "You remember what I said the first day of class about no one really knowing for sure that anything is real -- we could well be dreaming all of this, and might even dream that someone pinched us and tried to awaken us and nothing happened -- but that we'd all go crazy unless we took at least some leap of faith, and assumed on nothing better than faith that the world is real and we were really here?"

"I was late for that lecture, wasn't I?"

"No, I'm quite sure you were there," Jeff said. "Look, I'm trying to say that--"

"I know what you're saying." Now she looked at him very intently. "You want me to take that leap of faith with you and your story. You want me to assume that what you're saying is true, even though I have no evidence for it and it flies in the face of reason. You want me to say, look, I know this is crazy, but I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt, entertain your insanity, see where it leads us. In other words, pretense isn't good enough for you -- you want to make this really hard for me." She turned away.

"Something like that, right," Jeff said.

"What is it about me that's always attracted to lunatics," she murmured. She turned around and kissed him full on the lips.

"Two Papaya." Jeff held up two fingers to the man at the Papaya King on 3rd Avenue and 86th Street. "One to drink here and a quart to go." There was nothing like this drink in his century. Whatever the hell it was -- whatever its special mixture of pulp and sugars -- it was delicious.

He walked down 86th Street, package in hand, towards his place by the East River. His place ... he was feeling more and more comfortable in this place, and that made him feel uncomfortable, out of place. There were things he missed from his world -- faces on the phone, words on the screen, poles of the planet as easily accessible as the north and south parts of this borough -- but he missed them less and less. Especially when he was with Laura.

Still... He picked up a copy of the Daily News. Johnson was on the cover, saying he was going ahead full force on the space program, and on the inside was a picture of Gus Grissom. Jeff had thought about doing something to prevent the fire that would kill Grissom, White, and Chafee in their Apollo 1 capsule on January 27, 1967. But that was still over a year and a half away, and he couldn't be sure what impact that might have on the Moon landing, which was still the lonely high watermark of human penetration of space. No, he didn't dare mess with that -- better to bide his time, and wait the 19 further years, almost to the day, for a chance to avert the Challenger catastrophe, and the fatal blow it had delivered, in retrospect, to the space program.

But Jeff didn't suffer abidances of time very well. What was the point of time travel, anyway, if not to short-circuit ordinary time, make new things happen? It seemed the last thing that should be required of the time traveler was patience. Jeff knew now, ever since his experience with Sarah, that he could change the future -- which meant that his existence here could make a difference. But he had to get some word back to his team in 2084. How? He'd even tried taking a page from Asimov -- what was that book, The End of Eternity? -- and placed small, discrete, but clearly informative ads in a variety of significant journals and newspapers like The New York Times. But nothing had happened. He had no idea if any of the ads had even come to the attention of the team -- 1964 was after all well before the age of online information, and an ad in a newspaper this old might well have slipped by the Big Scannings in the new millennium.

He opened the door to his apartment quietly, so as not to wake Laura. She'd been sleeping over a lot, and Jeff figured she'd be moving in with him soon. He wasn't sure how his colleagues at City College would take this -- the 1960s were one of the decades of sexual liberation, but Jeff wasn't enough of an expert on that aspect of popular culture to know just how far that went.

He tiptoed into the bedroom. He liked looking at Laura when she was sleeping. Her eyes were open just a crack, and he could see the bottoms of her soft brown eyes tracing some sort of REM-dream diagram. He hoped it was of him. He looked at her body, her breasts, one nipple partly exposed. He could do a lot worse than spending the next 23 years with her.

He walked carefully back into the kitchen, put the papaya

juice into the refrigerator -- he loved it, a living antique, right out of the Smith-Sonyian -- and took out some eggs. Was cholesterol verboten in this decade? He'd been meaning to ask Laura. It certainly wasn't in his. He started a pot of water boiling for the eggs, and sat down at the table to read the paper...

"Jesus!" he shouted.

"What's the matter?" Laura shuffled out of the bedroom, rubbing her eyes.

Jeff shook his head in shock, disbelief.

"What's the matter, honey?" Laura walked over, put a concerned hand on his shoulder.

Jeff pointed to the paper.

"What? What is it?" Laura asked.

Jeff jabbed at a picture. "I know her," he rasped. "She was a member of my team. Rena Sarrett."

Laura leaned over, and read aloud the article associated with the photograph. "... run down by a bus on Central Park South last week.... died the next day ... her co-workers say she was hired by Gaulin's, an insurance firm, about six months ago ... attempts to locate Miss Sarrett's relatives have all proven unsuccessful ... police would appreciate anyone with information contacting them..."

"She was part of your project?" Laura asked.

"Right," Jeff said, his voice choked with emotion.

Laura had the presence of mind to turn off the water, which was furiously boiling. "And you and she were lovers?"

"What?" Jeff croaked.

"I'm sorry," Laura said.

"Yeah, we were lovers. Once. A long time ago -- actually, in a time which doesn't even goddamn exist yet. Does that matter?"

"Did you love her?" Laura asked.

"Yes," Jeff said, tears in his eyes. "But not as much as I love you."

Laura put her arms around his neck, stroked his chest.

"That's all that matters to me. I love you too."

Jeff rubbed the side of his face against her hand.

"What does this mean?" Laura asked. "I mean, your friend getting killed..."

"It means they sent her back too -- maybe to find me here, who knows, maybe they got one of my messages after all," Jeff said. "Or maybe they were trying to send her back to 1985, to do the same job I was supposed to do, but for some reason she got sucked back here to the 1960s too. I don't know."

"What are you -- we -- going to do now?" Laura asked.

"I don't know," Jeff said.

"I don't really want to go to this party," Jeff said, trudging reluctantly after Laura up a steep street in Washington Heights.

"Come on," Laura turned around and pulled his hand. "It's been over a month since you found out about Rena, and all you've been doing is moping and brooding -- it's time you got out and saw some people. It's summer already, for God's sake."

"Not moping -- thinking," Jeff said. "I was knocked unconscious in Dallas, Rena was killed by a bus, both in places we shouldn't have been. There's got to be some comprehensible pattern in this."

"I know," Laura said, more softly. "It's almost as if there's something in the nature of things that doesn't want people to time travel -- and punishes them when they do."

"You know I dreamed about Rena dead, shortly after I got out of the Dallas hospital," Jeff said, recalling this for the first time. "I wonder if that has any connection to any of this."

"Well, remember you told me that Kip Thorpe--"

"Thorne," Jeff corrected.

"Right, Kip Thorne and his people hypothesized that people flipped into alternate universes when they changed history through time travel -- that that's how the loops opened by the Thorne stayed clean -- so maybe, somehow, because you're here in the past, you've caused an alternate universe to come into being, and in that universe you'd already lived past knowing about Rena's death, because that universe is progressing at a different pace, and somehow your dream connected you to this alternate version of your self..."

Jeff smiled. It was at times like this that he could understand how he had come to feel so close to Laura. "You don't think I'm such a lunatic anymore, huh?"

Laura snuggled against him. "You're definitely a lunatic -- no doubt about that -- but maybe not about time travel."

Jeff kissed her on the forehead.

"Well, here we are at Joannie's building," Laura said. "Don't worry, I'm sure there'll be other teachers there. Just think of this as another great safari into 1960s culture."

"What can I fix you, Professor?"

"A scotch and water would be fine." Richard Atwick adjusted his thin-rimmed glasses and quietly eyed the hosed legs and sleek red dress of his benefactor. "Why thank you, Carla," he said, taking the drink from her hand, "and I must say you're looking as lovely tonight as always."

He gulped half his drink down in one swallow and, sloshing the rest around in the glass, began walking through the six rooms of Joannie Pernelli's parents' apartment. The place was packed with partiers in varying states of dress, intimacy, and inebriation.

"Professor Harris." Atwick strode over and extended his hand to Jeff. "I've seen you around Campus, but I don't think we've ever formally met. I'm Richard Atwick of Biology." He suddenly put his hand to his ear as the Beatles' "It Won't Be Long" blared forth without warning.

"Nice to meet you," Jeff said loudly over the twanging guitars. "Do you know Laura Chapin?"

"I don't think so, but I'm glad to now." Atwick said.

"Are you doing graduate work?"

"Thanks for the compliment." Laura smiled sweetly. "But I'm afraid I'm still undergrad. And if you two gentlemen have no objections, I think I'll go off and mingle now with some of my own kind."

"Nice." Atwick watched her walk off and nodded at Jeff approvingly. "And what are you having to drink, Professor?"

"Please, call me Jeff." Jeff tried not to respond to the nod. "I guess I'll have some white wine if there's any around."

"Well, let's just go and find some, shall we?" Atwick tugged on Jeff's arm and started towards the bottles on the far side of the room. "You know, I'm delighted that you'll be joining us again this Fall in the Sociology Department."

Sociology -- that's a discipline of the future! It's good we're building up our faculty in that area."

"Well, I'm happy to be here at City College. It's certainly one of the best schools in the country."

"Well, we like to think so." Atwick beamed. "Ah, here's some sort of Soave. Will that do? Good." Atwick began pouring. "Now I've heard your specialty is mass culture. And you did your graduate work at..." Atwick handed Jeff a brimming paper cup.

Jeff sipped a little and spilled a little on his shirt. "University of Edinburgh. And my specialty's really mass media -- you know, the work of Marshall McLuhan -- rather than mass culture." Jeff got a pang as he thought again about how he had successfully re-cycled the cover the team had provided -- any thought of the team brought along painful images of Rena...

"Edinburgh, yes," Atwick was talking. "Splendid mountain in the middle of the city. You worked under Phillip MacKenzie?"

"Mackenzie? Nope, don't think I did," Jeff said, wondering what he would say next if pressed. His credentials would after all not stand up to anyone who knew the real Geoff Harris, or even very long to anyone who knew someone who knew Geoff...

The sound quieted down a bit, and it occurred to Jeff that Atwick had a familiar British accent, maybe like a surgeon he half-remembered hearing once in a hospital...

"Of course, it's a large university--" Atwick began.

"Professor Harris, it's good to see you outside of the classroom!" Carla joined the men. Jeff was delighted for the intrusion.

"You know, I'm really mad at you for that C+." She batted her eyelids flirtatiously at Jeff.

"Well, Carla, if Professor Harris had graded you for good looks, I'm sure you would have received an A+. Am I right Jeff?"

"Absolutely," Jeff said -- thinking that, if his grasp of history was right, in a few decades that kind of bantering could bring both Atwick and him up on sexual harassment charges. He shuddered. Insane days they were, at the end of the 20th century. He'd be doing the world a big favor if the only thing he did back here was change that...

"Aw, I can't stay mad at you guys, you're too charming," Carla mewed. "Do you believe in dancing with students, Professor Harris? Professor Atwick has already honored me with one of his cha-chas."

Atwick bowed. "The honor was all mine."

"Well, I'd be pleased to dance with you Carla," Jeff laughed, "but I'm afraid these new dances are too much for me."

Carla smiled and subtly shifted her body so that her curves were more prominent. "I was thinking of something nice and slow."

"Well, in that case, I'd be a madman to refuse." Jeff winked at Atwick and extended his arm to Carla. He looked in vain for Laura as Carla escorted him to a room in which "The Best of Johnny Mathis" played incessantly.

An hour and who knows how many red dresses later, Laura came up behind Jeff. "Hi," she whispered in his ear and kissed it. "Find out anything interesting?"

"Actually, yeah," Jeff said, and handed Laura a glass of wine. "Amazing how many people seem to know the future when you're primed to hear that in their conversation. One kid told me that he thinks the Beachboys will go on to become second only

to the Beatles in musical importance. Now how could he know that on the basis of 'Surfin Safari' and a couple of other uncreative songs in 1964?"

"Tall blond, sun-tanned boy, Mark?" Laura asked.

"Yeah, I think so."

"Well, he looks like one of the Beachboys, so maybe he's just self-impressed," Laura laughed, and spilled her wine.

"Oops."

"You've got no luck with wine, have you?" Jeff was laughing too now. He had to admit he was having a good time.

"Here, take mine, I just poured it, I'll go get another."

"I think I've had fantastic luck with wine at least one time," Laura said.

Jeff went to fetch another bottle in an adjacent room. The music there was louder than anywhere else. Jeff cringed a bit under the sound assault, then realized he was hearing something else mixed in with the music ... a piercing wail coming from the next room. He dropped the bottle and ran in and found Laura shrieking on the floor.

"Laura, what's the matter?" He lifted her face and looked intently into her eyes. They were grossly dilated. Her shrieks suddenly turned into hysterical laughter.

"Professor Harris, is she sick or something?" Sandy, who Jeff realized had been standing over them, was nearly in tears herself.

"I don't know, Sandy. Look, could you please call me a cab?"

Jeff helped Laura to her feet. She was screaming and yelling at the top of her lungs but Jeff couldn't make out what she was saying. She passed out in his arms in the elevator. He carried her into the back seat of the cab that arrived a few minutes later. "Get me to the closest hospital emergency room," he told the driver, who looked like he'd seen it all.

He carefully put her head on his lap and wiped big beads of sweat from the bridge of her nose. Her eyes were tightly shut and she drooled slightly from the corner of her mouth. He gently wiped that also. She was moaning and half-singing some Beatles song.

He had read of the effects of sixties psychedelic drugs on people -- assuming that's what this was, though it seemed a little early in the 1960s for that -- and could see this was a very bad reaction, likely from something more nasty than LSD. Who the hell had given it to her?

In his day and age, treating it by simple suffusion would be child's play. But here more than a century earlier, with no nano-syndics at all -- jeez, he hoped these "doctors" were up to this. What would they use to cleanse her chemistry? He sighed, stroked her face. There was no point in torturing himself. That wouldn't stop her from dying. He had no choice but to put Laura in whatever primitive doctor's hands this cabbie placed her.

But why did this happen?

Another damn mishap?

He had a searing insight for an instant. Yes, of course ... Then he lost it.

He looked down at Laura's lips, and trembled.

Jeff had always found strength in the rivers of New York. He had spent hours as a child wandering along the banks of the Bronx River -- more a stream, really, than a river -- admiring

its waterfalls, sticking his toes in its pools, following its path through the Botanic and Zoological Gardens. Years later, he would sit on the terrace of Rena's high-rise on 125th Street, watching the powerful Hudson roll through the ninth decade of the stagnant 21st century. Good in medicine, agriculture, the intra-physics that the Thorne embodied, but not much else. Good in looking inward, backward, not outward. He walked now around Carl Schurz Park, looking down on the East River and its reflection of this 1960s city, hoping to find something he could use to recover his balance.

Laura was ok, resting in his apartment, well out of danger. That wasn't the problem.

"Close," the doctor had said. "Good thing you rushed her over here. Combo of booze and that kind of drug is dangerous. Good thing it responded to--"

Better get used to it doc -- you'll see a lot more of it before this decade is over.

Thank God Laura was ok.

But Jeff wasn't.

He had slept maybe an hour after bringing her home from the hospital, undressing her, tucking her safely in their bed. He'd had nightmares -- older and younger versions of his great-great-grandmother coming in and out of his life, changing it with each appearance, editing the narrative that was him so many times that he had no bearings. Only alterations, of alterations.

Jeff had always valued the sanctity and clarity of his mind. That's why he'd steered clear of the psychedelic drugs of his century -- better to improve external reality than just your perception of it. But he figured the contamination now of his past and future was far more toxic to the psyche than the worst drugs. Coleridge, de Quincey, Huxley, Leary, Goonatilake -- you're all pikers compared to me.

But why was he feeling the brunt of this now?

Something Laura had said or done -- not her almost ODing, but something that had happened then, though he didn't know what -- had unhinged him--

"Hi honey." A soft, cool hand touched his as he leaned against the stone embankment. He turned to Laura. She still looked pale.

"You shouldn't be out yet. How are you feeling?"

She held up her palms in an I-don't-know gesture. "I think pretty much better. I was going crazy in the house, and you were gone a long time. I was worried."

Jeff pulled her close. "Oh, Laura, Laura," he said softly, sadly. "What's going on?"

They parted and held hands, looking down at the lights that slid upon the inky water below. "I don't know," she said. "Do you?"

"I think so," Jeff said quietly.

"Tell me," Laura said.

"I think you know."

"No." Laura's face furrowed in confusion.

Jeff dropped her hand and turned to face her. "You look very nice in those shorts."

Laura patted the light red shorts she was wearing on this humid summer evening and looked even more confused. "What do my shorts have to do with anything?"

"For God's sake, stop playing games with me, Laura!" A nearby elderly woman with blue-tinted hair glared at Jeff. He

glared back and lowered his voice. "Try being honest with me for a change."

She turned and looked out over the water. "I think I have been honest. I've told you how much I love you." Her voice was husky.

"I don't suppose you remember much of what you did when the DMT first hit you?" Jeff continued impassively.

"No, I don't remember much of anything. The whole experience was horrible. You know that." She started crying.

"So you have no idea what song you were singing when I took you home in the cab?"

She shook her head. "I can't believe I was singing in that state--"

"Well would it surprise you to know that you were singing a few lines of the Beatles' 'Yes It Is' over and over again? 'Please don't wear red tonight..'"

"And you place some sort of significance on this?"

"I've been driving myself crazy, wandering around here for hours, trying to figure out what's been bothering me ever since I heard you singing those lines. I didn't even know until I saw you and your red shorts a few seconds ago that that song was the problem. But now I'm starting to understand. You still want to claim you have no idea what I'm talking about?"

"I haven't the foggiest notion." For the first time, annoyance was in Laura's voice. She had stopped crying.

"I think you do. Do you know what today's date is? June 29, 1964. Now the Beatles so far have released two albums in America, Meet the Beatles and The Beatles' Second Album. Actually, they also have a third album on VeeJay Records with some early songs. There's also an album with songs from their Hard Day's Night movie and a few new songs, Something New, which will be released here in a couple of weeks. You see I know all of this because I taught history of rock for five years when I first got my Ph.D."

"I know all about your past and future," Laura said tartly.

"Good," Jeff grabbed her arm and raised his voice again.

"And do you also know that 'Yes It Is' is on none of those albums? None of them! And in fact it won't be heard in America until an album called Beatles VI is released sometime late next year?"

Laura pulled away and laughed sarcastically. "And that's what all this is about? That when I was stoned out of my mind on some Brazilian drug maybe intended for you I sang some song that won't be released in the U.S. for another few months? There are a thousand explanations for that. I might know some English guy who heard Lennon and McCartney perform that song in a personal appearance. You yourself might have sung the song in your sleep. What's the big deal?" Her voice was rasping, and she started to cough.

"Your life's at stake," Jeff said. "That's the big deal. Don't you get it?"

Laura just looked at him, eyes wide and brimming with tears. She started to walk away.

"Listen to me, goddamn it!" Jeff caught up to her, spun her around, put his hands heavily on her shoulders. "Rena died, I think I was almost killed. You were almost killed. These are serious forces we're playing around with here."

She turned her head away, as if from the intensity of his reasoning.

"Tell me the truth!" he demanded.

"I love you," Laura said.

"We need more now," Jeff insisted.

Laura exhaled, squeezed close to Jeff, then pulled away.

"It's getting windy out here," she shivered. "Let's go back to the apartment and I'll try to tell you as much as I can."

The kettle whistled. Jeff carefully poured the water into the porcelain teapot, let it warm a bit, then added two servings of darjeeling tea and the extra one for the pot.

Laura was on the couch, arms around her knees and legs tucked under, talking. "We knew there was danger right after the arrival, but we didn't think it continued years after."

"None of our little expeditions before mine ran into any trouble at all," Jeff said. "As far as I know, I was the first not to return -- the first whose AWH self-destructed, or was destroyed by something else, after my time jump."

"None of those little events before yours were intended to seriously alter history," Laura said. "Your Challenger attempt was the first big-scale operation."

Jeff shivered, touching the teapot for warmth. The number of lives lost in the Challenger explosion -- if only he hadn't been funneled back here to the 1960s... "Suppose you start at the beginning," he said, "though it still bothers me to talk of beginnings that in one sense haven't even happened yet."

"The gist is this," Laura said. "My team was -- will be -- situated about 15 years after yours in the future. We knew about your team. Knew about you, Rena, her getting killed here. When your team uncovered her death in a cache of old micro-fiche, they stopped the project. Sealed all the files. My team found out about it and decided, secretly and illegally, to re-open it. My job was to--"

"Don't tell me -- to stop the killing of JFK."

"No," Laura said.

"But you're here in the 1960s," Jeff said.

"My job was to keep an eye on you -- assuming I could find you," Laura said.

Jeff's mouth hung open. "They sent you back here to find me?"

"Actually, not back here -- to 1985," Laura said.

"But--"

"Right," Laura said. "But I wound up back here, just like you, and just like Rena. My team didn't understand that at first. Neither did I. But I think it's clear what's going on now. The Thorne operates by creating basins of subatomic attraction, at both ends of the artificial wormhole. But if you create enough artificial basins, all in one place, that in effect must begin to operate like one hugely powerful natural basin, attracting all out-of-time units in its temporal vicinity. Like a well worn ditch attracting rivulets of water."

"Three were intended to go back to 1985..." Jeff mused.

"Yes," Laura said, "and they all ended up here more than 20 years earlier. Think about it. Your team perfected time travel, tried to bury it, my team dug it up -- you can't as a society, a species, unlearn a kind of knowledge. There must be thousands of time travel operations throughout the future. And the likely place for many of them to focus is JFK -- first assassination on film, on tape, copied onto digiscan, holoscan, mirrorims, and who knows what new media. It's the cultural icon of assassination, the beacon against which all others are measured."

"The glittering prize for time travellers," Jeff said, bringing Laura her tea.

"Yes," Laura said, gratefully sipping.

"And pulling any other time travellers back here who happened to be floating around nearby in time-flux," Jeff said.

Laura nodded. "Look at this very year. 1964. The Beatles, Bob Dylan, Marshall McLuhan -- the sexual revolution, feminism, the ecology movement all get big boosts in the next few years. Why all of that packed into this one decade? Couldn't be coincidence. The answer is that the 1960s were infected -- and inspired -- by time travellers. Despite all of our attempts at curbing possible cultural contamination from the future, it can't be done. You've seen that. Some leaks out -- and causes massive cultural upheavals."

"John Lennon was a time traveller?" Jeff asked.

"I don't know, maybe," Laura said. "Maybe that's why he was murdered. At very least I'd say he was touched by time travel."

Jeff's head was reeling. Someone else who didn't deserve to die, whose death he'd like to prevent if he could. Surprise Chapman in that Dakota alley, break his goddamn gun-hand... Was Jeff bound to spend his whole life now as a shackled witness to history? "How'd you find me?"

"Wasn't too hard," Laura said. "Once I got back here, realized I was stranded, I figured I might as well see if you landed back here too. We knew you were a teacher. You had to live, earn money somewhere. So I went around to every school in the area, saying I wanted to be a sociology major, and asking for information about the faculty. This was my plan for 1985, so I had some good credentials ready, made them just right with a little alteration. And when I talked to your Chair at City College, I knew I hit pay dirt -- he showed me your outline, and its emphasis on McLuhan. McLuhan's been well known in Canada for over a decade, but not down here."

"Why didn't you tell me who you were?" Jeff asked.

"I didn't want to spook you -- have you run away on me, where I couldn't find you again."

"Good you succeeded at least at one thing," Jeff smiled tiredly.

"Yeah."

"With all the people who came back to save Kennedy, not a single one succeeded at that, did they?" Jeff asked.

"No," Laura, "at least not as far as we know in our universe of knowledge." She shook her head. "I really do think that there's something about history that resists attempts to change it."

"Hawking's Chronology Protection Conjecture?" Jeff said. "Thorne and his colleagues claimed to have refuted that, though I admit the math was a bit beyond me."

"Refuted in theory -- with the assumption of clean loops with no causality interference -- but loops are much dirtier in practice, especially with big events affecting so many people like assassinations," Laura said. "Attempts to change those either fail completely, or maybe just change the events a little bit -- or cosmos forbid, maybe even ironically set up the events to happen in the first place."

"Not to mention that they're hazardous to the health of the time travellers," Jeff added.

"You really think we're in danger?" Laura asked.

"Obviously. My guess is the universe sort of cleans up

after itself -- does what it can to make sure there aren't too many loose ends, joints out of time, around at any one time. From that perspective, we're irritants to the universe -- our very being here disturbs it. But that doesn't mean we'll definitely be killed. Maybe we're just, I don't know, accident prone, more likely in a statistical sense to meet harm than others. If we're really careful, maybe we'll live. After all, you and I are still alive and kicking."

Laura pulled him down next to her on the couch.

Jeff's mind flipped back to the images of the Challenger. "It's so frustrating. To be back here, and not be able to even do anything about it. I mean, we have almost 20 years to plan some sort of intervention -- maybe we can do something, something small that won't rock the boat too much, but just enough to deflect the disaster, or the worst of it." He saw the faces again. "Over a hundred kids were killed when the Challenger crashed into that schoolhouse near Miami. The kids dead, the astronauts dead, those images and flames burning into everyone's brains all over America and the world -- no wonder it stopped the space program dead in its tracks. No President or Congress could support it in after an accident like that -- even dictators couldn't force it on their people--"

"What did you say?" Laura looked at him.

"What? About the Challenger?"

"What do kids in a schoolhouse have to do with that?" Laura asked.

Jeff looked puzzled.

"The Challenger explosion was a terrible thing for the country, and the space program, yes," Laura said. "It was horrible -- everyone saw those seven astronauts walking to their death, waving to the cameras, right on television. But it blew up just a minute or so after launch -- nowhere near Miami or a school filled with kids."

Jeff gasped. "And the space program continued in your timeline?"

"Oh yes," Laura said. "I mean, it's got its problems. Serious ones. But we've got settlements on Mars and the asteroid belt and--"

And for the first time since he had stood in front of the NYU Student Building with police lights mocking him in the night, Jeff had more than a whisper of hope.

"Maybe the difference between your version of reality and the one I remember," he said, "is us."

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