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THE TIME THIEF

THE STRANGER APPEARED at the crest of the knoll.

Mark and his friends, playing tag through the carcass of the abandoned Model T, did not see or hear him approach, but Mark gradually sensed the man's presence the way a disturbing thought lingers at the edge of consciousness before bursting full blown into the mind.

The steering wheel was safe and Mark rested his hands on the wheel while the Mellon twins, their scrawny red-headed bodies looking like waltzing carrots, scampered away from pudgy and flat-footed Joey Hanson. Soot from the blast furnaces coated the rusting car, turning Mark's fingertips black where they touched the wheel. He wiped his hands on his knickers, then with a spidery kind of feeling knew that he was being watched, caught at playing hookey from the eighth grade even before he looked up and saw the man. At first the stranger was just a silhouette on the hill framed by the saw-toothed battlements of the Ford Rouge Plant. Black smoke from the coke ovens momentarily blotted out the sun, transforming the man from silhouette to hawk-faced stranger. As Joey and the Mellon twins climbed through the car to Mark's side, he pointed at the man and they watched as the stranger slowly descended the hill toward them.

"Service Department?" Joey whispered.

"Must be," Pete Mellon said.

"Hobo," Mark guessed.

"Must be," Paul Mellon said.

The man reached the foot of the hill, stuck his hands on his hips and grinned at the boys. He wore a brown leather aviator's jacket, threadbare and ripped, and a hat with the brim shadowing his forehead. He was thin with deep-set eyes and sunken cheeks, convincing Mark that he was indeed a hobo, probably having just ridden the rails from out west to find work at the Ford Plant.

"Excuse me, boys, but is that the Ford Rouge Plant?" the stranger asked.

"That's Ford's," Mark said.

The Mellon twins stifled laughter over anyone being so dumb as to not know Ford's.

"They hirin?" the man asked.

"Maybe," Joey said. "But they'll only start you at \$6 a day."

"Yeah," Mark said. "My dad started at \$6 a day and he worked his way up to almost \$10 a day doing tool and die and then they fired him. They just hired him

back and made him start at \$6 again."

"Least he got hired back," Joey said. "My old man got laid off and hasn't worked for six months."

Mark blushed and studied his shoes; he should have been happy that his father was back to work, but he felt awkward, almost ashamed of the fact around his friends whose fathers were still jobless and broke. The Mellon family took in boarders, Joey's mother cleaned houses to make sure they had food. So Mark should have felt lucky, but actually felt ashamed, a feeling which had become his natural state.

For as long as he could remember his father had swung on a demented pendulum between working overtime six days a week and losing his job. With each swing of the pendulum, Mark's shame grew worse; it always seemed as if his father lost his job because there was something wrong with him or with the family. The first time it happened, men from the Ford Sociological Department came to inspect the house and the family to make sure they were living decently and were deserving of his father's profit-sharing bonus. No one knew exactly what standards old Henry Ford thought were befitting a bonus, but whatever they were, the men in suits who poked and prodded through the dirty laundry and examined the pantry for liquor bottles found no evidence that Mark's family lived up to their quality control. Not only did his father lose his profit-sharing bonus, he lost his job. Now, the Sociological Department was gone, but in the ten years since, his father had been rehired five times and lost his job four times, always for some reason that implied it was the man's own fault, or the family's fault, and each time Mark's shame grew deeper.

"Sounds like things are tough around here," the stranger said.

"Mister, where you been?" Joey laughed, puckering his pudgy face. "It's hard times. But things is gonna change. There's gonna be a march on the plant and they say thousands of guys is gonna "

Mark jabbed an elbow into Joey's ribs.

"Ow! What's the big idea?"

"You shouldn't go talking to strangers about things," Mark whispered.

Pete Mellon's eyes formed discs beneath his mop of red hair. "Yeah. He might be a Service Department spy."

"Service Department spy," his brother said.

The stranger chuckled to himself, his lips curling upward, bunching his thin face into a death's head grin. "Has there ever been a march on the plant?"

"Guess not," Mark said.

The man nodded, more to himself than to the boys. "Then this is the fight one,"

he said. "It's 1932." He tipped his hat and said, "Much obliged. You boys have yourself a good day." He started back up the hill, hesitated, turned and tossed a quarter to each boy.

"Geez, thanks, mister," Joey called after him.

Mark fingered his quarter and watched the stranger disappear over the rise of the hill as if the smoke and flames and massive walls of the plant were a dragon that had swallowed the man whole.

Then the man reappeared and beckoned them with a crook of his finger.

"Let's run," Pete Mellon said.

"Run," Paul said.

"I ain't going up there," Joey said.

Drawn for some reason he could not understand, Mark climbed the hill and stared down with the stranger at the plant. It stretched like its own dark city all the way to the Rouge River where freighters docked and skeletal gantries unloaded the ore. Lines of smokestacks carved a fence pattern across the sky, the buildings housing the assembly lines crowded each other like the caves of some race of toiling dwarves, and over all the smoke from the blast furnaces wrapped the plant in a shroud.

The stranger pointed and said, "Is that Miller Road down there?"

"Yep," Mark said.

The stranger nodded. "By the way, do you know" The man hesitated, then shook his head. "Never mind. It's better if I find him myself."

Mark waited, but the man only went on staring at the craggy summits of the blast furnaces. At last, Mark turned and raced down the hill. It was a warm day for March, but Mark shivered. With a start, he realized he was frightened, not knowing why, only knowing the stranger's appearance was an omen, as unlucky as walking under a ladder.

THE BOYS DEBATED what to do with their quarters, the Mellons wanting to see Scarface and Joey and Mark holding out for parfaits at Henderson's Drug Store. At last the parfaits won and the boys sat at the counter, eating with long-handled spoons, speculating about the stranger.

"Maybe he's a communist," Pete Mellon said.

"I still think he's Service Department," Joey Hanson said.

"He's just a hobo," Mark said.

As they talked, Mark's conviction about the man weakened. Something about the stranger, something knowing in the sunken eyes made him sure the man was much more than a hobo. But he couldn't believe the man was one of the goons from the

Ford Service Department. Goons always wore suits and ties. Still, there was something not quite right about the man. Maybe Joey was right, maybe the guy was a spy trying to find out about the Hunger March.

He sipped melted ice cream from the bottom of the glass with a straw, then smelled aftershave and his mood brightened.

"How's my favorites?" Randy Randolph said. He sat on a swivel stool at the counter, played with one of his ruby rings, straightened his tie, smoothed his greased-back hair. Randy had the look of an eager Doberman pinscher and just about as much fashion sense, but to Mark he was as heroic as Charles Lindbergh.

Randy started out life like them, living off the Ford Plant like rats living off a garbage dump, but now Randy dressed better than a politician and had no fear of layoffs or the Service Department. Randy was the lord of numbers; his masters weren't foremen, but the kind of guys you saw in movies, riding the running boards of cars, Tommy guns in hand.

Randy made a quarter appear from behind Mark's ear, then repeated the sleight of hand, pulling a stack of white cards from behind Mark's other ear. Randy fanned himself with the cards and grinned.

"I'll sell twice as many as last week," Mark said.

"I'll beat you any day of the week," Joey said.

The Mellons leaped for the cards.

"Hold up there," Randy said. "There's plenty for everybody."

Mark pocketed his allotment of cards; he would be on Miller Road at shift change, ready to sell the betting cards to plant workers, eager to impress Randy, just as eager to collect his five percent commission. Other runners only made two percent, but Randy took care of his runners, paid better, acted as buddy, confidant and father figure to Mark and his friends.

Randy ordered a chocolate shake, ruffled Mark's hair for no reason, then forced a comb through his own grease-caked hair.

Joey climbed onto the stool next to Randy. "Hey Randy, you gonna be in the march?"

"March?" Randy asked.

"The march on the plant. You know."

Mark sensed they should keep quiet, but this was Randy, after all, and he didn't want to lose his spot as Randy's number one pal. "There's gonna be thousands," Mark said.

"That a fact?" Randy said. "I suppose your dads will be there, right in the

front row."

"You bet," Mark said.

Randy shook his head. "Suckers," he said. "It's all a sucker's game. Remember what I told you guys. You don't want to be the ones buying the cards, you want to sell them. Nobody gets rich playing the cards and nobody gets rich working in some factory. You think marching on Ford's is going to make things better? Fat chance. And even if it does, your fathers will just be replacing one master with another. I got this cousin who works in a mine. They got a union. You know what that means? It means they still work in the mines only they got to pay union dues on top of everything else and do what the union bosses say to do. No, the only way to get ahead is with guts. You got to be an entrepreneur."

"A what?" Joey asked.

"You heard the man," Mark said, even though he had no idea what an entrepreneur was.

Randy tapped the tobacco down on a Chesterfield and lit the cigarette. "Go out on your own. Take me, for example. The boss tells me what to do, but he doesn't give a rat's ass about how I do it. As long as they get their cut, I'm a free man. So if I want to pay you guys more, that's fine and dandy. I don't report to nobody. And when I go home, my old lady's got steak on the table. My boy doesn't hold his pants up with rope. He's got more suspenders than you guys got teeth. So wise up. Ford's is for suckers."

"Right," Mark agreed. Randy was always right; his vision of life lingered with Mark, filled him with a luminous sense of life's possibilities, as rich as a stomach full of steak. The alternative was the assembly line, his future as predictable and fixed as engine blocks rumbling along the line in their single-minded ferocity.

"For instance," Randy said, "I can foretell the future. I predict there's more layoffs coming."

"How do you know that?" Joey asked.

"Because that shelf over there is empty. Do you know what used to be on that shelf? Hair dye. All the old guys are busy dying their hair so they look young and maybe fool people into thinking they still got what it takes. Happens every time rumors about layoffs start. Ain't that pathetic? Like I says, only suckers buy the cards."

"Right," Mark said.

"So you guys just stay away from this march. When is it now?"

"Day after tomorrow," Mark said.

"That's right. You told me that already. And what time was it again? Where's

it
starting?"

"Miller," Joey said. "Nine o'clock sharp, my dad says."

Randy grinned and said, "Right. That's right." He leaned on the counter and stared at the Mellon twins. "Cat got your tongue?"

Peter and Paul shook their red heads, synchronized like clockwork dolls.

"You guys are brain-damaged," Randy said and laughed. Cigarette dangling from his lip, he examined his appearance in the mirror behind the soda fountain, patting down his lacquered hair, using Joey's shirt to wipe the grease from his fingertips. "Well now, I got to be on my way. See you boys tomorrow, right?"

"Right," they all said and watched Randy swagger from the drugstore as if he was leaving the swinging doors of a saloon.

It was time to go home, so they followed Randy into the street. The air had turned the color of dirty snow, the low-hanging clouds erecting a bunker around the sun. Mark and his friends passed the Michigan Arms where plant workers crowded the lobby to find a woman and rent a room by the hour. Pete Mellon suddenly lurched to a halt and threw his arm across his friends.

The stranger turned the corner, at first stared past the boys as if searching for something or someone, then recognized them and grinned.

"All of that," the stranger said, sweeping his arm toward the fields extending behind Henderson's Drug Store, "will be gone within years. A great war will come and your fathers will be building tanks and army trucks instead of cars. Thousands of people will come north to work in the plants and at first they'll live in Quonset huts, but eventually there will be houses and stores and office parks and hospitals "

The man went on while the boys glanced at each other, made circular motions with their fingers at their temples.

"Ah, mister," Joey Hanson said. "Where you been? The Great War has already been fought. We won."

The stranger blinked at him, for a moment looked lost, then smiled. "Of course," he said. "Only I wasn't talking about that war. This will be another war. And there will be wars beyond that one. I shouldn't tell you boys this, but I like you. Tell your fathers to buy these fields here. If they do, they'll make more money than you can dream about."

Mark stared at the empty fields, home to old tires, bottles, dead grass and cattails, and decided the man wasn't Service Department, but a plain old madman.

"Now," the stranger said. "If a man around here wanted to get some action, where

would he go?"

They all pointed in unison to the Michigan Arms. The stranger watched it for a moment, then said, "No, that's very tempting, but that's not what I meant. What if a guy wanted to wager some money, on numbers, say. Where would he get a card?"

Four hands shot up holding cards.

The stranger laughed. "Well now, you boys certainly are the young businessmen. I'm impressed. But I was thinking about talking to the person who would supply you with such cards. I always believe in going right to the source."

The Mellon twins looked as if they were about to blurt out Randy's name, but Mark leaped in front of them. "We don't know his name."

The man narrowed his eyes at Mark, studied him, finally shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, much obliged anyways. You boys have yourself a good day."

Mark watched him walk away, his head swiveling from side to side as if searching for something.

"What's he up to?" the twins asked.

"Maybe he's a G-Man," Mark said.

The boys stared at each other, amazed at the enormity of being hunted by G-Men.

As if being chased by something on claws, they bolted for their homes.

That night, Mark's mother made hash and potatoes fried in lard. His father ate two platefuls, his face low over his plate as he spooned the food into his mouth, then straightening up, grease dripping from his lips to stain his shirt.

After dinner his father told him to go to his room.

"But the game's on the radio and"

His father, eyes like lumps of coal, glared at him. Mark began to obey, then lingered in the kitchen doorway. "Dad," he said. "How many guys do you think will be in the march?"

"Don't know," his father said.

"What time do you think we should be there,"

His father looked up at him, uncomprehending then formed slits with his eyelids.

"You aren't going to any march."

Mark was sure he must have misunderstood. "But all the guys"

"I said no."

"I'll stay right by you. I promise I won't"

His father snorted. "What makes you think I'm going to march in any fool

parade?

Besides, they're all reds and I ain't no red."

"Joey Hanson's dad isn't a red. Mr. Mellon isn't. And you helped organize
"

"Well, I changed my mind. I just got my job back and I'm sure as hell not going to do anything to lose it again."

A void formed in Mark, something as dark as the smoke from the Rouge Plant's coke ovens. "All the guys are goings" he said lamely.

"And I say shut the hell up!" his father yelled. "You go anywhere near that march and I'll give you something to whine about."

Mark knew enough to keep quiet when his father's voice went high-pitched and his fingers curled into a mallet. Years ago during one of his layoffs, there had been rumors of a foreman beaten up in an alley. Police came and talked to his father, but never charged him with anything. Joey Hanson told Mark his father had heard Mark's father bragging about it in a bar.

Mark retreated to his bedroom where he sprawled on his bed and for a moment choked back tears. He would not let himself cry. Randy Randolph didn't cry. Randy didn't beat up guys in alleys. He didn't care what his father said; he was going to march in the demonstration, shoulder to shoulder with Joey Hanson and the Mellon twins. Maybe Randy was right, maybe they were all suckers, but at least he wasn't chicken like

He couldn't bring himself to finish the thought, even though the bitterness he felt toward his father lingered like the aftertaste of vomit. His father probably deserved to lose his job time and time again.

Later that night, his father came to his room and sat on the edge of his bed and said, "Look, I'm sorry I yelled at you. You're a good kid. I didn't mean it."

"It's all right," Mark said.

"You just have to understand that a man has to do what he has to do. I put food on the table for you and your mother. I put clothes on your back. I'd rather be marching with my friends, but, well, I just can't. When you grow up you'll understand. Life ain't pretty and sometimes you do things for the best, not because you want to do them."

"Sure, I understand," Mark said.

He felt his father's hand in his for a moment, felt the cold of coins.

"Here's fifty cents," his father said. "Buy yourself something."

"Thanks," Mark said. For a moment he wanted to hug his father, but he remained still on the bed. He was afraid that if he touched his father he would realize how much the man had shrunk.

IN THE MORNING, Mark snuck a bottle of his father's Brylcreem and plastered

his hair back before setting off for school. After school, Mark desperately wanted to spend his fifty cents, share his wealth with his friends, but he could not bring himself to explain that his newfound money was a bribe to hide his father's cowardice. He wanted to talk, about what he wasn't quite sure, and at the same time yearned to be alone where he would never have to explain anything to anybody.

He met his friends at the parking lot on Miller Road and peddled his betting cards at shift change. Afterward, Joey wanted to play Indian Ball, but Mark still wanted to be alone so he faked a stomachache. When they were gone he headed for Henderson's and bought the latest Popular Science and a fistful of Tootsie Rolls, then sauntered across fields, paying more attention to the ads in the back of the magazine promising wealth for your inventions than to his destination.

He found himself on the banks of the Rouge River. Bluegills once swam beneath the currents, ripe to be picked by anyone with a pole and patience. Now sludge rode the water like mutant plankton and sewage collected along the banks like cancerous puff balls. Mark skimmed a few rocks across the river, then wandered across the field toward the old Model T where he could read his magazine in private.

He climbed into the driver's seat, opened the magazine, then screamed when the hand appeared over the seat back.

He tumbled from the car and whirled. Slowly, the stranger pulled himself to a sitting position in the back, rubbed his eyes, then grinned at Mark.

"Sorry about that," the man said. "Didn't mean to scare you."

"Jeezus, mister."

"Sorry." He rubbed his eyes again and stared at Mark. "Good magazine?"

"Yeah. You been sleeping here?"

"As good a place as any."

Hobo, Mark decided, definitely hobo.

"Is that what you spent your quarter on?" the man asked.

"Naw. My dad gave me fifty cents. He got his job back."

"So you said. You're lucky." The man opened the car door and sat on the edge of the rear bench seats and pulled his boots on.

"Yeah," Mark said, "as long as we can live good enough to keep it."

The stranger's deep eyes narrowed, his head cocked quizzically. "Live good enough?"

"They're always watching you at the plant. If you don't act right you can get canned. Used to be that guys from the plant came to inspect your house and if you weren't living right then you didn't get your profit sharing, or lost your job. See, Mr. Ford wants people to live right, but I don't think they actually

go to your house anymore."

The stranger leaned forward, intense, peering at Mark. "What does living right mean?"

Mark shrugged his shoulders, blushed, felt the need to tell someone and the stranger seemed harmless enough. "Oh, you know, clean house and no fooling around with women and stuff."

"Is that a fact?" the man said. Suddenly he threw his head back and laughed. "So old Henry was into social engineering. I never knew that. He was a man ahead of his time."

The blush on Mark's face deepened, burned into his skin. "It's not funny!"

The stranger stopped laughing. "I wasn't laughing at you," he said. "Actually it's not very funny. Even now there are social engineers coming to power in Europe that will make old Henry Ford look like a rank amateur and bring doom upon the heads of many people, themselves included." The man smiled gently and said, "Come here. Sit down and show me your magazine."

For some reason he couldn't grasp, Mark ignored his instinctive caution and sat on the edge of the front seat and thumbed through the Popular Science while the man rested his chin on the seat back and watched.

"So why did your dad lose his job this time?" the stranger asked.

"He stole time," Mark said.

"He what?"

"They said he was a time thief, that he stole Mr. Ford's time. This guy on the line next to him was a spotter and he kept track of all the time my dad went to the bathroom and he turned my dad in. They said he went to the bathroom too much and that was stealing Mr. Ford's time so they fired him."

The man shook his head. "So Mr. Ford thinks he can even own time, does he?"

"Guess so," Mark said and suddenly needed to change the subject. "Look at this," Mark said. "Someday there's going to be spaceships and people living on the moon. See, this article tells how people will wear these big boots with magnets on the bottoms so they can move around in spaceships where there's no gravity."

"Yes," the man said. "People will live on the moon one day. And Mars. I'm sure you're right."

"They had this neat story in Astounding Science Fiction about how these guys went to Mars and they dug up this canal and they found these Martians living underneath that had four arms and they were just waiting for someone to come along so they could steal their spaceship and invade Earth."

In a far-off, distracted voice, the man said, "That sounds like quite a story. You like stories? Would you like me to tell you one?"

"Sure," Mark said.

The stranger gazed at the plant beyond the hill, at the smoke turning the clouds the color of bruised skin, finally said, "Once upon a time, there was a man who died, was murdered actually, and that had a terrible effect on his family because they always depended on him to earn money and put food on the table. The mother had no way of supporting her son except taking in laundry and cleaning houses because women weren't --aren't trained to do much more. They fell into poverty, but the son managed to help out by running numbers for some local hoods. Pretty soon he started making contacts, as they say in the business, friends who knew the right people to talk to if some guy wanted to make some quick money. And all the time this kid had a burning hate inside of him because of what had happened to his father. All he really wanted was to get back at everybody and everything.

"Then a great war came and all the young men, including the son, had to go off and fight in the war. Well, this son was a pretty smart guy and while everybody else in the army was busy fighting the war, he got an idea on how to make some money off of it. See, wars aren't the way you see them in movies. Guys go into battle and they're so scared they even piss in their pants. That's not bad, you know. It's just the way it is. Being scared doesn't make you any less heroic. In fact you wouldn't be so heroic if you didn't have that fear to conquer. But still, if there was some way you could take the edge off that fear like taking a drink of whiskey, then so much the better. Well this man, boy really since he was only eighteen, knew about something even better than whiskey to help drive a man's fear away, a drug that would make everything in the world seem right. His old contacts from the streets supplied him and he sold it to his army pals and by the end of the war he was a very rich man.

"After the war the man came back to this country and he used his money and his smarts and his old buddies to build up a business, a crime business, doing all kinds of things I wouldn't want a young guy like yourself to hear about. Let's just say he became very rich and very powerful and his sons carried on the business and their sons and the sons of the next generation."

The stranger paused, looked even more far away, as insubstantial as the silence between seconds. At last he shook himself and continued. "All of this took many years, of course, and during this time the world changed drastically. Men did indeed walk on the moon and on Mars and sent probes into deep space. Back on Earth other scientists explored inner space, the worlds deep within your cells. They knew that everything we are is written in a code within our cells. Bit by bit they began to decipher that code and with the keys to human life they created miracles. They could alter the way a person would be while that person was still an embryo in the womb. They could tell who would get sick from which

diseases by studying the cells in a person's parents. They could make people super intelligent, handsome, anything they wanted. They could be gods.

"The problem was that all this magic took money. If you had enough money you could engineer your children any way you wanted, engineer your own cells to stave off disease. If you didn't have enough money you were shit out of luck. So

the wealthy and the powerful became more wealthy and more powerful while the poor grew poorer and more envious with each new discovery. Before long there were riots and more wars. Soon the powerful took the next logical step. Since they possessed the power to alter human beings, they could engineer the whole human race, take control of evolution itself."

"Ah, mister, I don't think I understand," Mark said.

The stranger smiled. "You don't have to."

"But what about the crime guys?"

"Be patient. I'm getting there. Anyways, the people with the power took charge and they decided what traits were valuable and which ones were not. They blamed

the violence on the poor and their genes, used that as an excuse to withhold the

technology of genetic engineering from them, said they were acting in the best interests of the human race, weeding out the defective, the immoral, the stupid.

Of course the funny thing was that the right genes just happened to be the ones

that the most powerful and wealthy people had."

Mark was still having trouble following the story. "What about the crime guys?"

he asked again.

"Well, by now the great grandson of our hero was the head of the family business

and he had inherited his family's gift for knowing how to make a buck. Just as his ancestor had made a fortune off of a bad situation, he could do the same.

So

he gave the poor what they wanted. He started a black market in genetic engineering and sold intelligence and health and good looks just the way some people sold liquor during prohibition or some people run numbers right now.

Only

it got out of hand, because they could never be sure they were doing it right, not cutting corners, not ripping people off. Terrible things happened.

Children

mutated or were born dead. The worst was a new disease that made the old devastating diseases look like the common cold. It was a plague and millions of

people died from it. And that only made things worse and there were more riots,

more death."

The man paused and went on staring at the jagged teeth of the factory and the black haze. Mark thought the man would continue, but there was only silence. Finally he asked, "How did it end?"

The man roused himself from his trance and shrugged his shoulders. "It hasn't ended yet. Sanity did return to the human race, democracy and all that. People

did learn to be more humane when they finally realized that the real message of human evolution is that altruism is self-serving. What affects one member of the group affects all members eventually. But it all came too late for our hero because the crime lord's beautiful wife died from one of the diseases his illegal business had mistakenly created. In his sorrow he came to hate himself and everything his family stood for and he began to wonder what would happen if his ancestor, the first one to be murdered, had lived. Would everything have been different? Because, you see, the scientists had by then gotten very smart, so smart they even managed time travel."

"H.G. Wells!" Mark yelled, finally understanding something, happy he could contribute to the story.

"Yeah," the man said, "just like H.G. Wells. Only that was a story and this was real. They learned about things called paradoxes and path determinants. Let's say this man went back in time and stopped his ancestor from being killed. Maybe that would alter history so much that the man would never be born. How could someone who was never born go back in time and kill his ancestor?"

Mark shrugged his shoulders; he wasn't even sure about the cell stuff.

"So the man realized he could not change the past. But what if you wanted to go back in time not to change it, but to simply watch it, live through it, actually experience the events that were part of your story and led to what you had become? Maybe, just maybe, if you could experience all those major events and all the different people involved, then you could finally understand it all and get those twisted parts of you out of your system and maybe, just maybe, find peace. Have you ever been scared, really scared?"

"Yes."

"I'll bet you told somebody about it. And then someone else, over and over again until it finally wasn't so scary. Right?"

"Yeah."

"Well this was the same way. This man had to go back and relive not just his own life, but the crucial moments in his whole family's past so that finally he could be free and find out who he was."

Again the man lapsed into silence.

"Is that it?" Mark asked.

"Yes," the man said.

Mark liked the story about the Martians much better. By now the light had dwindled and the air had grown cool, the factory walls only dim crags in the gray light.

"I have to get home," Mark said.

"Sure," the man said. "You'd better run along home."

As Mark climbed from the car, he asked, "You gonna get a job at Ford's?"

"I don't think so," the man said. He reached into his aviator's jacket and withdrew a black box the size of a bar of soap. "Actually I'm going to record the march on the plant."

Mark wasn't sure what the stranger meant. "You mean take pictures?"

"In a way, yes. This is a kind of camera. Very advanced."

"I guess so," Mark said. Suddenly he grinned. "You mean like the ones in Life? Wow, maybe me and my friends will be famous."

The man flinched as if Mark had spit at him. "What do you mean?"

"Take our pictures in the march and sell it to Life."

"You're not going to be part of this march, are your"

"Sure. Everybody is. Me and Joey and Pete and Paul will be right there
"Mark hesitated, finally lied, "Marching with our dads."

Slowly the man unfurled himself from the car and walked to Mark. "Don't do that," he said.

"Are you crazy?"

"It might be -- dangerous," the man said. He put a hand on Mark's shoulder. Mark yanked away from the man's touch.

"I got to go home now."

"Wait," the man said, suddenly wild-eyed and grasping for him. "What's your name?"

Mark dodged the madman.

"Please tell me your name!"

Mark ignored him, raced up the hill, running from something, not knowing what, hearing the man call, "Don't go near Miller Road when they march. Understand?"

Mark hopped a wooden fence and raced the alleys, convinced the man was following him, finally slowed when he knew he was alone.

The man was crazy, his story even crazier, stupid stuff adults like to tell kids and scare them. Still, the man had told his story as if he had read it from a newspaper. It was like hearing a good ghost story; even when you know it's not true you still believe in some deep closet of your mind. Why had the man said the march would be dangerous? Would something happen at the march tomorrow? Would someone die and doom his kid and ultimately much of the world? Crazy talk,

Mark decided.

He walked back to Henderson's Drug Store, needing to be with someone, needing an adult like Randy Randolph. He would have liked to talk to his father, but he thought Randy was more of a man. Randy would know. He ran a comb through his newly greased-back hair and used his remaining quarter to order a chocolate soda and buy the latest copy of the Katzenjammer Kids.

Near six o'clock, Randy swaggered in, spun himself around on a counter stool, patted down a cowlick and winked at Mark. "Good hunting?" Randy said.

Mark handed him five dollars.

"That's it?" Randy said.

Mark shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't feel good."

Randy slapped him on the back. "Hey, happens to the best of us."

"I'll do better tomorrow."

Randy went on grinning, but his expression faltered, his jaw tensed from the effort of maintaining the smile. "Why don't you skip tomorrow."

"No, really, I feel good now."

"Right, right, I know that. It's just maybe you'd better skip tomorrow. You know, the march and all. Nobody's gonna buy cards anyways with all the commotion going on."

"Really, it's...."

"Just stay away," Randy said. "Tell your friends to take the day off."

Fear sent cobwebs through Mark's nerves. For the second time he had been warned away from the march. "Randy?" he asked. "What's going to happen tomorrow?"

Randy stared through the plate-glass window. "Happen? Nothing's going to happen. Bunch of guys will make a big noise, then go home. That's all."

Mark shook his head. "Something's going to happen," he said. "I know it. You don't think the police or the plant guys will start anything, do you?"

"Course not. Don't worry. Now you scram. I have to get home. The little woman's got meatloaf waiting and she don't let the kid eat until I'm there."

Randy hopped from the stool, made for the door, then hesitated when Mark grabbed his sleeve. "Joey's dad will be there. Other guys and their dads. Something's going to happen and I don't want them to get hurt."

"I told you...."

"But maybe you don't know. Maybe things will just go crazy. I think I'd better

warn...."

Randy yanked his arm away from Mark, knelt and grabbed his shoulders. "You aren't saying nothing to no one. The cops and the plant goons aren't going to do anything."

"How do you know?" Mark asked, then, with a terrible certainty like the news of a death in the family, he whispered, "What do you know?"

"I just know, that's all. You go home and keep your mouth shut. Understand?"

Mark nodded his head and watched Randy hurry from the drug store. He told, Mark thought. He pumped us for information and then he sold it to the cops and to the plant. They know exactly where the marchers will be and when. They would be waiting for the men.

The stranger's story came back to him like a memory of the future. The stranger knew people would die. For a moment it seemed to Mark that the drug store vanished, everything vanished, and he was alone and stranded and, worse of all, betrayed. Betrayed by Randy, by his father's cowardice, by life itself. Only suckers buy the cards. He had bought the cards.

That night, as his father and mother listened to the radio, Mark lay in his bed, face in his pillow, first numb as death, then feeling as if he needed to scream. What if everything the stranger had said was true? Who would die? Whose ancestor would leave a legacy of doom? He knew he had to warn someone, at least Joey and the twins, tell them not to let their fathers march. But what good would that do? If the stranger was right about the march, then he was right about the future. He had said you can't change the future. So warning them was pointless. Whatever was about to happen would happen no matter what Mark did.

Late that night, when the house was dark and quiet, when all he could hear was the pulse of blood at his temples, Mark knew that he was no longer the same, that a glimpse of an awful and terrifying truth had opened up before him, a vision of life that had at its core essentially nothing. Future and present and past all curved in on themselves to form one implacable, pointless and unchangeable assembly line.

He slept and dreamt of guns roaring, then awoke and the blast of the guns became a pounding on glass.

Beyond his window, Joey Hanson grinned at him, the Mellon twins danced with excitement.

"It's starting," Joey called. "Come on."

"Come on," the twins echoed.

Mark scrambled into his overalls and flannel shirt, bolted into the kitchen. The house was silent, his father, now on the afternoon shift, probably asleep and snoring. For a moment he yearned to wake the man up, tell him everything, but instead hurried into the yard. There was no point in telling him anything. Even if you could change the future, his father was not the man to change anything.

Mark ran through Johnson's Junk Yard, cut across fields, scrambled through an alley, reemerged into the streets in time to see the front of the demonstration reach Vernor at the boundary between Detroit and Dearborn. The sight took his breath away.

They had talked about thousands, a big number that no one took seriously, but there they were, an army of the unemployed, the poor, the starving, the curious, the troublemakers, the communists, the fledgling union organizers, men, women and children, jammed into the street, their pace slowed to a crawl by the sheer weight and press of their humanity. The line stretched seemingly to the horizon as if it started in the cold March sky itself, pouring not from the city, but from the low-hanging charcoal clouds and surging through a valley formed by the storefronts on either side. Red banners rippled in the wind, clenched fists formed exclamation points in the air.

Along the sidewalks and in the side streets, Detroit police steadied their horses or patrolled the crowd on foot, content to watch and wait.

But no one worried about the Detroit police. Just beyond the front line of the march was Dearborn, the company town, where, Mark guessed, the Dearborn police waited. If the marchers made it past that gauntlet, then there were still the Service Department goons waiting at the plant.

Mark struggled through the crowd of curious onlookers and intersected the head of the march. Joey Hanson was there, as Mark knew he would be, walking next to his father, and the twins behind their red-haired father. Joey caught sight of him and waved him over, pushed against his father's leg to make room for Mark.

Now he was in the march, walking toward the plant, trying not to look at the police lining the sidewalks and their blue steel revolvers.

Someone was going to die.

"Where's your old man?" Joey said.

Mark looked past him, yanked on Mr. Hanson's leg. He had to tell someone.

"We'd better stop," he said. "Please."

Mr. Hanson peered down at him. "Why's that?"

"They know everything. They're waiting. There's gonna be trouble."

"How do you know that?"

"Someone's going to die."

"Nobody's going to die."

"Yes they are, please...."

Like a guillotine, the sound of someone calling his name stopped him cold. Lumbering toward them, red faced and breathless, was his father.

No, no, no, go away, go away....

His father trudged toward them, glared down at him, fists clenched, voice high pitched and hysterical. "I told you not to come here. I told you!" He grabbed Mark's arm. "Come home right now."

For a moment, Mark yielded, let his father take him toward safety.

Pushed on by the crowd, they reached the city limits of Dearborn. "Christ," Mr. Hanson snapped.

They faced a wall of police, blocking Miller Road, rifles at the ready. Mark stared, amazed at the rifles, cold steel lethal things, not like the BB gun the Mellon Twins owned. Dread, just as cold as the rifles, burrowed into Mark's gut.

A metallic voice came at them, half garbled by a megaphone, telling them to turn back, telling them it was unlawful.

Men in the front row yelled, "Keep going. We're not breaking any laws."

The metal voice shouted that they had no permit.

"Screw the permit," men yelled back.

Mr. Hanson said, "You boys move back so you're not in the front row."

With shock, Mark realized his father wasn't dragging him home, but was being shoved forward by the crowd.

Mark pulled at him. "We've got to go, we've got to go now, please!"

His father glared ahead at the line of police. "Bastards," he said. Mark saw his father glance at Mr. Hanson, saw his father's jaw set with anger, knew in that moment that his father had changed his mind, that he could not leave his friends in the face of danger.

"No, no, we have to go home now!" Mark pleaded.

A concussion slammed into him, sent him stumbling backward. He lost his grip on his father's hand. Something whizzed over their heads. More concussions, then canisters exploded around them. Within seconds the marchers and the street and the police vanished within a fog as thick as the smoke from the blast furnaces.

Then Mark thought he was dying. His eyes stung as if someone had poured

alcohol

into them, a fist crushed his chest. He fought to stay on his feet. Bodies crashed into him. People screamed and bolted in their blind panic. Mark knew if he fell he would be trampled.

Blind, he lurched forward, finally grasped brick with his fingers. When he opened his eyes, he was out of the cloud, supporting himself on a building wall.

Through his tears he saw people staggering through the cloud, running and falling in their blind panic. More tear gas canisters exploded on the street. The demonstration, a few seconds ago seeming as large and as immovable as a mountain, shattered into a myriad of groups all bolting in different directions.

Please let this be it, Mark thought.

Marchers ran past him, swearing, rubbing furiously at their eyes, headed for the alleys and open fields.

Mark realized everyone was still headed for the plant, only they were hopping fences and charging down side streets and cutting across open fields in so many groups that the police had no chance to stop them.

Desperately he looked for his father, Mr. Hanson, anyone familiar, but saw only angry, red, unknown faces blurring through the tears that would not cease.

For the first time Mark wondered if his father was about to die and he was the one foretold by the stranger. He gagged, his head swam. Then he ran.

Mark followed the mob along the nearest alley. In the streets, the police scrambled to head them off. Hoofs galloped along asphalt, sirens blared. Tear gas canisters shattered the windows of a dry goods store.

Mark's tears finally dried, leaving grime coated across his face. His arms pumping like pistons, he bolted ahead of the marchers, turned into Miller Road, almost ran headlong into a line of fire trucks blocking the street and the entrance to the plant.

"Shit," someone yelled.

Only the trucks had been deployed to block the street, no one guessing that the demonstrators would come from all sides.

Everywhere in Miller Road people were running through the spray of water as hard as cannon balls from the fire hoses. Those closest to the fire trucks were upended and sent crashing to the street, but from the fields and alleys to the sides, beyond the reach of the hoses, the marchers swarmed and overran the trucks. Firefighters toppled from their trucks as the fragmented mob now reunited into a river surging down Miller Road toward the Ford Plant.

To one side of Miller Road was the parking lot and to the other was the fortress-like plant. An overpass spanned Miller Road from the lot to the plant like a drawbridge spanning a moat. As Mark ran he saw the figures in suits

high

on the overpass waiting with more hoses. Torrents flowed from the heights in the cold air. There was no choice. The demonstrators charged through the manmade waterfall, the freezing water hitting them like fists.

Some turned back, most ran on.

Mark instinctively held his breath as he crashed through the torrent. The cold convulsed him with a massive spasm, threatened to knock him out, but somehow he managed to stay conscious and ran until he was clear of the overpass.

By the time he reached the plant gates there were too many people jammed up against the fence for Mark to get close. He heard people shouting, managed to get a glimpse of a short man in a suit charging out of the gate and screaming at one of the marchers.

Mark desperately searched for his father, screamed his name, his voice drowned out by other shouts and screams.

Then he saw the stranger at the fringe of the mob, holding up his black box. Mark elbowed his way through the crowd toward him. Maybe the stranger could explain it to him. Maybe the stranger could make it all right.

As Mark inched his way forward, the man caught a glimpse of him. The man screamed at him, waved him away. As Mark tried to get closer, the man lowered the box and started toward Mark.

"Who is it?" Mark screamed, but his words were lost in the chaos. "Is it me? Is it my dad?"

A flurry of movement at the gate caught Mark's eye. A chunk of asphalt sailed from the crowd, graceful as a dove as it arced through the air, then hurtling downward, gaining frenzied speed, crashing into the plant man's head. The little man screamed, hands flying to his face, crimson seeping through his fingers. He lurched forward, grabbed the marcher for support, then, in each other's arms like lovers, they both toppled to the ground. The marcher staggered to his feet, only, as he stood, his back suddenly arched and his mouth opened in a soundless scream.

Like an echo of the scream, Mark heard the shots: machine guns. Bullets screamed past the mob's head, ricocheted against the fence, the roar of the guns finally drowned out by the screaming people. Bodies crashed into Mark, sending him sprawling as people bolted. There was no hope of fighting his way to his feet, so Mark curled up and threw his arms over his head and waited out the stampede, repeating no, no, no to himself.

When he dared to open his eyes he saw a body, dead eyes watching him, shattered mouth still open to scream. There were others.

Mark climbed to his feet and stared around him, dazed, too shocked to think of much. Abstractly he counted four bodies. Other marchers, wounded and dazed, lay in the street, their limbs twisted into rag doll shapes. Everywhere people bolted for safety. Sirens wailed a banshee's scream.

And then he saw his father, standing, staring about him, looking dazed and sickened. Mark ran to him, almost knocked the man over as he threw his arms around him.

"Thank God," his father said and held him.

It was all right, it was....

And then it wasn't all right.

Men stood around them, Mr. Hanson and Mr. Mellon and others, furious, shouting.

One man held a lead pipe, another held a coil of rope.

Mr. Hanson knelt before Mark and grabbed his arm. "How did you know?" he yelled.

"You knew something was going to happen. Who told them?"

Mark's father pushed Mr. Hanson aside. "Leave him alone."

"He knew. He tried to warn us. There are dead and dying all around us! We'll find the son of a bitch who told them and we'll kill the bastard!"

Mark looked up at the men, then looked past them. The stranger was with them, holding up his black box as if it were a camera, eyes wide, expectant, waiting.

Mark knew, saw the future as clearly as the dead bodies in Miller Road. It all made sense. Randy Randolph was about to die. Mark would tell the angry betrayed

men and they would go after Randy and Randy's son would grow up to exact his terrible revenge on the world. And from the look on his face, Mark knew his father's rage would lead the mob.

This was Mark's part to play. He was about to tell them Randy had brought this down on their heads. He had no choice. He had to betray Randy just as Randy had

betrayed him. The script had already been written.

His father knelt and looked him in the face. "Do you know something?" the man asked.

Mark looked his father in the eye and said, "No."

"How did you know?" Mr. Hanson said.

"I had this bad dream," Mark said.

Fear much larger than fear of the men or fear of the violence swept through Mark; it was fear of the universe, as if his lie went against the fabric of time itself.

Suddenly, he didn't care.

His father said, "He doesn't know anything. He's just scared. It could have been any one of their spies."

The mob seemed to deflate, their rage now impotent. With no one to take revenge on, they turned away and began to help the wounded.

Mark stared after them; people still raced back and forth, helping the wounded, firefighters and police restoring order and protecting the plant. Men in suits ran through the crowd, some snatching away cameras from reporters, others taking pictures of the demonstration's leaders. He saw one man kneel and hold up his cumbersome 4x5 camera and take a shot of his father stooping to help a fallen man. That picture would be analyzed and Mark's father would again lose his job. Detached, Mark watched the scene play out as if it were a news reel; he seemed to inhabit a different world.

For a moment, he struggled to identify something, as if he had forgotten a very important fact, but sensed its presence the way a disturbing thought lingers at the edge of consciousness before bursting full blown into the mind.

Then the memory came of a man in an aviator's jacket telling him odd stories about travel in time and warning him of the doom that now came true before the gates to the plant.

He wasn't sure if it was a memory of a man or a dream, then he was positive the stranger existed, only now he was part of Mark's past and the past, as always, no longer existed, just as Mark was now part of the stranger's past. But the stranger had come from the future to record the past. Mark changed the man's past and thus there was no reason in the future for the stranger to return to the Ford Rouge Plant in the year 1939. and so he had not come from the future, only he had come from the future, a future that was no longer Mark's future, but the future in a world that had suddenly careened at an angle away from Mark's world.

With a kind of demented clarity, Mark saw himself in some other universe betraying Randy Randolph even as he knew for sure that he had not betrayed Randy Randolph, except that his memory of the stranger proved that he had done both simultaneously.

He knew this was true even as he could not understand how it could be true. At first he thought he should be afraid, but the fear never came. Instead he felt a jazz band of giddiness erupt into full swing in his head. If this is what the universe is like then anything is possible.

For the first time in years, Mark did not feel ashamed.

He ran through the carnage on Miller Road, trying not to laugh out loud, to help

his father with the wounded and to tell him that if he was smart he'd buy some of those empty fields over by Henderson's Drug Store because one day they'd be worth a fortune when the future came.