

GENERATION GAP

by

Stanley Schmidt

I. 1967

Like most people, Robby Lerman at fifteen knew far better than his elders about many things. Unlike most people, Robby did something about it.

It started, in a sense, the day of his brother Harry's funeral. Robby hardly heard the minister's droning, and the overwhelming smell of flowers almost put him to sleep. His eyes couldn't leave the closed, flag-draped casket, and his mind roamed freely over all the years leading up to this moment.

He hadn't actually seen Harry for over a year, since before he went off to the war that was never declared. Because of what happened over there, he would never see him again; but in his mind's eye he saw him over and over. A towering Harry leading a tiny, stumbling Robby across the fields, pointing out thistles and grasshoppers and awakening in him a wonder at life. A less towering Harry trading outrageous puns with a somewhat older Robby across a dinner table heaped with fried chicken and corn on the cob and fresh biscuits, convulsing their parents with mirth. In the early days Robby missed half the puns, but as he grew he understood more and more, and started making his own. He remembered long talks in which he tried to make Harry feel the excitement of frontiers that were opening up in space, and Harry tried to make Robby feel the excitement of running a football eighty yards for a winning touchdown. Neither ever fully succeeded, but that never changed the respect and affection each held for the other.

Only the war had begun to do that. They both read the papers; their social studies teachers saw to that. But Robby saw what it meant more clearly than Harry. Robby had felt a growing fear that Harry would be drafted and end up . . . as he had. Harry had never seemed to care. Every time Robby tried to tell him how he worried about him, Harry had shrugged it off. "If my country needs me," he had said, "I'll go. If I don't come back -- them's the breaks."

And so he had gone. And this -- Robby stared at the polished mahogany box through moist, unfocused eyes -- was how he had come home.

He helped his father and uncles and cousins carry the box, though he was still too small to be much help. Sleet stung his face as they stood by the grave, listening to useless platitudes and the tolling bell in the tower. A clever mechanism started lowering Harry into the ground, and the minister led everyone away so they wouldn't have to watch.

And then it was over -- for Harry. Robby sat in the back seat of the Pontiac as Dad drove past the city limits and along arrow-straight roads to the family farm. Nobody said anything until they were out in the country, driving past flat fields still too frozen to plow. Then Mom wiped away a tear and said softly, "Well, at least we can be proud of him."

That broke something in Robby. Ever since the messenger had brought the bad news, he'd been unsure whether what he felt was more sadness or loss, frustration or despair, anger or fear. Now they all came

bursting out at once. "But there was no *reason* for him to die!" he half- wailed.

His mother turned around to stare at him. "What did you say, young man?"

"There was no reason for him to die. Weren't you listening to that Mark Twain show on television last week? That could have been written the morning it was broadcast!"

Mom was frowning deeply. "I don't see what--"

"Only when the republic's life is in danger should a man uphold his government when it's wrong," Robby quoted. "The republic's life is not in danger. The government is wrong. The government killed Harry."

"*Robby!*"

"Well, son," his father drawled, "I know it must seem that way to you now. We're all very upset. But I think the government knows better than we can--"

"We have no business there," Robby interrupted. "It's not our war."

Mom started to cry. Dad said, "I don't think this is the time to discuss this."

"Well, I won't let it happen to me. If I have to go to Cana--"

"I said, this is not the time to discuss this. Robby, shut up."

Robby shut up, but he had to chew hard on his lower lip to keep from bursting into tears himself. Nobody said anything until they pulled into the driveway and parked next to the big old yellow brick house a few minutes later. Then Robby ran upstairs, locked himself in his room, and let the dam break.

Half an hour later he had calmed down just a bit. "Can't they see?" he thought incredulously. "Do they just swallow everything they hear? How did they get that way?"

Lying on his stomach on the bed, he turned on the radio on the bookshelf headboard, hoping to find something that would help calm him. But station after station had nothing but drivel. In the midst of some inanely cheerful songster crooning, "I'm going to sit right down and write myself a letter," he shut it off in disgust.

He didn't do it then, but that was the germ of the idea. His alienation from parents and government grew slowly but inexorably with each passing month. It wasn't that he loved either any less than he ever had. Indeed, it was because he loved them so much that he felt such sadness at the ways they had changed. "Who is the country?" Mark Twain had asked through Hal Holbrook on television that night. "Is it the government? In a republic, the government is merely a servant -- a temporary one. Its function is to obey orders, not originate them."

That seemed to Robby one of those "self-evident truths" they liked to talk about in social studies classes. So how was it that on the same day he had watched that show -- probably the most electrifying hour he had ever spent in front of the tube -- the President had unilaterally announced that he was abolishing draft deferments for graduate students? Didn't *Congress* have to decide things like that?

I m scared, Robby thought. *Do we have a dictator on our hands?*

Not that Robby was a graduate student, but he would be eventually. He had had his eyes on the stars, literally and figuratively, from a very early age. He vividly remembered the news of *Sputnik's* launch. He was only in the first grade then, and assumed that was why he couldn't understand the reactions he heard

from adults. "How horrible that the Russians should do it before us," they said, while young Robby exulted, "Yes! People can go to the stars!"

And he would help make it happen. His science and math teachers all agreed that he had "the right stuff." Until quite recently, his mind had held a clear, bright vision of his future, and just assumed that that was how it would be. Robby -- no, by then he'd probably call himself "Rob" -- Rob Lerman, astrophysicist, would help build the great rockets that would help mankind hatch from the egg of Earth and go forth to become all it could be. Perhaps someday he would even ride the rockets himself. In the meantime, he would come home from the lab each day to a family that was everything a family should be: two brilliant, loving parents guiding their even more brilliant children on a steady course toward independence, creativity, and thorough competence to handle whatever life dealt them.

He even had their mother picked out: Rachel Flanagan, who sat three rows over in English and at the front of the next row in science. She was pretty, in a quiet sort of way, with long, light brown hair and barely visible freckles; but what really attracted Robby, trite as it sounded, was her mind: she had one. She didn't say much in class, and when she did he sometimes had to strain to hear her. Most of her contemporaries seemed to him airheads, with no interests beyond hairstyles and dances, but Rachel had thoughts worth hearing.

He had never actually talked to her, face to face, one on one. A couple of times he had almost worked up the nerve to say something to her between classes, but each time the sight of another boy talking to her had sent him into hasty retreat. But the right moment would come. When it did, one thing would lead to another and they would live happily ever after.

Raising their own kids right would be a start, but Robby had a far larger vision than that. When the road to the stars opened up -- with his help -- the few intelligent, sane people in the world would go off and found their own colony somewhere, free of the stupidities and lunacies that had wrecked every civilization yet on Earth.

But if this war went on, would he even live long enough to do any of that -- or would he, like Harry, be drafted and killed in a war where he had no business? Would his country turn into a place with no room or tolerance for dreams?

Might he have to go somewhere else?

He didn't want to. The prospect was scary, and there was too much that he'd hate to leave behind. But he began listening more intently whenever he heard about draft-prone students going to Canada. He might have to consider that himself in a couple of years. There were good colleges in Canada, too.

At the merest hint of that, Dad blew up, calling Robby a coward. That hurt. Couldn't Dad understand that it would take as much courage to leave everything behind and embark on an uncertain and unpopular course as to blindly follow orders? Couldn't he or Mom understand that Robby was only trying to build the best possible future for himself and the family he would someday have, no matter how painful the sacrifices that required?

Did they ever have dreams like this? he asked himself after an angry confrontation one bright day in early spring. *How did they get to be the way they are?*

That phrase sent a shiver of *déjà vu* through him, casting his mind back to the day they buried Harry. Now, with the added wisdom of an additional year, he discovered an unnerving new insight. His parents *must* have had dreams like this, but somehow had lost them and forgotten what they were like.

That led him to an even more chilling question: *How do I make sure I don't get like that?*

Suddenly that seemed like a real, terribly urgent problem. As his mind continued to replay that painful scene from a year ago, it got to the part where the song on the radio had made him reach out angrily to shut it off. But now he heard in the song's words an answer to his problem.

With grim determination he made sure the door of his room was securely closed. Then, sitting down at his crowded desk with stationery pad, envelope, and pen, he began the most important letter he had ever written.

March 22, 1968

Dear Rob,

I don't know if you'll remember writing this, but please read it carefully. I'm writing because of a painful rift that's opened up between me and Mom and Dad lately. I guess it's that "generation gap" we're always hearing about. But I think I've figured out why generation gaps happen: as people get older, they forget things that were obvious when they were younger.

Now that you're almost as old as Mom and Dad were when I wrote this. I want to remind you of some things. You may have heard some of what I'm going to tell you from your own kids and shrugged it off. But you can't shrug it off from me. This is *you* talking, Rob, and if you cast your mind back maybe you can remember how you felt when. . .

He put the pen down an hour later, drained. He read the letter over once, then sealed it an envelope and addressed it:

To Rob Lerman
CONFIDENTIAL AND URGENT
To Be Opened On My 35th Birthday

Then he buried it deep in a box full of old rocket drawings and such, its exterior covered with warnings like PRIVATE -- KEEP OUT and TOP SECRET. He wouldn't want Mom or Dad to stumble onto it, but he trusted them not to dig in his secret place, and he trusted himself to find it when the time came.

Then he sealed the box, returned it to the back of his closet, and forgot about it. He never dreamed that he might get an answer -- until he did.

II. 1993

Even after all these years, Robert Lerman didn't need to think much about the straight Indiana roads that led to his parents' house. That was good, because he had too much on his mind to give them much attention. He noticed once-familiar houses and the black skeletons of scattered late November trees just enough to know when to turn. Most of his mind was back at work.

Pereira, he thought over and over. *Pereira, Pereira, Pereira! You're my best physicist. Why can't you concentrate on something we can sell to the folks with the money, instead of pie in the sky?*

Part of Robert -- a part that had once been far more active, but now seldom stirred in its sleep -- had to admit that there was a certain fascination, even excitement, in what Pereira wanted to try. If he was right, it could open up space in a way that poor old sleepy NASA could hardly imagine. But that was the problem: if they couldn't imagine it, they wouldn't fund it. One of the hardest lessons he'd had to learn to become a successful CEO had been that you figure out what you can get funding for, and don't waste time on what you *can't*.

So how could he keep from losing Pereira, and at the same time keep him working on things that paid? It

was a vexing problem, on which he should be concentrating all his efforts. This call from his mother could hardly have come at a worse time -- but he owed her, and he didn't want anyone else going through his things.

So here he was, speeding past denuded cornfields and finally turning into the old gravel driveway. He would do what he must, and get back as quickly as he could.

He greeted Mom with a perfunctory kiss and they traded a few polite words. He wished fleetingly that they could regain more of the warmth they had shared when he was small, but it was much too late for that. Now he could only give her what help he could and try to ease her remaining years. It saddened him to see how she had begun to shrink and shrivel, and how visibly the process had accelerated since Dad died last year. She was right: she needed to get out of this big old house, even though she had not yet found a buyer for it and the farm. No matter; she *had* found a cozy apartment, and Robert would at least help clear this place out and get her settled there.

She fixed chicken soup and biscuits for lunch, and they talked of Gloree and the kids and his job as they ate. The old cuckoo clock in the front room ticked a quiet accompaniment, and when the small bird came out and uttered its trademark twice Robert pushed himself away from the table. "Well, that was delicious, Mom, but I'd better get down to work. Is the heat on in my room?"

"Oh, yes, I saw to that last night." She climbed with him to the second-floor bedroom he'd shared with Harry. "Everything's just the way you left it, except I brought in a big wastebasket. If you need anything else, just holler."

She went out and left him alone. With a sigh he opened the closet, still full of clothes he hadn't worn in decades. He pulled those out unceremoniously and piled them on the bed. Then he pulled out several boxes from the back, sat down cross-legged on the floor, and started digging through his past.

They brought back memories, all right. He started with some boxes he'd filled himself with early school papers and his first scrawled drawings of spaceships. As he worked through the years, watching them improve, he debated whether any of this was worth keeping. At best, its interest was historic. Would anyone ever care? He'd already resigned himself to being no more than a footnote, if that, in histories written for the world.

Gloree might be interested, and Jerry and Kathy; but would he really want to show them such intimate glimpses of such an early him? Not now; but he could always take the boxes with him and decide later. . .

Occasionally, something he found gave him a small twinge of wistful melancholy. There were school papers there that impressed him surprisingly -- math and science papers marked A+, with comments like, "Keep at it and you'll go far!" He found himself thinking, *I could have been a real scientist, actually doing great things instead of just supervising them! If the war hadn't. . .*

He tried sternly to squelch the restless stirrings. The aroma of slow-simmering stew and dumplings drifted up the stairs, evoking the warmest parts of his past.

He came to a notebook where academic notes were interspersed with jotted notes about times and places of antidraft rallies -- and childish fantasies written in a private code about things he hoped someday to do with Rachel Flanagan.

He put the first one down, grinning with amusement. *Rachel Flanagan*, he thought. *I haven't thought about her in a coon's age! I wonder what ever became of her?*

He found a few more references to her, reminding him that he never *had* traded more than a few words with her. There were letters from Harry in Viet Nam that brought back real pain, and then a steadily growing barrage of letters from Gloree. Those were heady days! He could hardly believe that *she*, the definitive glamor queen, had come on to him, the nerd *par excellence*. But she had, in no uncertain terms. The sheer intoxication of her attention had led to a whole series of surprising turns in his life: drifting away from the antidraft and antiwar movements and into a more conventional sort of patriotism, even letting himself be drafted and going off To Serve His Country.

Unlike Harry, he'd lived to come home. He hadn't even been wounded, at least physically. But he had seen enough to scar his mind, and when he came home, it no longer worked quite the way it had. Now, in spite of himself, he found it pondering disturbing "what-ifs"? If the war *hadn't* interrupted his schooling, might he now be a genuine, hands-on scientist -- maybe even a creative and important one? If he hadn't met Gloree, might he have stuck to his original determination to stay out of the war at all costs? If -- *Stop that!* he shouted inside his mind. *It can't do you any good to wonder about that now!* He slammed that notebook shut and reached out for a new box -- one he didn't recognize.

He held it for a long time, a plain bronze-tinted shoebox with his name -- Robby Lerman -- written on top. But the writing was in a neat feminine hand, and the printed label said the box had held a pair of girl's shoes. Robby had never had a sister, and Robert found himself oddly reluctant to open the box. Finally he stood up, carried it downstairs, and held it out to his mother with a frown. "Mom," he asked quietly, "what is this? Where did it come from?"

"Oh, that," she said. "Didn't I ever tell you? I thought I sent you the clipping. You remember Rachel Flanagan, who went to school with you? She died in a terrible accident while she was still in college, poor girl. Her mother found this box with a note saying Rachel wanted you to have it if anything happened to her. So I saved it for you."

"Oh," said Robert, somehow keeping his voice steady. "Thank you." But he heard his heart pounding with unexpected emotion. *Rachel's dead?* he thought numbly, wondering why that should hit him so hard now. *And she wanted me to have this? Why would she want me to have anything?*

He turned quickly and took the box back upstairs.

What he found inside was astonishing. Clippings by and about Rachel from her college paper alternated with diary-like essays in the same handwriting as his name on the box lid. Together they formed a vivid, intimate portrait of her. In a half hour of reading things she'd written, and things others had written about her, Robert came to feel that he knew her better than most people he'd known face to face. He almost wished he hadn't, because the picture that emerged was very close to what he had imagined her to be. She'd gone to college somewhere in Canada, and had done very well in her studies despite a broad spectrum of activities from writing for school publications to participating in the antidraft movement. He came away fighting the feeling that she really would have been a better soul-mate for him than Gloree -- and might well have given him the support he needed to become what he really wanted instead of a mere administrator.

The last item in the box was a handwritten note, short and to the point -- and to him.

August 19, 1970

Dear Rob,

If you're reading this, something's happened to me. That's OK; it's the risk we all run, every day. I hope you don't think it's too silly that I asked Mom to give you these papers, but I wanted you at least once in your life to know

what I never had the nerve to tell you in mine. I always thought you were pretty special, Rob, all the way through school. I always wanted to get to know you better, always wished you would show some sign of wanting to get to know me. But you never did, and I could never bring myself to make the first move. That's my one regret. but it's a big one. I think I could have done it now, if we were both in the same place. But I had to get away from the kids I grew up with to start developing the self-confidence to do things like that.

Anyway, I wanted you to know how I felt, and to get to know at least a little someone who always thought the world of you, even if it's too late now. I wish you a wonderful life, Rob, and a much longer one than mine.

Love,
Rachel

Robert found himself fighting back tears. Not only had she really been what he'd been looking for, but she had been as interested in him as he in her. It *could have been* -- if they hadn't both been too shy and stupid and awkward to say so.

But none of that mattered now. It was water over the dam. And in the real now, not the might-have-been, he had a life to get on with.

So he squeezed the incipient emotions out, put Rachel's box back together, and returned to sorting through his closet so he could get back to Gloree and work. Five minutes later he came to the second bombshell: a sealed envelope addressed in his own hand.

To Rob Lerman
CONFIDENTIAL AND URGENT
To Be Opened On My 35th Birthday

A bit late for that now, he thought with amusement, since he was already past his forty-first -- but then, he'd long since forgotten he'd written it. He could only guess at what he'd written that he'd thought might interest him 20 or 30 years later. *Well*, he thought, slitting the envelope, *let's see what the kid has to say* ...

The opening grabbed him and dragged him back to the past with unexpected force.

Dear Rob,

I don't know if you'll remember writing this, but please read it carefully. I'm writing because of a painful rift that's opened up between me and Mom and Dad lately. I guess it's that "generation gap" we're always hearing about. But I think I've figured out why generation gaps happen. . .

Sure you have, Robert thought -- but he kept reading, with unexpectedly close attention to every word.

. . . when you were my age. I trust by now you're well on your way to a Nobel prize, are happily married to the right woman (you know who!), have those kids, and are doing a better job with them than "our" parents did with "us." Even so, I want to give you some advice, for your own good.

Something happens to people, Rob; don't let it happen to you. Mom and Dad have forgotten what it's like to dream of making a better life instead of just accepting the one they inherited. They've forgotten that young love can be a strong, thoughtful thing, instead of trivial infatuation. They joke so much about "puppy love" that I'm afraid to let them suspect I care about somebody who might not care about me. They live through their kids instead of having interests of their own, helping their kids do the same, and sharing their

different kinds of enjoyment. So when they lose their kids, whether to a stupid war or by drifting apart, they don't have much left. I see that happening already: it scares me to think how little will be left by the time you read this. If you have kids, remember they're people. Remember how you felt at their ages -- but keep a life of your own, too.

Perhaps worst of all, Mom and Dad have lost their senses of humor. They've forgotten how to have fun -- and that's tragic.

I still don't understand *how* these things happen, Rob, but be warned that they can. Watch out for the danger signs. Please don't let them happen to you. Try to remember what you knew when you *were* young.

The Ghost of Robert Past

That one did move him to tears. Reading it, he did remember how young Robby had felt when he wrote it. He could see a fair measure of truth and even wisdom in it -- and he could see more "danger signs" than he liked to admit in his present life.

And yet. . . .

OK, young whippersnapper, he thought, you've told me a thing or two that I needed to hear. But I've got a thing or two I could tell you, too. How I wish I could answer you, tell you all I've been through and all I've learned since then!

But of course that's impossible.

Or is it? he found himself thinking as he drove home two days later.

Robert had been glad to see Mom again, but even gladder to get away from the old house. That place was haunted, as surely as if it had been crawling with ectoplasmic ghosts!

As he put distance between it and him, the world seemed to return to normal -- except that a long drive alone provides a lot of opportunity for a mind to ponder what's been dumped into it lately. Part of that, of course, included the unnerving letters from himself and from Rachel, and the unhealthy speculations they'd stirred up about what might have been. But the theme he kept coming back to was his fleeting wish that he could answer young Robby's letter.

Obviously, he'd thought at the time, that was quite impossible, a mere idle fantasy. But now, headed back toward work, his thoughts returned to the crazily impractical research Pereira wanted to do. Was it *really* as crazily impractical as he'd been assuming?

Hadn't Pereira said something about its implying the possibility of motion in time as well as space?

He was going to have to have a serious talk with that man.

Antonio João Pereira looked like a carefully assembled blend of half a dozen races, which was hardly surprising for a Brazilian: broad nose, high cheekbones, straight brown hair with a hint of red in it and combed straight back. He also looked a little uncomfortable in Robert's guest chair, which was how Robert preferred it. He was supposed to be in control here, and that would happen more easily here in his big executive office than in Pereira's lab.

"I want to make it clear at the outset," Robert said carefully, looking the physicist right in the eye, "that I'm not saying we're going to pursue this thing of yours. You're well aware of my reservations about it. But I am willing to talk about it just a bit more, just on the off chance that we could find a way to do

some part of it. Your idea, in layman's language, is to create a chamber in which you can force the evolution of a confined quantum system so that the wave functions peak at a desired point in spacetime?"

"Yes, sir," said Pereira, in a soft voice that caressed English into something vaguely resembling his native Portuguese. "Think of it as loading the dice by the application of carefully selected fields to the system in the chamber. The practical result -- and I emphasize practical -- is to cause the system you put in the box to appear whenever and wherever you wish it to. In effect, it offers the possibility of a completely new kind of space travel, potentially much better than rockets. If we can reduce this to practice, it will be more like an aimable matter transmitter -- with no need for a receiver. And since *everything* is a quantum system, in principle the transmitter could move whatever we want to. It could make rocketry obsolete, and give us the stars directly."

Robert frowned hard. "But will it work? You've admitted it would cost a bundle to set up even your prototype, and I can't afford to gamble that unless the odds are quite favorable. I've read some of the thinking other physicists have done along these lines, and they all seem to stress that what they're describing is simply a thought experiment, beyond the reach of present technology."

"They're wrong," Pereira said matter-of-factly. "They haven't pursued their thoughts far enough. Let me remind you, Mr. Lerman, that just a few years ago essentially no physicists talked seriously about the possibility of any form of teleportation, time travel, or faster-than-light travel. Now the journals are full of those things. Just 'thought experiments,' as you say, but nonetheless serious discussions of real possibilities that might someday be practical."

"The remarkable thing is that none of those proposals even depend on radically new physics. They're new possibilities that have been implicit all along in theories that we've had for decades. I've simply gone a little farther down one such path than anyone else. If you get me the funding, I *can* reduce it to practice. That will make Rocketech the undisputed leader in space, so far ahead of everyone else that they'll never catch up except by buying a ride on our technology."

Put that way, it sounded almost irresistible. It sounded like the sort of breakthrough that Robert, back when he was Robby, had dreamed of someday announcing to a CEO from the other side of the desk. The credit he could take by supporting it from this side could be *almost* as satisfying, but he had to be very careful. He hadn't reached this position by succumbing easily to glowing speeches. He would have to subject the hard details of Pereira's proposal to review by his peers -- or as close to his peers as they could come up with. But if their report was favorable, it just *might* be a good enough bet for him to back without unduly jeopardizing his job. "So what would you need?" he asked.

"A place for the enclosure and the associated lab equipment. Preferably not too close to anything else. Funds to build all that--"

"How big?" Robert interrupted. "Would it fit in an ordinary house?"

"That would be about the minimum," said Pereira. "The actual size would depend on how big an object we wanted to move. Eventually, for practical applications, we'd need something bigger. But for a proof of principle, with a very small test object. . . yes, I think, that would do."

"I see." Robert leaned back in his leather swivel chair. "Well, Pereira, let me tell you how it looks to me. I do have some discretionary funds that I can use for 'blue sky' research. I must confess this has always seemed a bit *too* blue sky to me, and I'm still a little leery of it. But if a review panel -- don't worry, it will all be in house -- thinks it has a fighting chance, I'll agree that the potential rewards seem worth a bit of a gamble. Give me a package I can show them, and we may -- just may -- give you a chance at that proof of principle."

Pereira beamed. "You'll have it this afternoon, sir, and you won't regret it. Thank you, Mr. Lerman!"

"Don't thank me yet," Robert cautioned. Pereira was almost to the door before Robert worked up the nerve to add offhandedly, "Did I understand you to say that your gizmo might move things in time as well as space?"

Pereira turned around as if looking for a trap, then grinned. "As a matter of fact, it does. I didn't want to stress that unless you brought it up. If *anything* sounds 'blue sky'. . ."

"I won't mention it to the Board," Robert promised. "Out of curiosity, though, what kinds of things could it move in time? People?"

"Oh, I don't think so," said Pereira. "Certainly not the little prototype I'm asking to build. Maybe never, though it would be rash to say that. We might be able to handle small objects."

"Like this?" Robert waved a Federal Express package from his desk.

"Well, maybe. It's a long shot, but it's really too early to tell."

"Yes, of course. That's not our main goal anyway." *Officially*. "Well, thanks for your time, Pereira. You give me a quick answer, and I'll try to give you a quick answer. Please close the door on your way out."

As soon as Pereira was gone, Robert called his mother in her new apartment. "I may have good news for you," he said after the obligatory pleasantries. "You haven't sold the house yet, have you? Well, don't. Put it on hold for a few days. I may have a buyer for you. Me."

It took a few years to get the prototype ready to test, but they were invigorating years -- the best Robert had spent in a long time. Pereira's proposal sailed past the review panel (four company physicists, all sworn to secrecy) with surprising ease. Since the blue sky fund would cover most of it, at least at the beginning, Robert didn't have to tell the Board much about it. And then it was underway.

It felt wonderful, after years of bidding on trivial subcontracts for a lethargic and unimaginative space program, to be working on something with mind-stretching potential. Not having to report every detail to a committee, and even the risk of failure with disastrous consequences, added spice and made it still better. Robert was soon having more *fun* with his job than he'd ever had before, and that increased enjoyment spilled over into all aspects of his life.

Even so, through the daily exasperations and occasional minor triumphs, he never forgot his *personal* reason for pushing this project. From time to time he would jot himself a note, in a high-security file on his office hard disk, about what he was going to say in his letter. He wanted to get it just right, and it became increasingly clear that he was going to have to do it within strict wordage limits.

Putting the lab in his family's old house helped -- it reduced the need for both energy and precision in the *spatial* part of a transmission -- but the fact remained that temporal translations were going to be a lot more demanding than spatial ones. So when they eventually tried what he privately thought of as The Big One, he was going to have to put whatever he said into a very small, light package. Floppy disks were no good; young Robby would have no way to recognize, much less read them. Microfiche could carry a lot of message -- far more than Robert wanted to send -- but even that required special equipment that Robby might or might not bother to track down. So Robert was leaning toward simply typing what he could on an ordinary aerogramme -- one of those flimsy blue sheets that folded up to form its own envelope for airmail. With a 15-pitch typewriter, or one of the smaller fonts on his printer, that would be good for 1300 words or so.

Which 1300 words to type was the crucial question, but one he still had time to consider. To provide input to his subconscious, he occasionally read over some of the papers he'd dug out of the closet of his past -- including the clipping that detailed Rachel's accident, which Mom had insisted on digging up and giving to him before he left.

As the time drew nigh, and the first small spatial tests succeeded, Robert found himself thinking more and more about just what he was hoping to accomplish. He had convinced himself that the project actually had enough potential for space applications to *maybe* justify it to the Board and the stockholders; but he'd only become convinced after seeing the potential for answering Robby's letter. At times he worried that it was becoming an obsession. And he often wondered, *What if I do get a message back to him? Just what will that accomplish?*

When he tried to get Pereira's thoughts on the subject, he did it circumspectly, couching his questions in hypothetical terms. "So," he said casually one day over lunch, "suppose somebody sent a message back to somebody at an earlier time? What effect would it have on the present?"

Pereira shrugged, chewing the question as he chewed his asparagus. "We're really not sure," he said finally. "There are a number of possible interpretations of the formalism of quantum mechanics, and people still think of new ones from time to time. Personally, I lean toward the 'many worlds' model. At a particular point in time, there are two possibilities for the next instant. The guy gets a message from the future, or he doesn't. Each of those becomes a new branch of the original world-line, growing a whole new future."

"But which one's *real*?"

"Each of them is -- to the people who live in it. They're two separate universes existing and evolving side by side -- but not parallel, because they're diverging from a common origin."

Robert made a low whistle. "That's awesome, to think that our simple little experiment could create a whole new universe."

"Happens all the time," said Pereira. "Every time anybody or anything makes a choice. Take that guy who gets the message from the future. Does he do anything about it? If he tosses it and forgets it, that gives you one future. If he does what it says, that's another. If he thinks its advice is wrong and does something different, that's still another. They're all there, history branching and rebranching."

Robert had read things like that before, but he still found the answer vaguely unsatisfying. "So you're saying that it has *no* effect on the present the message was sent from, but just creates others that somehow exist alongside it but out of touch?"

"Maybe -- if that version of the many-worlds model happens to be right. Of course, it may not be. Maybe one of the other models is closer to reality -- or maybe the truth is some new one that nobody's even thought of yet. I can't even rule out the possibility that it would act like some kind of iterative process, where throwing a monkey wrench back into the past just changes the initial conditions and runs off a new version of the same future. But that one doesn't seem very likely to me. Of course, that could just be personal bias -- because that one would mean we physicists would have a lot more work to do, rebuilding our fundamental conceptual models." He looked thoughtful, then grinned. "That might not be so bad, at that. It ought to mean lots of employment opportunities!"

"If," said Robert, "anybody in that future thought that work was worth paying for." He didn't mean to be nasty, but Pereira's answer wasn't the one he'd hoped to hear. He could see now that an influential part of his mind was hoping that a letter to his younger self, suggesting actions that looked better in hindsight, might somehow change his present circumstances to ones more like his original goals. Circumstances, for

instance, in which he, not Pereira, was the one doing the real physics that might lead to a Nobel and the stars.

Okay, it was a long shot -- but even Pereira wasn't ruling it out. Robert would try not to get his hopes up, but he was more determined than ever to go through with the experiment.

Four months after that conversation, it was almost ready to go. Robert went to a stationery store, bought a package of aerogrammes, and rented a small electronic typewriter with a 15-pitch daisy wheel. He wrote the letter in his den, at home, when Gloree and the kids were out -- because some of the things in it could hurt them if they read it, and he didn't want that. He read it over once, then sealed it securely, stuck it in his jacket pocket, and went off to the lab.

He patiently endured a good deal of mild-mannered ribbing there. Everyone knew by now that he had insisted on providing the specimen for transmission, and when the technicians saw that it was an envelope addressed to a name suspiciously like his own, they were dying to know what it said. He fended off their requests gracefully but firmly. "Never mind what it says," he told them. "Just keep an eye on me afterward. If it *can* change the present, the results should affect me more than anybody else. So maybe you'll be able to tell if I've changed."

Not that he expected any such thing. The more he thought about it, the harder he found it to believe that dropping a new element into his past could do anything to the subsequent years he'd already lived. Nonetheless, he felt just a twinge as he watched the final preparations for the test. What if it could -- and the new life it created for him was one that had already ended before this moment?

Fortunately he didn't have time to dwell on it. Pereira had prepared his crews well. The countdown went off without a hitch, and the crucial instant was remarkably anticlimactic. Nothing obvious even happened outside the chamber.

But when the clock said enough time had elapsed, and Pereira was satisfied with several instrument readings, they reopened the chamber -- and found it empty.

III. 1969

Robby's answer came on a particularly fine day in the spring of his senior year. Even though the war was still on and looming closer and more personal than ever, Robby felt good when he came home from school that bright, flower-scented afternoon. School was going well; he had acceptances to two good colleges and two more pending; and he was no longer cowering passively before the menaces he saw around him. The war had grown increasingly controversial, dividing the country sharply between its supporters and its opponents. But Robby no longer felt like a lone voice whispering in the wilderness; now he often met with friends to demonstrate against the ongoing evil. There was a certain exhilaration in the mere fact of having taken a stand and gone forth publicly to defend it.

That afternoon he arrived home in high spirits and opened the door quickly, planning to change into something more comfortable and spend some time outside -- maybe take a walk down by the stream, where the willows had already leafed out nicely. But the door didn't open quite as quickly as expected, and the pile of mail it pushed across the carpet reminded him that Mom had gone shopping and must not be back yet. He looked quickly through it for more college acceptances or scholarship offers, then checked the door slot to make sure nothing was stuck there. Finding nothing of personal interest, he dumped the whole stack on Dad's desk and ran upstairs to change.

When he came back down, twenty minutes later, he saw the thin blue envelope in the middle of the living room floor.

He frowned; he was *sure* he'd picked up all the mail before. He picked it up and frowned even more. It was an aerogramme -- something he seldom saw. It was addressed to him, and it had no return address. It did have a stamp; but it wasn't canceled, the postage was ridiculously high, and the picture on it looked like some sort of spacecraft.

What was this thing? A joke?

Sunshine and willows forgotten, he flopped down on the couch and used his pocket knife to open the letter. Then he began to read.

13 June 2000

Dear Robby,

If you've peeked, you already know who this is from, but you probably don't believe it. Bear with me; I'll convince you.

My first proof is that I'm answering the letter you wrote to yourself on March 22, 1968. Who else knew about that? I'm not sure how long ago that was, for you. There's some intrinsic uncertainty about when this will be "delivered," and I wanted to be sure you got it after you wrote your letter. Otherwise it wouldn't make any sense to you. I read yours a few years later than I was supposed to, and I'm sorry about that. I'd say you did well to get it to me at all, with all that can and will happen in a couple of decades -- and it was a neat idea. Thanks for writing!

You're partly right that generation gaps are caused by people forgetting things as they age, but there's another part: they learn new things. You're sincere and earnest, but you lack experience. For example, I agree that it's sad and dangerous for people to live entirely through their kids, but it's an easy trap to fall into. At your age you can hardly imagine how much you have to give up and how completely your life revolves around kids, if you care about doing a good job with them. You will; I did. And Mom and Dad did better than you thought.

You also haven't yet grasped the fact that intelligent, caring people can sincerely disagree. I haven't changed my mind, at least not much, about what you/I said in the back seat of the car after Harry's funeral. But I very much regret saying it at that time and in that way. It hurt Mom and Dad terribly, and I don't know any way to take that back.

I appreciate your advice, but now let me give you some. Things didn't work out for me quite the way you expected; maybe it would be better if they had -- and maybe they can for you. More about that later . . .

I don't want to spoil all the surprises for you, but let me hit a few highlights of how you turned into me. You already know that I got more and more heavily into antidraft and antiwar activity, but still did well in school. I kept it up in college, and my professors all seemed to think I had great potential. It was a heady feeling. Despite all the time spent fighting the draft, I felt like the embryonic physicist in me was on a roll, picking up steam that would lead to really great things.

I remember a period when my classes started hitting me with much hairier math than I'd ever dealt with before. I felt like a mountain climber getting altitude sickness and wondering if I'd ever be able to make it to the top. But when I got past that I could look out and down and see the whole of physics spread out all around me. I could see how it all fit together, and how beautiful it was. And I could look up and see the summit, and know at last

that I was going to make it. If I'd kept climbing, Robby, I would have been a great scientist. I felt like I had a fire roaring in my brain, forging new understanding, and nothing could stop it.

Right now you're getting worried and asking yourself, "So what did?" I'll get to that. But you're also asking yourself, "What ever happened to Rachel Flanagan?" There's another proof that I am who I say I am. Who else ever knew about your crush on her? Certainly she didn't; you never did work up the nerve to tell her. There's another lesson for you, Robby: the most glorious dreams in the world aren't worth a damn unless you do something about them, and you can't always wait till later. Anyway, Rachel's going to go off to MacLaren College in Canada. Before that happens, you're going to meet a girl who's a lot less shy than either you or Rachel. Her name is Gloree Lindelle. She's tall, blonde, beautiful, popular, ambitious, and she's going to sweep you off your feet. She did me, and we wound up both going to IU and spending more and more time together.

This is where it starts getting weird -- the part you'll find hard to believe even if you've accepted the idea that you're writing to yourself from 30 years in the future. Gloree so bewitched me that when she started hinting that she didn't like my draft resistance, I listened. I drifted away from the rallies, and when I got a premature draft notice through a bureaucratic mixup, I didn't even fight it. I just went. Unlike Harry, I got through it all right, at least superficially. I wasn't hurt, but I saw enough combat to make me fear I'd been right in the first place and this really was a terrible thing that I should still be fighting against rather than in. But I fought that feeling down and muddled through.

Gloree waited for me. When I came home we got married and had a couple of kids, and on the whole we've been pretty happy -- but I couldn't do science any more. The fire had gone out. My grades began to slip, and with some nudging from Gloree I switched to an MBA program. Now I'm a CEO for a minor aerospace contractor; we do some work for NASA, but their program has lost steam just like I did. I shouldn't complain, but I'm not really satisfied. I keep thinking I could have done better if I'd gone a different way.

That's where you come in; you can. You do have the potential to become an important creative scientist, Robby; I could have if I'd kept up the momentum I had early in college and not let the war drain it off. And, much as I like Gloree, I think Rachel would have helped me better along the path I really wanted to follow.

Now the bombshell: she would have. She was just as shy as you, you nitwit, but had just as big a crush on you. Yes, I know. I read letters she left for me after she was killed. She was crazy about you, and she was everything you imagined she was. You would have loved her, and she would have loved you, if you'd given yourselves a chance.

Bombshell #2: Rachel's going to die in an accident unless you stop her. September 24, 1970; 2:32 PM, in front of the administration building at MacLaren. She'll be on her way to an antiwar meeting -- she became active in such things in college -- and she'll have so much on her mind that she'll do a stupid thing. She'll be looking straight ahead and walking fast, and dash out to cross the street without looking. She'll step right in front of a tank truck that won't be able to stop, and that will be the end of Rachel.

Unless you make sure it doesn't happen. Wouldn't that be changing the past? We don't know; there are a lot of uncertainties in our models. Even if it does, will it be changing my past -- or will it just create a new branch, on which another you/me will be happier than I am here? I don't know, but I'm willing

to do the experiment.

I do know this: if you're reading this and thinking about it, we've already proved that the past can be changed in at least one of those senses -- because I never got a reply to the letter you wrote.

So my advice is this: go for it. Go after Rachel now; don't let her die. She's better for you than Gloree. And if you can keep your momentum -- who knows what you can do with your dreams?

Think about it.

Robert

"Man," Robby said aloud, "this is really weird! Who'd pull a sick joke like this?" He looked again at the parts about his letter and his crush on Rachel, and added under his breath, "And how?"

Obviously somebody -- he couldn't imagine who -- had been into his private things and read the letter. That would have told them enough to pull this.

But when he ran up to his bedroom and dug into his closet, he found everything just as he'd left it. His letter to his future self was right where it belonged, its seal fully intact.

He found that oddly unnerving. Not that he *wanted* anyone else to read that letter -- except himself, twenty years hence -- but if they had, it would have explained at least part of what was going on. Finding the letter undisturbed left him without a clue.

He sat there for a long time, staring at the envelope he'd sealed himself and reading the mysterious aerogramme over and over. Could it be what it claimed? Could the things it foretold be true?

Rachel being killed? Some cheerleader type coming after him and remaking him in her own image? Him wimping out and turning soldier?

Ridiculous! And sick, he repeated to himself, his eyes drawn again to the part about Rachel's death.

A car crunched in the driveway and the screen door slammed downstairs. Either Mom and Dad had come home, and the other wouldn't be far behind. He hastily stuffed everything back into his treasure chest, ending with the letter from "Robert" -- which, by now, he had practically memorized. Then he threw the closet back together, donned nonchalance, and went downstairs. "Oh, hi, Mom," he said with a smile. "How'd it go?"

He thought a lot about Robert's letter in the coming months. He remained skeptical about its authenticity, but never came up with a better explanation for its detailed references to *his* letter and things he'd never confided anywhere else.

But if the aerogramme really was from Robert, that raised tantalizing and disturbing questions about how much of its content was true. Was Rachel really waiting for him to make the first move? Would she welcome it as eagerly as in his daydreams? Might it even save her life? It certainly was a temptation to try -- and if Robert had seen direct evidence and knew, what did he have to lose?

Did the axiom "Never trust anybody over thirty" apply even to his older self? He had to suspect it did. On the other hand, Robert's advice was supposedly based not only on his own experience, but on careful consideration of Robby's advice to him. That suggested that Robby's letter had actually had some of the effect he'd intended. If so, and he had an unexpected chance to draw some return benefit from it, shouldn't he?

He felt increasingly that he should. He began looking with real determination for a suitable moment to approach Rachel.

But before he quite got to it, something else happened that threw him off course.

Robby had not even thought about going to the prom; listening to his classmates' continual prattle about it was one of the more annoying features of spring. He didn't even think about asking Rachel there. He wasn't a party animal, and he doubted she was either. He was still plotting his move, but thinking more along the lines of a movie or a concert. Maybe even a picnic in the park.

So he was completely unprepared when a girl he hardly knew stopped him one day in the hall after lunch. He was walking along, minding his own business, when she materialized out of an alcove in front of him and said, "Excuse me. Robby?"

He stopped, confused. He was not used to being accosted by willowy blondes with shimmering ponytails cascading halfway down their backs. She looked vaguely familiar, he thought; he suspected he'd seen her around school, but couldn't quite place her. She hardly looked dressed for school; a lot of guys must find that clingy purple minidress quite distracting. Looking half at her and half past her, he stammered, "Yes?"

"I'm in your third bell study hall," she said. "I've been wanting to meet you for a long time, but you never seemed to notice I existed." Actually he had; now that she mentioned it, he remembered seeing her sitting across the aisle and dismissing her as decorative, but just another airhead. She smiled a dazzling smile, like a searchlight in his eyes. "So I finally decided I'd have to make the first move. I hope you don't think that too forward of me."

"Uh, no . . ." Actually it *did* seem pretty forward, compared to him and the way he'd been raised, but this sort of thing was becoming more common and accepted these days. He'd just never expected to be on the receiving end of it.

"Good," she said. "Well, here's the situation, Robby -- " She cut off abruptly and wrinkled her nose. "You're not really a Robby, you know. That's a little boy's name. I think I'll call you Rob. Okay?"

"Uh, okay." He smiled in spite of himself. Nobody had ever told him he'd outgrown his nickname before, and he rather liked it. "Sure."

"Great! Well, anyway, Rob, here's the deal. I've been watching you and I'd like to get to know you. Do you have a date for the prom yet?"

"Not yet," he said woodenly. He felt himself blush.

"Well, why don't you go with me?"

That floored him -- not so much the fact that she was taking the initiative, but that a virtual stranger who looked like her should be asking him. "With you?" he echoed incredulously. "I don't understand. Why me? You could go with anybody you--"

"But I want you," she said, smiling sweetly. "The only question is, would you mind going with me?"

"Well. . . I'm flattered that you'd ask. But I should warn you, I . . . can't dance.

"I'll teach you," she said brightly. "Deal?"

He felt like a freshly landed fish flopping around, trying but failing either to understand what was

happening or to find a believable excuse to say no. Finally he gave up and managed to return her smile. "Deal!" He wondered inwardly, *What have I got myself into?*

"Great!" he heard her say. "Got to get to class now; we'll work out the details later. See you around, Rob!"

She was ten paces away before he remembered. "Say," he called after her, "this is embarrassing, but I don't even know your name."

She stopped, pivoted gracefully, and grinned with perfect composure. "Oh, I guess you will be needing that, won't you? I'm Gloree Lindelle."

After the initial shock wore off, Robby -- or Rob, as he increasingly thought of himself -- found it harder and harder to shrug off Robert's letter. This was just too eerie. But how much of what it described was immutable, and what might he change?

He wasn't even sure how much he wanted to change. Despite his misgivings about plunging into such an alien environment as a prom, he went and actually enjoyed it, thanks entirely to Gloree. She did teach him to dance, and she was fun to be with. Occasionally a small part of his mind tried to tell him she had many of the qualities he'd found so shallow in other girls, but she had such an uncanny knack for anticipating what would please *him* that he heard less and less from that part. Soon they were dating steadily, and he thought less and less about Rachel.

Ironically, it was only when his and Gloree's relationship was well established that he finally shared a few extracurricular words with Rachel. It was right after graduation, when all the kids were milling around in their tuxes and formals, fending off congratulations from their families in the auditorium lobby, itching to get off to parties. Rachel, looking surprisingly pretty in her gown, came up to him and with a shy smile said, "Well, Robby, we made it. So what will you be doing?"

"I'm going to IU," he said, wincing slightly at the "Robby." "Think I'll major in physics. You?"

"MacLaren College," she said. "You probably never heard of it. It's in Canada. I'm leaning toward journalism, and maybe math."

"Oh." He hoped she couldn't see his shock when she said MacLaren College. "Well, good luck. It's been nice--"

Just then Gloree came up and grabbed him by the arm. "Come on, Rob! They're waiting for us." She literally dragged him off, remembering as an afterthought to call over her shoulder, "Congratulations, Rachel. See you around." Then she turned back to Rob and half-whispered, "I did get her name right, didn't I?"

Gloree had already decided to go to IU by the time Rob did, and she hinted later that his decision had been a major factor in hers. He didn't see how that could be, since he'd never even talked to her yet; but she explained that she had set her sights on him long before and asked around to learn everything she could about him.

The summer after graduation passed in a perfect blend of the idyllic and the exhilarating. Again he attributed much of that to Gloree's attention -- but not all. That July was when Apollo 11 landed on the Moon, and for the first time ever, human beings walked on another world. Rob and Gloree watched it together; it was one of the most thrilling moments of Rob's life. He thought Neil Armstrong's first words got it exactly right. He felt almost as proud as if he'd helped put the *Eagle* there himself, and justified the feeling by his promise that he *would* help, a lot, with some later giant steps for mankind.

Gloree said it was "nice," but she obviously didn't feel the moment's majesty and import as Rob did. That disappointed him a little. He almost felt that she was applauding the astronauts not because what they did was so important, but simply because Rob was interested in it and therefore she should be, too.

When school started, she was at least supportive of his enthusiastic pursuit of his studies. He was determined to be a very good scientist, if not a great one, and both he and his professors were quite confident that he would. Every time he earned another plaudit for something extraordinary he'd done, Gloree added her oohs and aahs to the chorus. She didn't even complain when he grew a beard.

The only sour note was that she was much less supportive of his antiwar and antidraft activities. Those embarrassed her, she said. He had such potential, he was on his way to such a brilliant career, why must he act as if he had no gratitude at all for the country that made it all possible? He tried to explain that that wasn't it at all -- that it was precisely *because* he so loved his country that he was determined to turn it away from what he saw as a grave error -- but she never seemed to understand. He wasn't sure she even really listened. She had a Plan for their future, and was determined to support everything that fit into it and stamp out everything that didn't.

But she *was* fun to be with, when she wasn't doing that, and she showered him unendingly with a kind of attention he had never seriously dreamed of getting. He liked that; so gradually he talked less and less about "peace" activities, first to Gloree and eventually to anyone. He never reached the point of saying that the war was a good thing, but Gloree pushed him inexorably down the road toward conventional patriotism and (he wasn't really sure when this entered the discussion) matrimony. Somehow he found himself engaged by the end of their freshman year; and by the time they returned as sophomores, he'd agreed that maybe the quickest way to end the war would be to help fight it. So if he was called he would go, and she would wait for him.

He went along with it, and often told himself he was very lucky to be engaged to someone like Gloree -- but he never felt really comfortable with the part about the draft. It still didn't feel right; and sometimes, late at night, he was nagged by the feeling that he'd sold out, that he was slowly and unceremoniously burying an important part of himself.

Somewhere along there he remembered he'd saved Robert's letter from the future, and he got it out to reread what it said about this period of his life. The description so far was unnervingly accurate. Did that mean it was all immutable? Maybe so -- but would Robert have bothered to write it if he really thought so?

If he *could* change anything, what would he change and how would he change it? It was too late to start dating Rachel in high school. . . .

Stop that! he chided himself. *You're engaged to Gloree, she's a great girl, and it's unfair to her to be thinking now about how it might have been with somebody else.*

But he couldn't help it. They were starting their sophomore year now, and that was when the letter said Rachel would die -- unless he prevented it. Just a few more weeks. . .

As that deadline drew closer, Rob reread the last part of the letter oftener and oftener. No, he told himself, he was not going to make a last-ditch play for Rachel; the very thought was absurd. But if there was a chance that he could save her life, and nobody else in the world even knew she would be in danger -- could he live with himself if he didn't at least try?

By the third week of September, the question was preying heavily on his mind. Meanwhile Gloree was pushing him hard to set a wedding date, and he got a notice to report for a draft board physical. . . .

By the time the decision came, it seemed automatic. He couldn't think of any way to explain to Gloree or anyone else where he was going, or why, so he didn't. He just walked off campus the morning of September 23, bought a bus ticket, and climbed aboard.

It was a long haul from Bloomington, which gave him a lot of time for second thoughts. *Am I crazy to be doing this?* he thought more than once. Most people would have said so, but most people hadn't read Robert's letter and watched so much of it come true. The evidence, if not the theory, suggested that the letter should be taken seriously. As a scientist, wasn't Rob supposed to pay more attention to the evidence?

What if he did change Robert's past? Was Robert right about Rachel being a better life partner for him, or was that just a theory? He was, after all, just extrapolating from old letters. He'd never actually spent any time with her, and other grass often looks greener whether it is or not.

No matter. Rob wasn't making this trip to start a thing with Rachel; he already had one with Gloree. All he wanted to do with Rachel was keep her from killing herself, and then go home. Of course, if he'd taken Robert's advice in the first place and got to know Rachel right away, this trip might not be necessary. Maybe neither of them would be anywhere near MacLaren College -- but it was too late for that, too.

He knew practically nothing about MacLaren or its college, so he got off the bus at a rest stop in Fort Wayne to browse in some travel guides. He didn't buy them; his money was tight and this trip was using too much of it even without extras. Besides, the books didn't have as much detail as he needed. Good thing he'd allowed some extra time. . . .

The bus got into MacLaren at dusk. It was a comfortable little town, clean and neat with sturdy stone and brick houses on tree-lined streets. The bus station looked like bus stations everywhere. Rob changed a little money and found a city map in the newsstand there. He was pleased to see that there was a YMCA not far from the station, and the campus was a comparable distance beyond.

It was colder outside than he expected. He grabbed a burger and fries in a greasy spoon next to the bus station, then walked briskly to the Y, checked in, and tried to sleep. Not very successfully, though; his dreams were too haunted by two girls -- one he knew personally and one who came highly recommended by a source with unique credentials.

Morning dawned clear and crisp. After a donut and coffee in the Y cafeteria, Rob was off to learn his way around the college. The autumn chill was even more pronounced this morning; his breath shone in the sun. The colors were farther along here than back home, mostly maples and white birches with an occasional cluster of dark green conifers. The tang of wood smoke hung in the air, and he could see plumes of it drifting skyward from several chimneys.

The campus, with more stone and less brick than the rest of the town, was fairly compact. Good; that would improve the odds. Rob started by walking all around it, looking at everybody he passed, hoping but not expecting to see a familiar face. Ideally, he would simply find Rachel and distract her so she wouldn't be near the Administration Building at the fateful hour. Maybe he'd take her to lunch, and they could stretch out small talk until three o'clock or so. . . .

In practice, he felt sadly sure, it wouldn't be that easy. MacLaren wasn't big, but it had 3000 students and enough buildings and walkways to make a chance meeting unlikely. So pretty soon he'd have to start a more aggressive, purposeful search.

He wasn't eager to do that. He hadn't thought of a way to do it without letting someone else know who he was and what he was trying to do. He still felt a little silly about that himself, and couldn't imagine how

to explain it to anyone else without it sounding even sillier to them.

He paused in front of the Administration Building, looking at its columned facade and the sculpted lions that flanked the front steps. He'd been all the way around it twice, and decided that this must be what Robert's letter meant by the front. It looked like a main entrance, and it faced the busiest street in town -- a *surprisingly* busy street, considering the size of the town and how quiet it had seemed last night. Somewhere around here was where it was going to happen, if he couldn't keep things from getting that far.

He shuddered at the thought that he might not only fail, but arrive just in time to see Rachel killed. For all he knew, he might still have made no significant change in the history Robert remembered. The news report on the accident probably wouldn't have mentioned him even if he'd been here. Maybe history *was* essentially immutable.

Stop that! he scolded. *You don't know that. You're here because you hope it isn't, and so does Robert.*

He forced his attention back to the building in front of him. It stretched along at least 200 feet of the street. Exactly *where* in front of it was the danger spot?

He felt his throat getting dry as he visualized scenarios in which his lack of that knowledge was fatal. He *had* to get more information, something he could use to keep things from getting that critical.

He checked his watch. Already 11:18; the letter said Rachel would be hit at 2:32. Definitely time to get cracking.

Resolutely he marched up the steps between the lions. The registrar had to know her class schedule and where she lived -- though he had only the vaguest idea how he would convince anyone he deserved that information.

His footsteps echoed off the hard corridor walls. It was an old building, and hardly anyone was in the halls. He found a directory, noted the room number for the registrar's office, and started in that direction.

Halfway there, the word "directory" tripped something in his mind. *Shouldn't there be a student directory?* He found a pay phone in a nearby alcove, with several tattered volumes hung on a chain. One of them was indeed a MacLaren College Directory. *I don't even know she's here*, he thought as he flipped eagerly through its pages. *I didn't check. All I know is that the letter said she would be. . . .*

She was. There was her name, with a dorm name and a phone number. Heart pounding, he dialed the number and let it ring twenty times.

No answer.

He checked the nearest campus map. The dorm wasn't far away. He asked the young woman guarding its entrance if she knew where Rachel Flanagan was, and drew a blank. He thought about leaving a message, couldn't think of a way to word it that didn't sound ridiculous, and headed back to the Admin Building.

He tried calling her once more, with the same frustrating result. Okay; time to try the registrar -- if the office wasn't closed for lunch.

Fortunately MacLaren was a big enough college to keep the registrar's office staffed and open all day, though the lone person on duty looked like another student. Rob walked up to the desk and cleared his throat. "Excuse me. I need to talk to a student named Rachel Flanagan. Can you help me find her?"

The young man behind the counter looked up. "Well, we could leave a message in her mailbox for you."

"It might take her too long to pick it up," said Rob. "This is urgent--"

"Family emergency?"

Well, it's certainly an emergency, Rob thought. "Not exactly," he said lamely, "but it's very important that I talk to her. If you could just let me look at her class schedule--"

The clerk gave him a suspicious look. "I'm afraid we can't do that," he said frostily. "We can't aid and abet strangers who are looking for our students and won't say why."

A sigh of frustration. "I was afraid of that." Rob left in disgust.

An hour to go. Maybe he should get some lunch himself -- and the student cafeteria should be a good place to watch for a student. He tried Rachel's number once more, then walked over to the Student Union and bought a plate of spaghetti. He ate it listlessly, alone at a corner table, anxiously scanning every face already at a table or coming through the line.

Nothing. He wondered whether he'd even recognize her if he saw her. He'd grown a beard since they graduated; who knew how she might have changed?

He finished his meal, dropped off his tray and garbage, and headed back out to the nearest pay phone. Still no answer -- and it was after two o'clock.

How accurate was the time in the letter?

He was coming down to the wire. Back across campus, still scanning faces. Once in a while he'd see one that made him wonder: *Is that her? Or am I clutching at straws because time's running out?*

One more futile phone call from a booth in front of the Admin Building. No time to go anywhere else now; only fifteen minutes to go. He spent it pacing the length of the building, wondering where she'd appear. He didn't even know whether she'd be crossing toward or away from the building. There was a little park across the street; maybe he should take a look over there. Besides, he was probably starting to look suspicious, pacing back and forth along this side like a caged tiger.

He crossed over; traffic was so heavy that it took him a full minute to find a suitable opening. When he got there he wondered if it had been a good idea. If she showed up on the other side, would he have time to get back to her?

Well, just one quick look around here. . . Walking fast, he circled the square. There were plenty of obvious students there, lounging, laughing, tossing Frisbees, a group with signs gathering around the central fountain; but no Rachel. And when he got back to the sidewalk his watch said 2:30.

He felt himself sweating. He half-ran back and forth along this side, scanning, wondering again which side he should be on.

As he made his turn at one end, he saw her -- unmistakably her -- step out the front door of the Admin Building and start down the stairs. She was wearing tattered jeans and a bulky navy sweatshirt and her hair was even longer than she'd worn it in high school. She was too far away to see any details of her face, but recognition was instant and positive; he had not the slightest doubt of who she was.

"Rachel!" he yelled as loud as he could, breaking into a run. He obviously didn't have much time; she was looking straight ahead, descending between the lions with a fast, purposeful stride, just as Robert had

described her. She'd be crossing at the midpoint, straight toward the fountain. Rob ran that way, watching frantically for a break in the traffic that he could run through, seeing none. *Just slow up*, he pleaded mentally. "Rachel! Stop!"

She showed no sign of hearing him, and she was almost off the steps now. Nothing left between her and the street but the sidewalk -- Rob saw the big tanker at the same time he heard the deep-throated blare of its horn. The horn blast seemed to go on forever, joined by the scream of air brakes and tires. Rachel was stepping into the street now and a weirdly detached part of Rob's mind, its time sense slowed at least an order of magnitude by adrenaline, was coolly calculating its options. There was traffic coming both ways; a safe normal crossing was out of the question. But if he ran as fast as he could, zigging here and zagging there, and if three drivers had good reflexes. . .

He'd have to risk it. Before the thought had fully formed, he was halfway across the street, cars screeching to a halt all around him in slow motion, closer than he'd want to think about. But he was running faster than he'd ever run before, and Rachel, however briskly, was walking. He hit her in a flying tackle, sending books flying and Rachel sprawling onto the curb, Rob landing in a heap on top of her. He felt something tug slightly at his foot, and then, gradually, all the sounds stopped -- except his heart thudding in his ears -- and time returned to normal.

He lay there panting. The first thought that formed as his mind approached normality was that she had cushioned his landing but nothing had cushioned hers. "Sorry," he said. "Are you hurt?"

"I don't think so," she panted. "No more than bruises, anyway--" She broke off and grinned at him. "What do you mean, *sorry*? You saved my life. Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"But I did it so--" He rolled off her and offered his hands to help her up as another voice interrupted.

The truck driver had flung his door open and was running toward them, yelling, "Are you all right? I didn't see you in time--"

"No problem," Rachel assured him, brushing herself off. "I'm okay, thanks to this gentleman here, and it wasn't your fault. I should have been paying attention. Too much on my mind . . ."

Talk about grace under pressure, Rob marveled as he watched her. It took a few minutes to reassure the truck driver, who insisted on leaving his name and address, and to fend off a multitude of concerned witnesses. During all that Rob's eyes wandered to the black skid mark of the tanker's right tires. He shuddered when he saw a tiny indentation in the right edge, a place where the rubber had somehow missed the pavement, and found a matching streak of black on the toe of one of his shoes. It had been that close; he had quite literally gambled his life to save hers, and almost lost.

But not quite. They were both alive, without serious injuries, and standing together on a sidewalk somewhere in Canada. When the last bystanders finally drifted off, she turned to him and said, "I really can't thank you enough. I'm sorry to have put you on such a spot--" She never finished the sentence. A puzzled frown had been growing on her face, and now she broke off and almost whispered, "Robby? Are you Robby Lerman?"

"Guilty as charged. Uh. . . it's good to see you, Rachel."

She broke into a hearty laugh. "And absolutely incredible to see you. What on Earth are you doing here? I thought you were going to school back home."

"I am," he said awkwardly. "I just. . . uh. . . had a hunch. And. . . I've always sort of had a crush on you." Now why had he blurted *that* out? He'd done what he came for; it was time to start home! He felt

himself blushing.

But Rachel's good-natured grin put him at ease. He felt his blush fade as he became aware of the light freckles across her nose. "That's funny," she said. "So have I. On you, I mean."

So it was true! "Really? Why didn't you ever say anything?"

"Why didn't you?"

They both laughed. "This is *really* incredible," she repeated. "I think we have a lot of catching up to do. At least figure out what just happened, and maybe get a little better acquainted. Why don't we go over to Schipp's and have a beer or something? My treat."

He grinned back. "That sounds great."

"Good." She rounded up her books and started walking. "I was hurrying to a meeting, but it can wait. Maybe you'd like to come along."

He followed. The bar was cool and cozy, and half an hour later Rob felt as if he'd known her all his life. "Why didn't we ever do this in high school?" he asked with an odd mixture of exhilaration and wistful ache.

"I don't know," she said. "Yes, I do. We were both still too afraid. We hadn't learned yet that the most glorious dreams in the world aren't worth a damn unless you do something about them. And you can't always wait." She laughed shortly. "I guess we both learned *that* today!" Now her expression turned wistful. "I hate to think of your disappearing from my life again after the last half hour. Wouldn't it be neat if we could spend some time together and see if it led anywhere?"

"Yes," he said cautiously, "but there are problems." He paused. "Actually, I've been thinking about transferring here." He realized as he said it that his subconscious actually had, for the last few minutes. There was a larger grain of truth in it, too: back when he'd been college-shopping, he'd considered a couple of Canadian schools, but dropped the idea for fear of Dad's reaction. Now, suddenly, that seemed oddly unimportant. "Of course, I wouldn't want either of us to get our hopes up too high. . . ."

"Of course," Rachel nodded. "We've hardly met, really. Who knows what ugly truths we'll unearth about each other if we spend a lot of time together?" She grinned. "But I'd like to find out."

"So would I." A little voice inside Rob's head was shouting, *What about Gloree?* But it was getting fainter by the minute, as if receding into the distance.

"So what are the problems?" Rachel asked.

"The draft," he said. "I'm not worried about getting into the school; my grades are fine, and my profs will give me glowing recommendations. But there's more and more talk about phasing out student deferments, and I've been called for a physical. I came into Canada as a weekend visitor. It might be hard getting permission to stay--"

"Maybe not as hard as you think. Why don't you come to that meeting I was rushing to? The local antidraft group has good contacts with the Toronto Anti-Draft Programme, and they've been really helpful to a lot of people in situations like yours."

"You know," said Rob, leaning back and stretching, "I think I will."

As Rachel paid the bill and they got up and headed back out into the sunshine together, he marveled at

how casually he was making these sweeping, radical decisions -- and how comfortable he felt with them, as if they'd been brewing all along. All at once it seemed obvious that he *would* stay in Canada and not let the war interrupt his concentration on physics, and that he'd just have to break it off with Gloree, as gently as possible. He saw very clearly now that she had been doing all the driving toward the future they'd been headed for, and he'd simply gone along because he saw no roads leading anywhere better. Now he did.

Only time would tell whether it was *really* better, of course, but one thing was very clear: he was now on his way to a very different future than the one Robert had written him from. *You got me into this*, he warned his far future self. *I hope we both like where it leads!*

An impish giggle from Rachel snapped him out of his reverie. When he looked a wordless question at her she explained, "I just thought of something funny. If this *should* ever lead to anything lasting between us, I'll have the perfect answer when anybody asks me how it all began. Not many women can truthfully say, 'He swept me off my feet!'"

IV. 2001

December 31, 2001

Dear Rob,

I won't be mailing this one, and you won't be reading it. The postage is just too high. But I have a few thoughts I wish I could tell you about, and I think it will do me good to get them out of my system.

I haven't noticed any change in my life that I could attribute to anything you might have done. I've given up on knowing what, if anything, you did in response to my letter. At first that disappointed me. Even though, intellectually, I understood Pereira's expectations about the probable outcome of our little experiment, emotionally, I kept hoping that somehow you could jump me onto the track I wished I'd followed. Now I understand that he was right: the most I could do was create a new branch.

But after a little reflection, I realized that I *had* benefitted from this very limited dialogue we've had. First, I can imagine that I've helped at least one alternate Robby, in the "many Robbies" interpretation of quantum mechanics, onto a life he might find more satisfying. I'll never know, but if it's true, there is a certain deep satisfaction in helping someone else, even if it's someone I can never meet.

Second is something subtler and completely unanticipated -- but I *am* the beneficiary of that one. Back when Pereira was badgering me for funds, he was thinking about a better road to space; time was just an afterthought. But time was what got me interested enough to back him. I never said so in the official memos, but the whole goal of the project, for me, was to answer your letter and try to influence your actions. I was so obsessed with that that I almost forgot about the space travel aspects.

But those, as it turns out, were where the real action was. We managed to send one little message back in time, at so great a cost and so much uncertainty about the results that we may never do it again. But sending things through space turns out to be much easier. For far less money and energy, we can send much bigger things, even living things, across great distances with remarkable accuracy.

In short, we've opened up a new road to the stars that makes NASA and rockets obsolete. Rocketech's board was too shortsighted to see that, and fired

Pereira and me for wasting their money. But we got great new jobs with a company that already had a good start on a private moonbase, independent of NASA. *They* see the potential, and they're not afraid to use whatever will help them. We're going out there, Robby, and in a very real sense, you and I did it. Making that happen was the big ambition that shaped so much of our early life. Yes, Pereira will get, and deserve, the Nobel. But you made it happen: if you hadn't written your letter, none of the rest could have occurred.

Notice the irony in all that? Thanks to your letter, I've finally achieved, or at least helped achieve, the biggest goal I ever had, and made my whole life far more satisfying in the bargain. But I effected the change not by tinkering with the past, but by changing the way I approached the present.

Maybe that's the most important lesson I've learned from all this: no matter who we are or what our circumstances, we all have to build our own futures -- and we must start from where we are, not from where we might have been. For that lesson, even above all the rest, I thank you. Whoever, wherever, whenever you are -- build yourself a great future!

With gratitude and respect,

Robert

About the author:

Stanley Schmidt, born in Cincinnati and graduated from the University of Cincinnati in 1966, began selling stories while a graduate student at Case Western Reserve University, where he completed his Ph.D. in physics in 1969. He continued freelancing while an assistant professor at Heidelberg College in Ohio, teaching physics, astronomy, science fiction, and other oddities. (He was introduced to his wife, Joyce, by a serpent while teaching field biology in a place vaguely resembling that well-known garden.) He has contributed numerous stories and articles to original anthologies and magazine including *Analog*, *Asimov's, Fantasy & Science Fiction, Rigel, The Twilight Zone, Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, American Journal of Physics, Camping Journal, Writer's Digest*, and *The Writer*. He has edited about a dozen anthologies, including co-editing and writing several chapters of *Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy* (St. Martin's Press, 1991) and *Islands in the Sky: Bold New Ideas for Colonizing Space* (with Robert Zubrin, Wiley, 1996).

Since 1978, as editor of *Analog*, he has been nominated 20 times for the Hugo award for Best Professional Editor. He is a member of the Board of Advisers of the National Space Society, and has been an invited speaker at national meetings of that organization, the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, and the American Association of Physics Teachers, as well as numerous museums and universities. In his writing and editing he draws on a varied background including extensive experience as a musician, photographer, traveler, naturalist, outdoorsman, pilot, and linguist. Most of these influences left traces in his four novels, *The Sins of the Fathers, Lifeboat Earth, Newton and the QuasiApple*, and *Tweedlioop*. His nonfiction book, *Aliens and Alien Societies: A Writer's Guide to Creating Extraterrestrial Life-Forms*, was published in 1996 by Writer's Digest Books. He was Guest of Honor at BucConeer, the 1998 World Science Fiction Convention in Baltimore.

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