

From Here You Can See the Sunquists

By [Richard Wadholm](#)

Originally published in
Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine

Part One

All that summer the Sunquists debated a trip to La Jetée.

Mr. Sunquist said that summer was the time to go. The tourists would be off to Kleege's Beach, where the hotels were new and no one worried about slipping back and forth in time as they walked down the beach. The Sunquists would have La Jetée to themselves.

Mrs. Sunquist was plainly uneasy about La Jetée. She would not say why. The Sunquists were travelers, after all. Cosmopolitans. They savored a difficult aesthetic experience.

She spoke only of their neighbors, the Dales, who had spent a month in Nepal. "They seemed so happy," she said. "They had their own sherpas. They rode in a cart up to Annapurna, pulled by a team of yetis."

Mr. Sunquist wondered at her reluctance. Was she worried for the baby? He knew she was nervous. Mrs. Sunquist had the sort of nerves that only a mid-life pregnancy can bring on. But women had babies in La Jetée all the time. Some women spent their entire pregnancies there. Mr. Sunquist proposed nothing more than a week? a farewell to the city of their youth. What could that hurt?

He plied his wife with nostalgia. He reminded her of their first meeting, in the galleries along Gull Street. Mr. Sunquist had purchased mangoes at Sonny's Seafood Chowder Bar and shown her how to eat them with salt and cayenne pepper.

He smiled as Mrs. Sunquist twisted her lips to taste the sweetness of the fruit, the heat of the red pepper. This was one of their quiet and indelible memories together. Mr. Sunquist knew it.

"We can go back and see it, just exactly as it was," he told her.

"Nothing is ever exactly as it was," she said.

"In La Jetée it is," he said. This was not an article of faith on his part. In La Jetée it was a simple fact.

"What about us? Will we be the same?"

"We will be what we've always been," he promised her. "You'll see."

* * *

It was in the nature of the world that their last journey to La Jetée should begin sweetly. Just as the hours of canyon roads had become unendurable, something shimmered in the air, a change of light or air pressure. The road took a turn and they found themselves at the bottom of the cliff road, looking out at the city of their youth.

Mrs. Sunquist had been quiet these last two hours. Now, she could not help smiling. "It's still the most beautiful place we ever lived," she said.

La Jetée glowed under the slanted light of evening, as vivid as a fever dream. Every little outbuilding and café? a rich, ridiculous red. Every boat-repair a bitter aqua, a harsh viridian.

Melancholy limned the moment. The Sunquists had agreed that this would be their last trip to La Jetée. The baby was coming. They both had experienced things in La Jetée that no one needed to grow up with, Mr. Sunquist had said so himself. That had been an easy decision in their kitchen. As he drank in his last vista of La Jetée, Mr. Sunquist would have taken it back.

"Do you remember that time at Lola's Bookstore," Mr. Sunquist asked his wife, "when Piecziznski, the chess master, challenged nineteen of his own iterations to speed tournaments?"

"And he beat twelve of them?" She laughed at the image. "And played the other seven to draws..."

"? And then he killed himself, because twelve of the nineteen were older versions of himself, and he could see how his powers would decline!" The Sunquists shook their heads; this was a favorite memory of theirs. Something they had always planned to get back to see again.

"Do you think we can find that?" she asked.

Mr. Sunquist nodded down the road. The La Jetée of last summer had passed into the expanding time signatures of the Present City. He thought he recognized it, floating against the horizon, spectral and over bright. Or maybe he saw some other iteration, realized by other Sunquists on other summer jaunts.

"He's there," Mr. Sunquist said. "I know that. We need a Feynman diagram to orient ourselves, that's all." He knew a kiosk in the hotel district, they could get one there.

Just off the frontage road, they passed the skeleton of a new luxury hotel, half-built and abandoned. It rose from behind its screen of construction siding like the rusted gantries of some failed cosmodrome. A faded sign promised completion in the spring. It did not mention the year.

Mr. Sunquist winced a little as they drove by. So many friends had gone in with him on this investment. They should have known, he told himself. Vacation real estate can be so risky.

But Mr. Sunquist had no time to indulge regret. His mind was on the row of orchid houses that had been dug under in the hotel's wake. Where was that paella kitchen where he had taught Mrs. Sunquist how to eat mangoes? Or the hotel where they had hidden themselves away from the heat on those breathless August days when the sky was blue-black with unspent rain? A less romantic man would have surrendered these places to the iterations of memory. Mr. Sunquist surrendered nothing.

Twenty-five years up the highway would be the Hotel Mozambique, just as it had been at the height of its renown. During the hot weekends of August, the Sunquists had allowed themselves little vacations from their basement apartment on Four o'Clock Street. The Hotel Mozambique had been their destination. Mr. Sunquist remembered the room they had asked for. Number 219 looked out on the black-bottom pool and the ocean across the road.

Here also would be Sonny's Bar, and the night he had proposed marriage to Melanie Everett. This was one of Mrs. Sunquist's favorite moments.

They would get their room at the Mozambique, he decided. From there, they would find the night of their proposal. But something about their Feynman was corrupted. Or maybe Mrs. Sunquist wasn't reading it properly. Whatever, the Sunquists found themselves retracing a patch of highway twenty-five years up the road. Just as their navigating turned quarrelsome, Mrs. Sunquist sighted a blue-and-white beachcomber bicycle racked up alongside the Ciriquito Street pier.

She pointed into the haze of decoherence that muffled the world beyond the road. In that instant, a moment coalesced before them.

Mr. Sunquist found himself in a narrow parking strip looking down on a gentrified waterfront. Sailboats in slips, cafés with sun decks. Temporal observatories offered "Views of Parallel Worlds!" and, "The Chance to See the Life You Might Have Led!" All for two dollars.

Sonny's Bar nestled into the crook where the Ciriquito Street Pier met the beach. Like every other building on the beach, Sonny's Bar showed its backside to the landlubbers' world. A sign had been painted above the dumpsters, reminding all the old neighborhood that Sonny had been serving them in this same location "Since most of you were underage."

"I don't see my truck," Mr. Sunquist said. "Are you sure this is the night?"

"You called me from your office and said to meet you here," Mrs. Sunquist said. "I do not make a habit of bicycling to bars. This is the night you proposed."

"Maybe we pulled off the highway a few minutes early." Mr. Sunquist offered. He suggested they wait for him inside the bar, just to be sure.

The interior was designed in one of those inverted situations from the turn of some century. The patrons clambered together on a large round cushion the color and texture of boxing gloves. Three bartenders hovered over a counter that encircled them.

TV monitors were placed to catch the eye at every angle. In this age, Sonny's fancied itself a sports bar. But Sonny himself? He liked novellas, Mexican soap operas. Two different ones were playing simultaneously as the Sunquists walked in. A regular was complaining that the World Cup was on, Brazil versus Russia. Sonny was laughing and nodding, paying the man no particular mind. His eyes were neither on the man nor on the screens.

Like everyone else in the room, Sonny watched the girl in the sundress and sandals. She sat on the quiet side of a circular cushion, away from most of the television screens. She read *Justine* (the one by Lawrence Durrell, not Marquis de Sade), and nudged a glass of chardonnay around by the stem. Maybe it was something about seeing across twenty-five years in the space of a single room, but Mr. Sunquist imagined the girl in a singular light. Maybe it was simply that everyone else seemed to dim by comparison.

The Sunquists found chairs in an alcove beneath one of the television screens. They had a view of the bar from here, and the television to distract anyone who looked their way.

A waiter asked what they were having. Mrs. Sunquist asked for iced tea. ("Ice tea," she snickered. "This kills me.")

Mr. Sunquist liked a scotch-and-soda, but not here. As he looked across the bar, he recognized iterations of himself and his wife from other summers, all drinking scotch-and-sodas. He did not wish to be known by the sort of drink he ordered. He ordered a glass of merlot.

Mrs. Sunquist put a hand on his arm. "You know I was furious at you for leaving me

alone in a bar," she said. A phone call had kept Mr. Sunquist from leaving, some warehouse on Gull Street wanting to be an artists' loft.

Mrs. Sunquist did not seem furious; she was smiling at her younger reflection. The girl on the couch didn't look furious. She looked like a stranded angel, patiently waiting on gravity's demise.

"Right about now, I was giving you five more minutes to walk through the door."

"You were very tolerant with me, Mrs. S."

But it wasn't tolerance that had kept her in her seat for an hour.

He wore a suit and tie, but badly. They were not what he was used to. He was not yet thirty, yet his scalp already showed through the down at the top of his head. A last bit of baby fat lent his eyes a squint when he smiled.

Mr. and Mrs. Sunquist hushed each other as the little man asked to sit. "He was very polite," Mrs. Sunquist recalled.

"He was scared of you," Mr. Sunquist chuckled. "Look how bald he's become in just a few years." Mr. Sunquist remembered the little man from their old neighborhood. He didn't remember the name. But the young man had existed at the periphery of Bobby Shelbourne's crew, Mr. Sunquist remembered that.

The Sunquists stifled giggles; Melanie let him buy her a glass of wine, though a glass stood half full at her elbow. She smiled at him as he fumbled at his introduction: Roger J. Swann, from a local desk of one of the international banks in Kleege's Beach. He never mentioned the old bungalows they had all shared on the beach, or the parties at Sonny's and at Bobby Shelbourne's apartment. He seemed happy in his role as stranger. In the presence of Melanie Everett, he might have been happy with anything.

The story as the Sunquists retold it to each other over the years had this desperate little man crawling into Melanie's lap. In fact, Swann never looked down at her open décolletage. His eyes were glued to her face. Every smile she made brought one in return. Her jokes made him laugh, and cover his mouth with his palm.

Melanie Everett asked him about himself. (Surely, she was being wicked!) Roger Swann was awed by her consideration. He grew flustered. He might have gone.

Melanie had this thing she did, this nervous laugh, as if she were the one, needed reassurance. Swann happily reassured her.

He told her about his work. Roger Swann was a programmer for the bank. "More like a game warden," he confided. "The programs do their own programming anymore. I just make sure they remember who they're working for."

Melanie laughed and put her hand up to her mouth. Roger Swann did the same. His eyes squinted down to little black points of happiness and moist shine.

Mr. Sunquist remembered Roger Swann. What a perfect foil he had been. He had missed his chance with Melanie at her twentieth birthday party. Look at him now? Mr. Sunquist could see the romantic fantasies fill his mind. "Enjoy it while you can," he chuckled.

One of the bartenders swung up the counter to let someone through. It was Bill Sunquist. He looked sheepish at first. He saw the clock above the bar and lowered his head and sighed. Then he saw the fervent little banker paying for Melanie's wine. This wicked leer kinked up the corner of his mouth.

Roger Swann never looked up, but Melanie did. Melanie said not a word as Bill Sunquist pushed by the two of them to take a seat on her left. Roger Swann was explaining the intricacies of Darwinian programming strategies. She seemed perfectly content to listen.

Mr. Sunquist remembered looking across at Melanie as Swann continued on about his work? Are you looking for a job? What? That's when he saw the amusement in her eyes. What a hoot this would be!

Bill Sunquist had a low boredom tolerance. There was only so much arbitrage trading and Darwinian software business to put up with before the joke ran out. Just for fun, he leaned across Roger's lap to argue with the waiter over the provenance of a gram of hashish.

"A spicy aroma of ginger," he read off the thumb-sized packet. "Redolent with earth musk and cardamom." Bill Sunquist opened it up for the maitre d' to smell. "Would you describe that as 'redolent with earth musk and cardamom'?"

The waiter looked at him long, a patronizing half-smile at the corner of his mouth. "We have a fine roan from Lebanon, with the elusive sweetness of late-harvest Riesling. Would you care to try that?"

"For my friend here." Mr. Sunquist remembered smiling down on Roger Swann. "For my friend." He remembered Roger Swann smiling back, confused and helpful and friendly as a pup. Bill Sunquist nodded across at Melanie. "Are you ready, Mi Amor? To Grandmother's house we go."

A priceless moment? Roger Swann turns his hopeful gaze back to Melanie. But Melanie is already moving past Bill for the open side of the bar.

Looking on from the darkness of their alcove, Mr. Sunquist could not help an ornery cackle. Ohh, he was terrible in those days!

They shook hands like gentlemen, give them that. Such was his commitment to sportsmanship that Roger Swann would have shaken Melanie's hand as well, but something made her turn away at the last moment. She stumbled into Bill, pushed past him blindly for the door.

Mr. Sunquist had to bite his fist to keep from laughing at the ridiculous tableau? Roger Swann, staring after them with three half-empty wine glasses on the bar and a look in his eyes like crushed violets.

Mrs. Sunquist squeezed his arm the way she always did when she was trying to make him behave. Oh, but her eyes shone. Even before she said it, he knew she must be exulting in their perversity.

He might have skipped the proposal at this point. He had no need to fight the crush of other Sunquists, all hurrying out to see the same thing. He had seen what he wanted. Only courtesy made him remind his wife why they had come here in the first place.

"Right out there on the porch," he told her, "I'm proposing marriage to you."

Mrs. Sunquist had her eyes on Roger Swann. He had to nudge her for attention. "You still want to see this, don't you?" She laughed then, like she always did. She assured him that she was all right, as if he had asked.

They had managed to snag a prime parking spot from the clutches of their own grasping iterations. From here, the Sunquists looked on as Bill Sunquist dug in his coat pocket and came up with something small, wrapped in velvet and chintz.

Even now, Mr. Sunquist remembered the moment. He remembered the way Melanie drew her hands to her face, and looked from his hands to his face as if to catch him in a lie. He remembered the feel of her fingers in his palm as she took the box, the little breath as she opened it and turned the ring toward the light.

Mr. Sunquist tried to remember what was going through the mind of the young man on the porch. Maddeningly, all he could think of was Roger Swann. People like that, you humiliate them and they think they can win you over. Any minute, he had expected the door to open and a myopic smile to appear beneath the wall sconce.

The realization made him anxious for something to say. "We look like we're very much in love." In truth, Mr. Sunquist had no idea what people in love were supposed to look like.

"I hate to tell you what I was really thinking." Mrs. Sunquist gave a glance over her shoulder. There was another couple in a car just a few spaces down. She leaned forward so they would not hear what she had to say. "I had just downed a glass-and-a-half of cheap white wine and all I could think about was finding someplace to pee."

"And, of course, you couldn't go back in the bar? "

"Roger Swann was in there."

Mr. Sunquist found himself roaring. Mrs. Sunquist hushed him; she was a shy person by nature, and people might be listening. That made him laugh even harder.

The couple in the next car turned to see what was funny, but he didn't care. He knew

these people well enough, he had nothing to prove to them.

They would be a couple in their thirties. They would be having a conversation very much like this one. A little breathless, the woman hints to her husband how these past fifteen years are as much a product of bladder control as love.

Perhaps she intends a joke. Perhaps an insult. Things are not so good between the man and the woman at this point in their marriage. The woman realizes this too late, and starts to back up and stammer.

To himself, the man thinks...

"Romance is one of those things that doesn't really work as a first-hand experience. Why we come back here every year, I imagine."

"What?" Mrs. Sunquist looked up at him. "You must have heard that somewhere."

It was not an especially generous thought, Mr. Sunquist realized. He was a little surprised he had said it out loud. More surprised how much he believed it to be true.

"We should move on," he said. "Let these kids have their privacy."

She put a hand to his wrist as he reached for the touch pad. "One more minute," she whispered. "They're almost done." She stared so intently that Mr. Sunquist wondered what she was looking at. Her head tilted to her right, and her mouth gaped in little-girl awe.

"I was a beauty in my day, wasn't I?" She smiled a little, as if to make a joke, but she could not hide the shine on her eyes.

It must be the baby, he thought. The baby makes her sentimental. A half-dozen things came to mind. All had the antiseptic cheer of a get-well card. He squeezed her hand. "Steady-on, old girl. Let's not break the mood here."

Mrs. Sunquist nodded. Of course, of course. Suddenly she was laughing again. She waved all his worried looks aside. Perhaps she had been having him on after all.

* * *

Part Two

A few minutes further up the road awaited the Hotel Mozambique they had known as youngsters. White stucco bungalows crowded protectively around a medium-sized black-bottom pool. The pool looked out the open end of the courtyard toward the sea.

Mr. Sunquist got them the room they always asked for, looking out through the top of a date palm toward Mer Noire.

Mrs. Sunquist pushed open the window. A blood-warm breeze came in off the bay, sour with brine, pungent with road tar from the asphalt bike paths just beyond the courtyard.

"What was the name of that soap opera they filmed down the beach?" Mrs. Sunquist eased herself into the corner of the sill, hugging herself in the dreamy light that spilled through the palms just beyond.

"Indigo Something," Mr. Sunquist recalled. "Shades of Indigo, I think."

"They filmed right outside my window for six months when I lived with Bobby Shelbourne. The next year, the production company followed their expanding time signature up the beach and filmed the actors playing opposite their own earlier iterations. You remember that?"

Mr. Sunquist said he did. This was a lie? Mr. Sunquist had no money for television when he was young? but all lies are sweet in La Jetée in August.

Mrs. Sunquist smiled at him, knowing and unconcerned. She led him by the hand to the bed. They made love in the cool shade of the whitewashed room? sweetly, awkwardly,

stopping to see if everything was all right with the baby.

Later, as the heat of the day enveloped them, Mr. Sunquist pressed his arm around Mrs. Sunquist's shoulders and drew her close. They had not slept this way since they were newlyweds. Her hair had the soapy smell of newborn babies. The scent of it followed him into his dreams.

Here was Melanie Everett, the girl that would be his wife. He remembered her all golden under the sun, bashful but hardly uncertain. She had perfected this fascination that goes with being the second-prettiest girl at every party. Boys became aware of her in stages, the way they became aware of the first hit pop tune of the summer.

Forthright kids like Bob Shelbourne were always going to get around to Melanie Everett, right after they investigated the fulsome charms of Jenn LeMel, or the Maynard sisters. Shy kids always thought of her beauty as their secret. Being shy, they assumed their secret safe.

Lying beside her now, Mr. Sunquist dreamed not of his wife, but of his friends? the things they would tell each other. What did they think when they heard Melanie Everett had gone home with him? His had been an epic battle, as pure as a fairy tale. A rival had been vanquished. A maiden won. Being a man living at a certain moment in history, he had learned to savor these stories. Nothing is more vivid than a moment re-lived, he would say. Not even the moment itself.

The heat of the day had broken when Mr. Sunquist shook off the last of his dreams. The breeze had shifted around to come in from the south, from the future side of the bay.

Mrs. Sunquist said she could lie beneath the billowing curtains all night long. Perhaps Mrs. Sunquist still had doubts. If so, Mr. Sunquist hardly heard. He was planning their road trip.

He asked Mrs. Sunquist if she remembered the first time they made love.

"Of course I do." As indignant as she could manage.

"We had to take a blanket out to Mourning Shoals because your boyfriend was setting up your apartment for a surprise birthday party. You remember? And the fog rolled in so we almost couldn't find the truck, and then we got back an hour and a half after the party started?"

Mrs. Sunquist laughed, embarrassed. She remembered.

"You know," Mr. Sunquist said, "that's one place you and I have never gone back to."

"Oh, William. No!"

"It's a birthday party. It would be easy to slip in. And we had such a time that night."

Mrs. Sunquist touched his cheek. "You remember everything so perfectly," she said.

Something in her tone struck Mr. Sunquist odd, so that he smiled and frowned at the same time. Perhaps his wife had not enjoyed the scene in the bar as he expected. Time for something frivolous, he decided. Piecziznski, the chess master, perhaps. Or maybe they could see Shades of Indigo filming up at the old Harbinger Hotel.

He didn't tell her what he planned. He thought to surprise her. He expected that she might even mention these places herself, but the scene in the bar had left Mrs. Sunquist in some reverie of her own.

Seven miles up the highway, and as many years further back, Mr. Sunquist found a neighborhood he recognized. Lola's Bookstore was just up the street in a bus barn it shared with an equity waiver theater. If someone could give them the local date and time, they would pin down the moment of their arrival.

The Sunquists discovered a young couple hiding among the shadows of Ciriquito Street. Mr. Sunquist called to them. The boy glanced back at him? what? The girl turned around to see what he was looking at. The Sunquists realized they were looking at themselves.

Mr. Sunquist knew immediately where they were. Somehow, they had stumbled onto

Melanie Everett's twentieth birthday party. This was the night she had ended her relationship with her boyfriend. The night she had gone home with him.

Bill Sunquist and Melanie Everett stood in the shadow of a large real-estate sign. The sign showed an artist's rendering of tennis courts, a condominium, a hotel complex.

The Ciriquito Street pier, where fishing boats still headed into the sun each morning, that was to be subsumed into a two-hundred-slip marina. Bill Sunquist noticed none of this. The sign was nothing to him but cover. He had Melanie under his left arm and they were studying the beachfront apartment she shared with Bobby Shelbourne, the man who promised to love her, "no matter how much she disappointed him."

They were talking. The Sunquists were too far away to hear the words. No matter, the Sunquists had remembered this story to each other till they could mouth the words. Bill Sunquist and Melanie Everett had parked along Kleege's Beach and spent the afternoon under the tarp in the back of Bill Sunquist's two-ton army surplus lorry. Now she was late to her own birthday party. Late, and sunburned and sweaty and very guilty.

Mr. Sunquist thought of Piecziznski, the chess master. Well, they were here now. Whatever he had intended could wait until after. Mrs. Sunquist smiled, though she plainly was embarrassed. "William, I don't know about this."

"What are you worried about? You know how it turns out."

"I don't want to see this."

"You were asking if you were beautiful." He nodded toward their younger reflections. "Look at how young we are in this place."

"It's a world of ghosts," Mrs. Sunquist said to the car window. "I don't care how young they are."

Mr. Sunquist did not blame his wife for being negative. He ascribed her unease to Bobby Shelbourne's oppressive aura. Understandable, certainly. Bobby Shelbourne was a vegetarian and pathological spoilsport, one of those people who savored his slights. No wonder Mrs. Sunquist quailed at the memory of this night. He studied the girl standing under the real-estate sign. Look at how frantic she is to make her story, he thought.

"The only way out is through," he told Mrs. Sunquist. And then: "Don't be scared." It was the sort of patronizing admonishment a six-year-old uses on a younger sibling.

Mrs. Sunquist pursed her lips with a moment's thought; then she nodded at an open curb down the block.

They pulled up in front of a shaded courtyard between two bungalows. Bill and Melanie had disappeared. Mr. Sunquist heard whispers and laughter through a screen of rust-colored bougainvillea. Up ahead was the ocean, and a small yard inside a rusted fence that separated the apartment from the beach. He heard flapping above his head. A banner cut from bed sheets stretched between a pair of upstairs windows. It read: HAPPY BIRTHDAY, MELANIE. I LOVE YOU.

Mrs. Sunquist paused when she saw the painted bed sheet. "Really," she said. "Let's not do this." Just for a moment, she glanced back the way they had come. She might have been gauging her chances of making the street.

"Don't tell me you feel guilty." Mr. Sunquist hooted. "Guilty for Bobby Shelbourne! Oh, wouldn't he love that."

"There's not enough people for us to slip in. Someone will recognize us. They'll know we came from down the beach."

Indeed, a young man with mild blue eyes had been stationed at the top of the stair to guard against crashers.

For one moment, Mr. Sunquist cringed as Roger Swann nodded down at them. He thought of the humiliation Roger had suffered in Sonny's? wondered if he might have to answer for it. But no, that bar scene was seven years in Roger Swann's future. Swann gave them only a look of rueful curiosity. He nodded toward the next bungalow over, where he imagined they had come from. He asked if they were here to complain about the noise.

Mr. Sunquist was thinking up a suitable lie when Melanie Everett stepped out onto the landing.

She had this nervous laugh as a kid, which was odd. Watching her, Mr. Sunquist suddenly realized that Melanie herself was not nervous at all. The laugh was for the benefit of whomever she spoke to. It worked to spectacular effect.

Suddenly, Roger Swann was over his terror of pretty girls. He leaned forward to hear her as she asked him something under the music. Smiling, he answered.

Mrs. Sunquist took her husband by the wrist. "You know what he's telling me?" Even now the boy's words affected her. "He's telling me how Bobby's been waiting for me since 4:00, and then he tells me he himself has been waiting for me all his life."

"Aww." Mr. Sunquist gave her a look of arch sentimentality. Together, they went, "Aww," loud enough to attract the gaze of the kids on the stair. He thought that Melanie regarded them with some look of secret humor. Who knew what she was really thinking. Mr. Sunquist imagined pretty girls used this look when they could think of nothing to say.

Roger got a peck on the cheek for his sweetness. Melanie disappeared into the party without a backward glance, but that was enough for Roger Swann. The Sunquists were forgotten. He slicked the thinning wedge of hair back from his forehead. He followed after her; the Sunquists trailed a short distance behind.

One thing Mr. Sunquist remembered about Bobby Shelbourne's apartment, it was dangerous to show too much interest in any bit of ornament.

Bobby Shelbourne lived in a museum of Melmac ice cream dishes, mismatched kitchen chairs, and determinedly outdated electronic entertainment gear. Every one with a little story on where it had been found, and how much it was really worth to some mythical dealer in garage sale lamps, or kitchen formica, or digital video downloaders.

A whir-sound passed by overhead. A scale model of the Hindenburg was making stately passage from the living room to the kitchen. Normally, Bobby would be following it around, pointing out the hand-painted swastika on the tail rudder. But the mood had gone out of him today.

He saw Melanie and his pale blue eyes went all weepy and proud. His pouty lip grew heavier than it was already. If Bobby had promised to forgive Melanie no matter what, he had not promised to make it easy. He would not even acknowledge Melanie till she

took his arm and made him face her.

Someone put on music, too loud to hear her speak. No matter, Mr. Sunquist could tell by her rueful demeanor that she was making her story.

What was it he and Melanie had decided? Yes, he remembered now? Melanie had gone down the T-Line Highway to visit the iterations of her own childhood. The Feynman diagram in her glove compartment contained too many streets between there and here that had yet to be built. She'd gotten confused coming back.

Mr. Sunquist spotted himself over by the kitchen door, watching. Melanie had asked Bill to stay away while she tried to explain things to her boyfriend. Of course there was no way Bill Sunquist would do that? let her explain things to her boyfriend? So they might smooth things out? Melanie had been naive to think he would.

It hardly mattered; Bobby Shelbourne saw him over Melanie's head. Shelbourne smiled.

"It's you, isn't it." His eyes were luminous with anger.

Bill made no attempt to deny it. He smiled his most irritating smirk, motioned to Shelbourne in that silent gesture every young man knows? back of the hands up, fingers cupping palms in ironic invitation: Come on then. Come get some.

Melanie pulled him back by the arm, and for one moment Bobby Shelbourne let her. The pause was so brief that Billy Sunquist had barely noticed. Twenty-five years older, Mr. Sunquist grinned: Look how he glances around for a way out!

"You were never no street brawler, Bobby." Slipping into a voice he had not spoken in since he was a vain young man. "You were never nothing like what I was." Even now, Mr. Sunquist lived for these moments. Anymore, the stakes would be infinitely higher than a broken nose. But that desperate calculation remained eternal: Pride? Or survival?

Melanie saw her chance to wedge between them. The two boys clenched each other tight against her. Mr. Sunquist remembered the collision between his belly and her skinny rib cage. He remembered the sound she made as the breath went out of her.

Billy Sunquist might have reached for her. He always told himself that he would have, if only Bobby had not started in the way he did.

"Look at her," Bobby hissed. "Now you've done it. Now you've hurt her." Nobody put Billy Sunquist on the defensive.

Bill Sunquist took a hunk of genuine 100% Rayon bowling shirt and laughed in Bobby Shelbourne's face. Nice try. All these years away, Mr. Sunquist still felt Bobby Shelbourne's cheekbones beneath his knuckles. The two of them waltzed around till they fell back against the formica tabletop, slamming the blender and liquor and ice onto the floor.

Melanie wasn't really so damaged. Mr. Sunquist found her, easing herself back against the refrigerator. Her shirt was soaked watery green from a half-bottle of Midori, but she seemed all right.

Roger Swann had come over to help her up, but she had more than pity on her mind. She took his elbow and pointed toward the mess in the kitchen.

Like any young man of experience, he knew the risks of stepping into someone else's fight. He thumbed the side of his mouth in an expression of unease. But Melanie had this unassailable sense of mission when the chips were down. It animated her. It swept up everyone around her. Roger found his resolve; together, they waded in. Each grabbed an elbow, or a shoulder, and yanked backward.

Bill Sunquist had Bobby Shelbourne's face against the refrigerator. Mr. Sunquist dimly remembered the conversation between them, something about eating the refrigerator's door handle. Oh well.

The next moments came vivid, but in flashes, like snapshots: A hand on his arm. A face coming in at him. He remembered placating words, but his blood was up. He swung back his left hand and connected solidly with hard bone, right at somebody's hairline. The face went away.

Bill Sunquist turned back for Bobby Shelbourne only to find that Melanie had got between them. The fight was over.

He called to her. He nodded toward the door, Let's go. But Melanie was angry, she ignored him.

Shelbourne fixed his eyes on her. Even as his friends moved him off to the far side of the kitchen, he spoke to her. Bobby asked if she'd been hurt, was there anything he could do?

"You know I always took care of you," Bobby Shelbourne called to her. "I may not be exciting, but I'm always there."

Oh, he was good. Anyone else would have blasphemed and threatened.

Melanie looked big-eyed and stricken. This was the moment she had chewed her knuckles over all the way from Kleege's Beach. Bill Sunquist, too. By the look on his face, he might have swallowed an ice tray. He was a street kid, after all. Smooth talk was not where he excelled.

Melanie wavered. She started to raise her hands the way she did when she was miserable and all out of words.

But here was Roger Swann, leaning forward with his hand to his forehead. Blood was seeping through his fingers and plopping in the wet muck. He wobbled on his knees and Melanie took him. Bobby's appeals to her conscience would have to wait.

Bobby smiled, sure. "You're doing the right thing," he told her. "Take care of Roger. We'll talk later. When you have a minute."

Mr. Sunquist had not seen this side of Melanie since they were married. She could be magnificent, couldn't she? He marveled: Bobby Shelbourne is two months from buying up this whole block of apartments for his daddy's marina project, look at how he stammers before her.

His wife felt the weight of his consideration. For one moment she was the girl she had been. Self-possessed and certain. Perhaps she knew what he was thinking. She would have said something to him, but Melanie Everett came this way. Roger Swann bumped along in her wake. Mr. and Mrs. Sunquist stood up to make room for him on the couch.

She was saying something under her breath, half to Roger, half to herself: "Limo." It was Bill Sunquist's street name. "Limo, Limo, Limo," she said? eventually winding up with, "Damn him." Melanie tipped Roger's head back. She squinted against the bad party light. The blood was starting to roll down his nose. She dipped a kitchen towel in the punch bowl and dabbed it off.

"It was just a wild punch." Roger's hand came up, a gesture of indifference. "He hit me left-handed anyway. Probably doesn't even know he did it."

"Him and those stupid rings he wears. He's been dying to use them on someone."

Roger was silent for a few dabs. Mr. Sunquist could see him working his way up to something. "You really have to go with him?"

For one moment, Melanie looked up at the Sunquists with this exasperated grimace? you explain it for him. Mr. Sunquist felt his wife's fingers clutch his, stricken. But it was an illusion. Melanie's look was intended for anyone within earshot? anyone who knew what it was to be the second-prettiest girl at every party. For one night, she had her pick between princes. How could she explain to the nicest kid in the room what this meant?

"I'm going home with Limo." She squeezed Roger's blood into the punch bowl. "I really am."

Roger Swann shook his head, whatever. "We'll see each other again," he said.

Mr. Sunquist nudged Mrs. Sunquist. He raised his chin at the boy. "Sonny's Bar," he whispered in her ear. "This is what he was thinking when he saw you alone in Sonny's Bar."

He laughed so loud that both the people on the couch turned back in curiosity. He didn't care. He waved them back to their conversation. "This is too good," he hissed.

Mrs. Sunquist was supposed to laugh along at times like this. She bit her lip and looked down at her shoes. "How do you do it?" She sounded breathless; she might have been amazed. "I see the time passing and it makes me so weary. And you just keep getting

angrier. Don't you ever feel any pity? Or regret?"

He put out his hands; he smiled. He figured there had to be a joke in here somewhere. "We are what we've always been. Isn't that enough?" It was the only explanation he could think of.

"Poor Roger," she said.

To himself, he thought, Somebody has to lose.

Did she know what he was thinking? Suddenly, she had this look on her face, still and deliberate and calm. It was the face he recognized from the taxi drivers who came to pick him up from bars. Whatever she saw in his eyes only made her sigh.

"Time for us to go," Mrs. Sunquist said.

"We haven't seen the end yet. Remember? I sweep out of the crowd and pick you up, and Bobby Shelbourne? "

"You know what happens. You take me home with you. We spend the next twenty-five years coming back to see it all again. I have something I want to remember."

Here was a phrase Mr. Sunquist would think back on: I have something I want to remember.

In all the years he had come back to La Jetée, Mr. Sunquist had never felt the need to remember anything. Memories were for people who didn't come to La Jetée. Memories were for the ones Mr. Sunquist imagined in his audience.

Part Three

Evening was coming on as they pulled onto Ciriquito Street. The shutters on all the beach bungalows and flower kiosks had opened to the first breath of an evening breeze. The air was dense with the musk of orchids.

This was five years earlier; La Jetée was a strip of bungalows, caught between the highway and the beach. Mr. Sunquist remembered thin times. The tourists had bypassed La Jetée for the more developed resorts down the beach. The only money in the town came from the nurseries across the highway, and service jobs in the hotels south of Kleege's Beach. Every evening the streetcars would be full of people in half-undone housecleaning uniforms. Head waiters from the lesser restaurants would hang from the doors, swigging pilfered wine bottles and calling out insults as they passed each other.

And everyone ended up in the tiny patio at Sonny's.

Here was the Sonny's that the Sunquists never tired of. Sonny's Seafood Chowder Bar was an open courtyard, an old banyan tree, gnarled as knuckles, a cast-concrete bar patterned with ridiculous wood grain. Sonny Himself was whip-thin these days. With ashy skin and freckles and a wide grin that seemed somehow more charming for its insincerity.

He was not charming tonight. He was eating Spanish peanuts out of the bar dishes, which is what he did when he was nervous. His eyes were like black ice and he kept checking his watch.

A door behind the bar led out into an alley that ran from the street to the beach. People passed in and out carrying guitars and tambales and a set of wide-mouthed clay jugs, each one painted with "Jug Breakers" on the side? Bobby Shelbourne's band.

Sonny glared at every kid who passed through that door. He pointed to his watch. They scuttled off to the stage like roaches caught in a kitchen light.

Bobby Shelbourne had played here every Thursday night for most of the summer, but anyone could see the blow-up that was coming. Sonny Scorzy was a congenial host, but he was hell as an employer. He hated lateness, even when he was paying no money. Bobby Shelbourne had a star's concept of time, even though he made no money. Sonny Scorzy hated that.

On this night, only one person was exempt from Sonny's evil eye. Even now, Mr. Sunquist lost his breath at the sight of her. That golden hair. Those exotic eyes. Sonny had saved her his own chair, right at the end of his beloved bar. She took it with this air of modest expectancy? she was gracious and patient as Sonny wiped off the peanut skins and beer. But it never occurred to her to sit elsewhere.

Mr. Sunquist still loved the way she said things and then covered her mouth with her hand, as if surprised by her own sense of humor. He loved the careful, prim way she crossed her ankles. He loved her dubious smile as young Billy Lee Sunquist slid in next to her.

Mr. Sunquist wondered how much it would take to impress a girl like Melanie Everett now. How much had he spent on that account rep from Loach & Widell? Not including lunch at that expensive bistro she had recommended? Billy Lee Sunquist had held his knowledge cheaply when he'd lived in La Jetée, and given it away for the asking.

"Here," Billy Lee said to the young woman struggling with the fruit that Sonny had put out for her. "You wanna know how to eat a mango, I'll show you how to eat a mango."

"I'm with someone," she said, and nodded toward a little door into the alley, where Bobby Shelbourne and his Jug Breakers were tuning up.

Billy Lee Sunquist laughed at the caution on her face. He held up his hands. "I'm just showing you how to eat a mango." He took the fruit from her hand, salted it, dusted it with cayenne pepper, and slipped it down his throat. He licked his fingers one by one and gave her a lascivious grin.

Mrs. Sunquist gave her husband a secret smile. "You remember what you said to me?"

Mr. Sunquist claimed he did not. Mrs. Sunquist said she did not believe he didn't remember. Out on the patio, Billy Lee Sunquist whispered in Melanie Everett's ear. She grew big-eyed and aghast. She gave Billy Lee a slap on the shoulder, and then said something under her breath that made him laugh and made her cover her mouth with her hand.

Mr. Sunquist gripped his wife's hand. This trip was already working changes on her. That sturdy quiet she had acquired over the lean years of their middle age, that had melted to the shyness he remembered so well. He would have shared this moment with the world.

Bobby came out with his nickel-topped Dobro guitar. Roger Swann hunkered down next to him with some squat Caribbean drum between his knees. They were a team in those days, Bobby and Roger. If Bobby played guitar, Roger would be there with the drums.

There was this trombone player that neither of the Sunquists remembered. He nudged Bobby Shelbourne. He motioned toward his girl and the young man sitting next to her.

Perhaps he had a look of mischief. If so, he would be disappointed. Bobby Shelbourne saw Bill Sunquist leaning close to Melanie. He grinned and shook his finger, school-marm style. Billy laughed. Melanie gave him a girl-slug and nodded toward her boyfriend on the stage? See? I told you.

Everybody knew each other at Sonny's. Everything was easy.

The music started. Jug-band blues, simple and irresistible. Everybody on the patio pushed forward under the gnarled banyan tree. They sang along to the songs they knew. They shoulder-danced to the songs they didn't know. They ate mangoes and papayas and drank fermented sidra from terra-cotta jugs.

Then it came time for this walking blues, "Limousine Blues." Billy Lee Sunquist liked this song. He wasn't sure yet, but he was thinking about incorporating it as his personal theme.

He threw back his head at the first note. His face split into a wide grin. "My song!" he cried. "Bobby remembered my song!"

Melanie was still wiping mango pulp from her fingers as he took her hand. "Ohh no," she was saying as he led her out in front of the band. "Ohh no."

There, in front of God and her boyfriend and everybody they knew, Billy Lee Sunquist and Melanie Everett danced some imaginary swing that they knew only from watching Tex Avery cartoons.

Mr. Sunquist felt his wife draw near. She asked him if he knew why they were here. He put his arm around her; he knew. "This is a cute moment together. Look at us there." He

laughed at his younger iteration. Billy Lee Sunquist was barely more than a slouch and a lazy smile. "We were so poor," he said.

"You might have been a billionaire for the way you acted. I was so impressed with you." She looked so long and hard at the young couple she might have been trying to imprint this scene forever in her mind. "This is the moment I fell in love," she said.

Mr. Sunquist tried to remember the moment, what he was thinking. He couldn't. Maybe he too had been in love. Mr. Sunquist laughed as he realized it.

###

As they walked out to the car, he offered to take her to see Piecziznski, the chess master. But something had gone out of the mood. Perhaps this last moment had been a miscalculation? Mr. Sunquist decided they'd seen enough for their first day of vacation. He turned the car back up the highway for their hotel.

Mrs. Sunquist asked him about Roger Swann? back in that first iteration of Sonny's, he should have recognized them. It had been just a few years since they'd all seen each other, had they changed so much?

They fell into a foolish argument about Roger Swann, and why hadn't he recognized them? Mr. Sunquist wanted to laugh, except that underneath it all, the argument wasn't foolish. And somehow it wasn't really about Roger Swann.

Arguing, they missed the Hotel Mozambique. They drove south, beyond even the present iteration of La Jetée. Mr. Sunquist looked around to realize they had gone down the road, on to South Beach? into the future. They became quiet as they realized that nothing around them looked familiar.

No one ever came out to this end of the T-Line highway. Like one of those weighty popular art novels, South Beach was a place on every tongue, but rarely experienced in person. Everybody knew someone who had risked all to catch some glimpse of themselves in a new and unimagined place in their own lives. Always some friend, some relative. Never the person telling the story. Always the tale had some ghastly, amusing outcome.

They were well and truly lost when they reached the first town south of the Present Iteration. Mrs. Sunquist hesitated, but they were running low on power, and she had to use the bathroom again.

"Let's do it," cried Mr. Sunquist, his middle-aged timbre catching some of that old devilish sway. "Let's take a chance and see what we run into down here in The Future."

Mrs. Sunquist looked uneasy. But she would not be outdone by her husband. Laughing together, they swung off the T-Line to get directions from the future back to the present.

###

Another building cycle was coming to La Jetée. All of the old orchid stands that had been on Noon Street and then replanted on Meridian Street were being uprooted again for a tract of old-style bungalow rows. The artist's conception reminded Mr. Sunquist of places he had lived. He wondered if this would be one of his investments.

No mention of the temporal anomaly. Was that no longer considered a draw? The only connection to the town they had left back in the gloom of fog and quantum wave functions was a tag at the bottom of the sign:

SERIOUS ONLY

ENQUIRE WITH MR. ROBERT SHELBOURNE.

LA JETÉE

"Look at this," Mrs. Sunquist said. "They're even tearing down the buildings I hated to make way for new."

Mr. Sunquist knew he should be irate. Bobby Shelbourne hustled his phony nostalgia in the one place where nostalgia was useless. Somehow, he could do nothing but envy the man's gall.

They found an open-air market down the street. Palm fronds covered the porch, implying some sort of tropical oeuvre. Nearer the road were the hydrogen pumps, and electrical-charge outlets, and gasoline for the hybrids. As Mr. Sunquist started into the hydrogen lane, his wife grabbed his wrist and pointed across the street.

Their own car was parked at the curb, as if the occupants had gone for a walk over the chalk-white dunes to the ocean.

The Sunquists stared in astonishment. It was indeed their car, only the paint had faded to a dried-out coral. The seats had been left to the salt air and the sun till they had rotted open.

Someone had half-pulled an old beach blanket across the over-ripened seat cushions. An insignia on the blanket commemorated the Mer Noire regatta, fourteen years hence. The blanket looked as if it had been in the sun a couple of years even beyond that.

Mr. Sunquist thought for a moment. He realized what it had to mean. "It's our car all right, but we've passed it on to our child. This is just the sort of thing we would do."

Mrs. Sunquist looked doubtful. "Sixteen years from now? We'll have this car sixteen years from now?"

"It surely wouldn't be us." Mr. Sunquist cast a melodramatic stare toward Mrs. Sunquist. "Are we down on the beach somewhere? Should we go look?"

Mrs. Sunquist had given over the need to match her husband dare-for-dare. "Let's just get some power and go," she said.

Mr. Sunquist wanted to egg her on a little. "Are you sure? We might be out there. On the beach. Living."

"This isn't funny," she said. "Let's just get the power and go."

Mr. Sunquist might have pushed a little harder but for the baby.

"You're lucky," he told her. He went up to pay for the fuel. She followed along to find a bathroom.

Around the corner from the pump island was a fruit stand and a cashier. As they approached, they heard a gravelly voice. "You know what you put on those? No, not sugar." Chesty laughter. "Thing's already sweet. Why would you put sugar on it? No, you know what they do in Mexico? They put salt on their mangos. A little cayenne pepper. Here."

Mr. and Mrs. Sunquist traded looks. An afternoon of chasing the ghosts of memory had left them unprepared for their role as someone else's ghost. They asked each other in that wordless language of married couples if they should go, but neither of them moved.

Mr. Sunquist felt his throat dry up. He thought for a moment. Was he sure he wanted to see himself like this? He grew impatient with his own timidity. What would happen, anyway? Would they blow up? Some sort of mutual annihilation, as if they were both opposing nuclear particles?

They stepped into the back of the cashier's line as casually as they could manage.

He was with a young girl. She had caramel-colored hair, like Mrs. Sunquist's had been when she had been a student. That same lithe waist. Those legs.

This is my daughter, Mr. Sunquist realized. The lust in him should have shamed him, but it merely made him furtive.

The store clerk flipped a light on so the old man could see what he was doing with that mango. A reflection appeared in the counter glass. Mr. Sunquist stared in fascination at the face of a tired satyr.

###

"We were such scoundrels when we were your age."

"Who's that?" the young woman frowned at the yellow fruit coming apart in her fingers. Her mind was a million years down the T-Line Highway.

"Here. Let me show you something. Over here to the northwest." He was so casual about the way he put his arm around the girl's waist. He aimed her toward a dark smudge along the knife-edge of the horizon, it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Who were you such scoundrels with, Billy?"

"If you look over this way," the old man said, "you can see the actual heat death of the universe." He was trying hard to instill his voice with a sense of wonder that life had not held for him in a very long time. The young woman followed his arm.

Mr. Sunquist was shocked at the resemblance she had to his wife. The dark, sloe eyes, the long, caramel-blond hair, the mobile mouth.

"It looks more like fog," she observed with adolescent irony.

"Can't see it with the naked eye. Somebody set a radio telescope pointing that way. Came back with dead air. Nothing."

The girl nodded. She understood: The cosmic background radiation. It was supposed to be evenly distributed throughout the universe. "Gee, that's interesting." She slurped mango slices.

The old man leaned close as if he wanted to steal a kiss. The girl smiled back at him, What? The soft light of her trust set him back. He looked away down the beach, as if uncertain what to do.

She asked him what he was thinking. He ran his hand up and down her arm, elbow to shoulder as he considered his answer.

"I was thinking of a moment from my life a long time ago," he answered. "I was on a patio, dancing with a girl who looked very much like you. We were both a little drunk, and her boyfriend was playing for us, and everyone was friends, you know? Just.

Friends. And right now, I was thinking that may have been the sweetest moment of my life."

"It must be nice," the girl offered, "having a lifetime of memories like that. I wish I had one moment I could look back on."

The old Sunquist laughed, shook his head. "No, it's terrible," he said. "You spend the rest of your life trying to find that moment again, and it's never where you thought." He paused, as if he'd only just heard his own words. "It's amazing what a person will do to recapture one moment of peace. Amazing and terrible."

Something in his tone made the girl back away. But somehow she was still in his arms, and in turning, she had presented her face to him.

He kissed her hard on the mouth. The girl pushed him back. For a moment, her chin bunched up and her cheeks reddened as if she might cry, or pummel the old man to the ground.

"Dammit," she said. "Damn it." Her hands went up in exasperation. An impulse took hold of her. She ran up and slugged him in the arm, dared him to respond.

The old Sunquist could do nothing but stare at her in stupid love. A moment of silence; then she stalked away down the beach. He squeezed his lips between his fingers. He squinted in anguish. He paced around in a little circle of perplexity, so that Mr. Sunquist could not help feeling sorry for him.

He called after the girl, laughing heartily as if it had all been a joke; she made an obscene gesture over her shoulder.

The present-tense Mr. Sunquist became aware of a profound silence directly behind him. He waited as long as he could before turning around.

Mrs. Sunquist? Melanie? was gone.

He put his fingers to his nose the way he did whenever he had to steady his vision after

too much bourbon. He thought, this is ridiculous. How can I be blamed for something that hasn't even happened yet? Our child isn't even born. I don't even know for certain it will be a girl.

But in his heart, he knew it was not ridiculous. He knew himself well enough to know it was entirely likely. He simply couldn't believe Mrs. Sunquist would not forgive him. He had been forgiven all his life, hadn't he?

He pushed himself up to the top of the sand dune and searched the beach. He saw the girl stalking away along a concrete sea wall, making angry little skips with her palm against the rough stone blocks.

He couldn't find Mrs. Sunquist anywhere.

He realized the old man was beside him. He wondered what he should do. He had heard of people meeting themselves, of course. One always heard stories. He just couldn't remember how any of those stories turned out.

When he could stand it no longer, he turned to the old man: "You know what you've done?" he asked.

The man looked shocked, like a theater patron suddenly addressed from the stage.

"You're not supposed to? "

"You couldn't keep your hands off your own daughter? Damn it."

In truth, he was not very angry. Mr. Sunquist was more overcome with weariness. In his weariness, he saw his older persona in a cool and distant light, the way one sees one's parents after while. He wasn't addressing himself anymore. He was addressing a sad old man who had lost track of things somehow.

He crouched down to take the old man's hand. It was bloated, the skin shiny and taut. "I'm sorry," he said, "It's just? " He paused. How to put this? "That's our daughter. Do you understand? There are some things I just can't do. If I do these things, there will be

no limits for me at all." He looked into the cracked old face for some sign he was getting through.

"Daughter? What do you take me for? That's not our daughter." The old man laughed. There was a certain malicious strain in the reedy voice. Even now, he wasn't so different. "We don't have a daughter. We have a son, Jeremy, but I haven't seen him in five years. You don't know this yet, do you? Sorry. Shouldn't have opened my mouth, I guess."

Mr. Sunquist sighed; of course, this man would know how Mr. Sunquist longed for a son. He would use that knowledge to win sympathy, emotional leverage. Mr. Sunquist wondered if this was the man he truly was destined to become. What a pathetic and self-serving old liar.

"Come on, now," he said as gently as possible. "I recognized her eyes. I know her cheekbones. The resemblance is too strong. You can't tell me this was just some kid you picked up."

The old satyr leaned close. Mr. Sunquist held his breath at the tang of stale bourbon. "Of course it looks like Melanie," he hissed through his gaping teeth. "It is Melanie."

Mr. Sunquist felt something clammy and soft in the pit of his stomach. "You're not supposed to..."

"I was lonely," he said. "Mrs. Sunquist left me a couple years ago? left us, I should say. Left us. I got my car, I took a ride down the T-Line Highway." The rheumy eyes squinted defiantly. "Look at you, you're so self-righteous. What are you doing here? Huh? What are you doing here?"

"You're lying." Mr. Sunquist backed away. Melanie had to be somewhere on this beach; she had been right behind him a moment ago. He called out for her, but his words were caught up in a sudden gust of wind and scattered across the beach like sea birds.

"Lying? To you? Why would I lie to you of all people?"

Way down by the waterline, Mr. Sunquist saw the young girl his wife had been. She looked back at the sound of her name. Was that recognition in her eyes? Mr. Sunquist entertained the notion of following after her. But she was not his wife and he was not

really Billy Lee Sunquist. Not her Billy Lee Sunquist. She turned away up the beach even as he debated his next move, and then she was gone.

"I would know if you'd messed about in my past. Mrs. Sunquist? Melanie? would have said something."

"Times change. Have you talked to Melanie recently?"

"You can't just drive down the road and change my life. You can't do that."

"Screw your life. I was lonely."

"You can't do that," he repeated fervently, hopefully.

He left the old man on the top of the dune and started back for his car. He found it sitting quietly in its refueling lane. The passenger-side door remained slightly ajar, just as his wife had left it.

He walked out in the street and called for her. He had to be wrong. She was here somewhere. She was confused; maybe she hated him a little bit. But she was still his wife. He couldn't have changed time. One didn't do such things in La Jetée. It just wasn't done.

He ran down the street, backward in time, calling for her as he went. Among the empty cliffs where beach hotels and seafood restaurants and temporal observatories had once been, gulls cocked their heads to peer down at him.

He pulled up, gasping at the highway on-ramp. All right, he told himself. Something terrible had happened. But it wasn't too late to fix things. Melanie was still there for him. She was a little ways down the T-Line Highway, that was all.

He would find her as she had been. He would protect her from that sad old ghost. And she would love him more than ever. He would see to it. He would be good to her, and listen to what she said. He would love the woman she was now. And the memories of the people they had been? He would let them remain beautiful memories, nothing more.

Headlights rolled across his shoulders. He turned and stumbled. The car rolled right up to his knees. He thought he was dead.

The driver was a woman with shoulder-length caramel-colored hair and exotically slanted eyes. The passenger was a sad-eyed little man. He stepped out to help Mr. Sunquist off the pavement.

"Are you all right? We didn't even see you. We got lost coming up the T-Line Highway and missed our city. We're just trying to find our way out of here. Trying, you know, not to see more than we should..."

Mr. Sunquist looked at his wife. Her face was clouded with the blank concern for a stranger she had almost killed.

He raised his hands to plead with her through the windshield. He started to ask her, Have I changed so much?

"Roger," she said to her husband, "ask him if he needs to go to the doctor. He looks like he's in shock." She started to slip out from behind the wheel. Her husband waved her back in the car.

"Don't do that, Honey. Just stay there."

Mr. Sunquist saw by the way she moved that she was extremely pregnant.

"Here." Roger Swann peeled a twenty-five-dollar bill off his money clip and stuffed it in Mr. Sunquist's hand. "Go on now, fella." He glanced back at his wife in a meaningful way. "She's having a baby," Roger Swann confided. "I just want to keep her happy."

Mr. Sunquist looked down at the bill wadded up in his palm. When he looked back, the Swanns were already driving away.

He wanted to say something, but he couldn't think what. He watched them pull around,

back onto the T-Line Highway going south.

He ran back to the car. He used the twenty-five-dollar bill to pay for his charge. The truth, he realized, was back in one of those cities along the beach. All he had to do was find where his life had diverged from its path? find that moment of clarity. Wasn't that what he'd always come back to La Jetée to do? He would make it right.

Fifteen minutes up the highway, the towers of La Jetée, like a city sculpted from thoroughly burned ash, rose in the heat of a morning Mr. Sunquist couldn't remember seeing.

He pulled off the highway and wept.