

**It's a Wonderful Life**  
by Michaela Roessner

Michaela Roessner is the author of several novels, including *Walkabout Woman* and *Vanishing Point*. Our readers might recall her story “Horse-Year Women” from our Jan. 2006 issue. She says that her new story ties together several threads: an Aikido student who is currently enlisted in the Coast Guard partly so he can attend film school when his tour of duty is over; her Vietnam vet husband; hearing her friend Marta Randall mourn the loss of certain old buildings in Berkeley; and her own interest in the conventions of wish fulfillment stories. And then there’s the fact that ‘tis the holiday season....

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Dodging all the folks wearing white lab coats who were rushing about, Cal stuck close to the far side of the hallway, using his mop handle to nudge his wheeled bucket along the corridor of the subbasement third floor. He tried to make himself as thin as possible against the wall, tried to look like less of a janitor/slacker by pulling the zipper of his work jumpsuit higher over the black T-shirt underneath; the one that said “Cannes Fan” in the faded silver lettering of too many trips through the washing machine.

The younger technicians had been drafted into hauling down new, revamped equipment. They were having trouble pulling it all out of the service elevator, pushing it the length of the hall, then jostling it through the designated room’s double-wide swinging doors.

The older ones shuffled papers on clipboards, checking off crisp little check marks on long lists, frowning, not looking up even once or breaking stride, not questioning for a moment that the surrounding chaos would part before them like the Red Sea did for Charleton Heston—they were that confident of their status.

Cal glanced into the room as he passed. *Busy bees. Busy bees.* The engineers, physicists, administrators, technicians, security spooks, and who knows else swarmed over banks of machines, tiers of switches, and a vipers’ nest worth of electrical cables. The tangle of cables reminded Cal of Indiana Jones’s snake pit.

It was always like this. The secret separate parts that had been abuilding in the different departments all coming and fitting together into a big-ass, room-filling, three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle.

Cal shoved his galvanized metal mop bucket forward. All it meant to *him* was that in the end there'd be, yet again, one less room for him to clean down here. He glanced over his shoulder, back the way he'd come from slopping down the Control Center at the end of the hallway by the regular elevators and the stairway. Along the hall, between the Control Center and where he stood, he could see the double-wide doors of four other rooms, two on each side of the hallway, facing each other. Their glass windows were blacked out; their doors sealed shut.

Cal wondered, in an idle sort of way, how far the Brass would cut his hours if they ran out of rooms on this floor for the big experiment. They still had five that hadn't been used. One directly across from the room being prepped, and four more on down the line, all the way to the freight elevator.

At the rate of roughly one room every year, he still might not be retired by the time they had to seal off the whole danged floor. At worst he'd be docked to two-thirds pay, since he cleaned the other two floors of the subbasement. Knowing these folks, though, most likely they'd just dig themselves a fourth subbasement floor and keep on trucking. He could probably keep working at full-time pay until he keeled over.

"Watch out, please! Coming through! Sorry!" A female engineer-type shouted in warning. Cal shoved off to the opposite wall, dodging a machinery-laden juggernaut bearing down on him. He recognized it as recording equipment.

Even with long, flatbed dollies, the young researchers left deep-grooved marks on the floor's gray linoleum. Deeper and blacker smudges than the last time. Cal raised his eyebrows, scraped his lower teeth over the brush edge where his gray mustache turned down onto his upper lip. He might soon have one less room to clean, but he'd be putting in extra time scrubbing up that tread. Merry Christmas to you, too, he thought at the retreating white-coated backs.

One of the clipboards—a tall, distinguished-looking African American man—snapped his fingers at Cal. "Calvin! Calvin Hallet! You have to leave this floor now."

Cal tipped his head down the hall. "I still haven't cleaned the two rooms left on this side, Dr. Williams." Dr. Williams looked like Morgan Freeman but sounded like Samuel Jackson.

"That's all right. We're deadlining today so you're off-routine. This floor will be secured and locked down in fifteen minutes. All nonessential

personnel have to go.”

Cal nodded. He knew the drill better than some of the younger researchers. He'd been on board since the very first time. Since the very first sealed-off room. Of course nobody ever sent the janitor a memo. But he'd recognized the signs that today was the day the deal would go down.

“I'll put away my gear and head on up,” he said. Cal reversed his direction. The janitor closet and the restrooms on this floor were around the corner from the Control Center, in a short stub of a corridor. He looked through the experiment room's windows again on the way. Things inside were shaping up like clockwork.

Banks of silvery stainless steel consoles lined the walls, blinking with a blitzkrieg of red and green lights like an overdone Christmas display. Cal suppressed a smile. He knew that most of it was just bells and whistles for registering and logging data.

The contraptions with the real mojo were the two simple-looking big chronometers, same as always, and the oversized switch like a circuit breaker handle. And the ten-by-ten-by-ten-foot glass-walled cube that formed a transparent room-within-a-room in the middle of the floor. Inside this clear cage was the “carriage,” as they called it. It balanced on an intricate sled-like arrangement of metal tubing bolted to the floor.

This time the carriage was a canoe-sized flat-bottomed boat. A technician stood inside the glass booth, leaning over and twiddling with some machinery tucked under the boat's floorboards.

Last year's carriage had been a vintage 1940's Volkswagen—a true German folks' wagon, complete with khaki paint job and Nazi swastikas on the side panels. It could have come straight off the set of *The Great Escape* or *Stalag 17*.

Before he swung his gear around the corner to his closet, Cal glanced at the clock over the elevator: 11 a.m. He got off work at 2:30 in the afternoon. The lab coats were so busy down here, so excited, he knew they'd skip lunch altogether today. Probably dinner too. He might as well go up and mop the cafeteria now instead of at 1:30 p.m. after the lunch hour—normally his last chore of the day before clocking out. He'd take his own lunch break while he was at it.

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The cafeteria, up on the first subbasement floor, usually bustled with food preparations this late in the morning.

Not today. Marilyn, who ran the place, had one of the two young army privates who worked under her doing a major clean-up on the ovens. She had the other one immersed in the nasty job of dredging out a kitchen sump. They were both on loan from the base in Oakland.

Cal wondered if Admin. had also failed to send Marilyn a memo. If not, she'd still picked up on today's vibe. All she'd set out for lunch was a minimum of sandwich makings and three chafing dishes staying warm over sterno on a table near the register. The long bank of stainless steel food tubs lined up under the cafeteria's sneeze guard lay gleaming and empty.

Marilyn was holding down her industrial strength electric mixer into a big bowl, whipping up something chocolatey. She nodded at Cal and his broom, mop, and bucket, obviously not surprised by his early arrival. "Mornin', Cal," she called over the sound of the beaters.

"Good mornin', Marilyn," Cal said, tipping an imaginary cap at her, like he always did. Only difference was that usually they said, "Good afternoon," to each other.

Cal liked Marilyn. She never said much. Never smiled much, but never frowned, either. She looked a bit like Kathy Bates, in any of Kathy Bates's non-crazy roles.

Marilyn was a tough, sturdy gal, an ex-Navy cook. Cal had never asked her but he guessed that Marilyn had gotten her job the same way he'd gotten his: by taking her military resume with her to the Department of Defense offices across the Bay in San Francisco.

"Good day for cleaning up," Cal said.

"That it is," Marilyn replied, shutting off the mixer.

Cal swept the cafeteria floor and was just finishing mopping when two young men in white coats showed up for lunch. The lab rats. They had to be. Even R & D with the D.O.D. allowed the condemned a last meal. None of the other white coats would be taking time to eat today, but they'd be sure that these two got a bite.

Last year's lab rats had been gleaming-blond Aryan types. Cal had guessed they spoke fluent German even before he'd seen the Nazi

carriage two floors down.

These two were more of a mixed bag.

The Anglo kid was disjointedly lanky, with plain brown hair. Cal knew he'd seen the kid around the subbasement complex sporting a full mustache and a struggling beard. The kid had shaved off the trimmings—undoubtedly ordered to for the experiment. Or mission. Whatever they'd told the poor bastard. Now the area of his upper lip and chin stood out paler than the rest of his wan face, making him look vulnerable.

The other guy was a young Korean-American. Cal remembered him a little better. A good-looking, golden-faced kid with the sort of thick, shiny black hair that never thins to baldness. He radiated both respectfulness and self-confidence. The Brass must have just loved this guy.

For the life of him, Cal couldn't figure out where the Brass were going to try to send these two. If they wore any of their period clothing for the trip, the lab coats and scrub-room overpants hid it.

The lab rats bellied up to the table with the heated chafing dishes. Pale kid raised one of the rounded covers and Cal got a big warm whiff of tender pot roast. Marilyn didn't fix pot roast often, but when she did it was food for the gods. The other two chafing dishes held buttery, sage-perfumed pork chops on steamed collards and Chicken Kiev on wild rice.

Once they loaded up their plates and their trays, the kids swiped their I.D. cards through the charge slot at Marilyn's register. They seated themselves at the far end of the cafeteria where the floor had already dried.

Cal put his mop in the bucket to soak, washed his hands in the men's lavatory just outside the cafeteria, then came back in and went over to the do-it-yourself food station to make himself a sandwich.

Marilyn was spreading the chocolate on top of a cake. She nodded toward the chafing dishes and their perfumed aromas. "Help yourself, Cal. They left plenty."

Cal shook his head. "No, thanks. They might want seconds." Then he added, too quietly for Marilyn's workers to hear, just in case they were listening, "Dead men walking."

Marilyn raised her eyebrows a tad and shrugged. She came out from behind the counter carrying a wide platter filled to its edges by a tall angel food cake with milk chocolate frosting. She placed it on the serving station next to the chafing dish table, in direct line-of-sight to the lab rats. They couldn't fail to see it. "I wish I could put out some good wine or beer for them," she said to Cal. "It doesn't seem fair. Pretty cold, even for the D.O.D., to pull this on them just before Christmas."

Cal nodded. He doubted, however, that the holidays made much of a difference. At least not to these two kids. After the very first experiment, he felt pretty sure that all lab rats had been chosen, not just for their talents and skills, but also on the basis of a lack of family baggage. For sure no spouses or children. Parents probably dead or the patriotic blinkered sort who'd buy being told that their children were secretly M.I.A. in glorious service to their country. Probably not even brothers or sisters. Or aunts or uncles—at least not close enough to care.

Cal took his tray to sit a few tables away from the kids. Then he picked it up again and stood, indecisive, thinking. Finally he walked over to their table. He couldn't help a small smile when he saw their plates heaped to overflowing with Marilyn's fabulous grub. He'd forgotten what it was like to be that young and that hungry.

"Awfully empty in here today. Mind if I join you?"

The two lab rats looked up, surprised. Cal knew that usually nobody ruffled the smooth waters of the facility's caste system. Physicists broke bread with physicists. The security spooks ate with the other security spooks.

But this was Berkeley after all, or close enough to it—Emeryville. Up top and outside of the hidden D.O.D. complex, polite counterculture manners tended to dominate. Besides, these two had probably lived in the area at least long enough to know that a raggedy-ass, skinny, hippie-looking old guy working as a janitor *could* turn out to be a hallowed-but-burned-out poet laureate in disguise. Or something,

The Korean kid spoke first. "Sure, man." He smiled. Nicely. "Have a seat. Take a load off."

Awkward Anglo Boy scrambled to push a chair out for Cal. Up close, the kid's eyes matched his hair. Except they weren't a plain brown. They glowed with intelligence.

Cal felt even worse for these boys. Good kids. Helluva thing.

Cal took a couple of bites of his sandwich; chewed, swallowed, then spoke. “So, today’s the big day,” he said—a statement, not a question. “Anybody wished you bon voyage yet?”

The lab rats stared at him nervously.

Cal waved his hand. “It’s all right. I’ve been working here, in this building, for almost thirty years. I’ve seen it all.”

They still looked a little anxious but somewhat reassured. And curious. They were too smart not to figure out instantly that anybody who’d been around for thirty years might have interesting tales to tell. The sort of tales the Brass would have declined to share with them. Cal wondered if they’d ever been curious about the sealed and blocked-off rooms downstairs.

He knew they had to be searching their brains for anything they might have heard about him. If they came up with anything, it would be info readily available: That he wasn’t an abdicated poet laureate, but instead a worn-out old Viet Nam vet that the D.O.D. had taken pity on and given this thankless but steady employment to, back when he’d already been worn-out but no older than they were now.

But that wasn’t even the half of it. The only reason he’d joined the army in the first place was for the G. I. Bill, to go to college—just about the only option a poor and silly kid from the Midwest who wanted to go to school to learn to be a film director had in those days. But nobody here knew anything about that. Or cared.

Cal took the initiative again. “Look. I’m not going to ask. I don’t *want* to know. But just think about something, will you? Wherever they’re sending you to ... to *whenever* they’re sending you....” He paused, started over one more time. “Whatever it is they want you to do, it’s big, right?”

Both kids looked ready to jump clean out of their lab coats and scrub pants.

Cal waved his hands. “Seriously. I don’t want to know. I don’t want to talk you out of anything. Or into anything. I just want you to think about something. Can you hear me out? Look at me.” He spread his hands, indicating his gray custodian’s uniform. “What could it hurt?”

They both settled back down. The Korean kid nodded cautiously.

“Look, whatever they’ve been doing, you have to have figured out that it hasn’t been going too well. Otherwise the world would be a lot better place, right?”

Their faces looked frozen but Cal got the feeling that they were still nodding in agreement, somewhere deep inside.

“I’m not saying that they’re wrong. But maybe they’re trying just too hard. Trying too damned big. Going too far back.”

The brown-haired kid’s eyes narrowed, but in concentration, not disapproval.

Encouraged, Cal reached hard to come up with an example. Not the Holocaust. That would strike too close to home. Way too recent. He’d bet good money that last year’s blond lab rats had been sent back to pull off everybody’s favorite fantasy of an assassination.

“Okay, back a bunch of hundred years ago, the Huns tore up a lot of Eastern Europe. They say Attila and his crew piled skulls into heaps so high that you could rest whole caravans in their shade.

“Now imagine if somebody went back and arranged for Attila to catch a nasty virus, something like the Spanish Flu, and he keeled over before he got the chance to organize his hordes. *Really* think about it. That would mean thousands of people who died would’ve lived to raise hundreds of thousands, millions of descendants, any *one* of who could have made an enormous difference in the world. Likely a whole *bunch* of them would have made big differences. There’s no way to know how that would all shake down. It’s just too dangd big, right?”

The lab rats still looked at him with mesmerized expressions.

“But what if you went back not so far? Not too far? And did something really small. Didn’t kill or kidnap or take any viruses with you or anything like that. Maybe just have a cup of coffee with somebody. Or have a nice chat with a stranger while waiting in line at the supermarket. Or get your car in front of them at a toll booth and pay forward for them, so they’d be in a great frame of mind on a particular day.”

“But how would you know, then?” Anglo Boy blurted out. The Korean kid looked at him sharply, must have kicked him under the table because



Anglo Boy glared at his partner. He turned back to Cal. “How would you know you’d accomplished your goal?”

“You might not at first,” Cal conceded. He watched the interest start to die in their eyes. Why volunteer, why take a chance with your life if you couldn’t tell if you’d made a difference?

“But you might,” he added quickly. “And the differences would show up in what might seem like little things to most folks.”

Doubt darkened their gaze.

“I may be just a janitor,” Cal said, desperate to hang on to them. “But even I can see, by looking at just the little things, how everything is totally screwed up—even if I never picked up a paper or watched the news on TV.

“Look, just as an example: Think of how many movies you’ve seen that could have been great, but they wrecked the screenplay when they didn’t have to. Or terrific films that never got released, that are mouldering somewhere in cans. Or casting that makes no earthly sense at all. Or people who died before their time. Before doing their best work.”

“You mean like Christopher Reeve?” the brown-haired kid said.

Encouraged, Cal nodded. “Exactly.”

But the Korean kid folded his arms over his chest, raised his eyebrows in an *Oh yeah? Prove it to me—I know you can’t*, manner.

Cal scrambled. He ticked off samples from his list.

“Movies that could have been great: *Face Off* with Nicolas Cage and John Travolta. Fantastic acting by both of them. Cage was the transformed Travolta, and Travolta the transformed Cage. But the film resolved itself by them having different blood types. Any moron knows that their switched faces would have started crawling off their skulls before the swap was even finished. There was a perfect solution: Give them the same blood type, O positive, then reveal their true identities through retinal scans, since their eyeballs weren’t exchanged. But somebody got lazy in the script-writing department.

“Miscasting. Did you ever see *Superman II*? On video or DVD? For Christ’s sake, they’ve got *Gene Hackman* as Lex Luther. Wearing a *curly*

wig for part of it. Gene Hackman is a good actor. A great actor. But as Lex Luther? What was up with *that*?

“And why hasn’t anybody made a movie with Billy Crystal, Tom Hanks, and Michael Keaton cast as brothers? Or a movie with Karen Black and Juliette Lewis as grandmother and granddaughter?” He could see he was losing the two kids. Losing them.

Cal talked faster, though he knew he shouldn’t. He couldn’t help himself. “Movies mouldering in cans, never released. Did you ever hear the legend that Metro Goldwyn Mayer shot a movie of *Vanity Fair* with Marilyn Monroe as Becky Sharp? Her performance was supposed to be brilliant, shrewd, transcendent. Oscar-worthy. But the part had Marilyn acting so against type that the studio decided it was unmarketable. Nobody knows where it went to.”

Both the lab rats now held down smiles. Going, going, gone.

One last ditch effort. “Okay, okay—I know all that seems silly, that movies don’t count. They’re just an example. What I’m trying to say is that it’s like that butterfly effect thing. Some small and kind action will have a big reverberation and give you better odds for ending up with a better world. If the little things start showing up the way they should, then the whole can’t help but become more than the sum of its parts. Forget movies. Think of things that *you* really dig, and how they could have turned out better.”

“That’s a very interesting theory,” the Korean kid said, all politeness. They’d finished up their plates during Cal’s rant. “I hope you’ll excuse us, but we’ve got to get back to work soon and I see a big cake with our name on it.” He and Anglo Boy pushed back their chairs, got up and headed for their last dessert. Cal knew they wanted him gone by the time they returned to the table. The brown-haired lab rat looked over his shoulder and said with sympathy, “It’s a nice idea to think about.”

Cal clocked out at 2:30 p.m. The marine layer, which would have burned off by noon, had already rolled back in from the San Francisco Bay, leaving the air dank and chill. He walked up to San Pablo Avenue past old brick warehouses remodeled and gentrified into architect offices, upscale handmade furniture manufacturers, a Pilates center; each with its door painted either a crisp glossy black or hunter green. He caught a north-bound bus and asked for his usual transfer stub. At University Avenue he got off. The corner of University and San Pablo still retained a pre-gentrification, down-at-the heels shabbiness. A few street people

loitered in front of the cheap-shoes store on the corner. The faint smell of pot lingered, as always, around the bus bench. Cal caught the number fifty-one. It took him up alongside U.C. Berkeley and then turned down College Avenue and past Berkeley's stately bungalows with their shingled houses, toward upper Oakland. He lived in a one bedroom apartment over a bakery in the Rockridge Area—a little seedier than Berkeley, but not by much. The art school at Broadway and College Avenue helped the neighborhood retain a laid-back Bohemian charm.

As the bus drove along University Avenue, Cal took in what passed for holiday decorations in Berkeley. Some green and silver tinsel and red ribbons on the street lights. Hanging blue and white Stars of David for Chanukah graced some of the old stucco buildings. Yellow, green, and brown tribal harvest symbols for Kwanza. Pleasant, tasteful, low key. If the lab rats succeeded at the experiment this time, Cal wondered if he'd wake up tomorrow to more holiday trimmings or fewer holiday trimmings.

The always-jammed intersection at Shattuck Avenue loomed ahead. Cal looked to his right. Immense scaffolding covered the better part of a city block, obscuring what had been the U.C. Theater—a funky ancient repertory movie house that had screened old films for years upon years. A favorite haunt of Cal's, it had shown flicks of all sorts, from near and far, popular and obscure, from the excellent to the dreadful. Now the place was gutted, killed, its corpse awaiting rebirth as graceless condos or the undeath of corporate offices. Cal closed his eyes. His chest hurt. Bah, humbug.

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He got up the next morning at 4:00 a.m., like he always did. He fixed himself a bowl of cereal and drank a glass of orange juice and a cup of good coffee, then dressed, pocketed his clearance badge, and caught the earliest number fifty-one bus back to work.

The sky was still night-dark outside when he clocked in at 5:30 a.m. Cal emptied the wastebaskets and cleaned the offices and labs as much as he could before the facility's personnel started sifting in between eight and nine a.m. Usually he started at the first subbasement floor and worked his way down to the third subbasement floor. Today he reversed the order. He wanted to find out what had happened to the lab rats.

Cal knew as soon as he stepped off the elevator. Most of the white-coated personnel still lingered on the third floor. They weren't flapping about anymore. They looked depressed, exhausted, talked among

themselves in subdued tones. Cal picked up a wide-brushed broom and a dust pan and walked past the experiment on his way to the vacant and not-yet-sealed rooms on the other side. Through the glass windows he saw the metal tubing of the sledge standing lonely and empty in the middle of the big glass cube. The boat and the lab rats hadn't come back.

Just like the Volkswagen carriage and the two Aryan lab rats that hadn't returned the year before. Just like the earlier three carriages that hadn't come back either.

The technicians and engineers were wrapping things up. Much of the equipment had already been hauled away, back to the separate departments to be taken apart, dissected, analyzed. Only one bank of equipment remained, set up against the middle of the wall. It included the two chronometers and the toggle switch.

Cal walked back down the hall and trudged up the stairway two floors. After an hour of working on the first subfloor he took the elevator back down. Everybody else was gone now. They'd done all they could for the moment. Just like after the other failures.

Cal swept the four rooms on the other side of the experiment room. Later today, or tomorrow at the latest, some of the technicians would return. They'd take out the last stainless steel console, the one with the chronometers and switch. In its place they'd embed sensors into the wall and leave a get-the-coffin-open transmitter set to a code that only the lab rats knew. Just in case Anglo Boy and Korean Kid ever returned. Then the techs would seal the doors and ventilation systems so tight it looked like it would take an atom bomb to break out. Cal didn't know what they thought might ride the carriage back instead of any of the lab rats, but obviously the possibilities scared them. The specially fabricated fused windows were already secure. All the techs had to do was black them out.

Sweeping done, Cal needed to go back to the janitor's closet for his mop and bucket. He glanced into the window as he passed. It would probably be the last time he'd set eyes on the interior of that particular room.

He stopped. Stared. Dropped his broom and dustpan and ran into the room.

The little boat sat on the receiving sled.

Cal opened the door in the glass booth and rushed to the boat. It

looked a tad battered but it rested in its cradle in one piece. Nobody huddled on the bottom, though. Neither of the two lab rats. On the other hand, Cal saw no signs of blood or violence and the planking that hid the time travel mechanism hadn't been breached, at least as far as he could tell. He stepped back from the boat, looked at it and thought for five minutes.

He left the booth and walked over to the two chronometers. The one on the right was set to the present time. The one on left was set to a time in the past. He looked at it closely. Ah. So that was the "when" they'd been sent back to. It didn't surprise Cal that they hadn't come back. But he was astonished by the boat's return.

He thought for another ten minutes or so. Then he reset the date and time on the Past chronometer. He left the experiment room and walked down to the Control Center, swiping his pass badge to get in. He rummaged around for a while. Dr. Williams and the rest of them would be surprised how much he knew about machinery. After 'Nam he *had* taken advantage of the G. I. Bill and gone to school, and after that had worked as a grip on a few movies. Until he realized that the film industry was as rotten at its core as anything else in life. Hard to accept that he'd survived the war just for the privilege of coming to that conclusion. That's when he'd given up.

Cal found a timer and returned to the room. He figured that just like rocket launches, there must be a countdown once they threw the main toggle. But just to be sure he rigged the timer to throw the switch. He entered the glass booth and climbed into the boat with plenty of time to spare. He didn't worry about his clothes—a janitor is a janitor pretty much everywhere. Everywhen. And he was taking his own advice and not going all that far back. The fifties would do just fine.

The room flashed. Not with light. Not with darkness. It flashed with an absence of everything. When the flash stopped, Cal and the boat had vanished.

Five minutes passed on the Present chronometer.

The room strobed again. This time when it stopped, the boat, with Cal in it, reappeared. Cal looked tired, hungry, in need of a bath, his beard maybe three days scruffier.

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He clambered with stiff limbs out of the boat, patting it before he left the glass booth. He hobbled a bit as he walked over to the Past chronometer and set it back to its original setting. Cal flipped the switch, endured again the instant of nothingness while the boat disappeared one last time. He figured the two kids must have listened to him at least a little, or the boat wouldn't have come back at all from their trip. Maybe the boat would return to them—they deserved at least that much of a chance.

Cal put away his broom and his dustpan and rode the elevator up to the first subbasement floor. From there he jig-jogged down a crooked corridor to the only elevator that connected the subbasement with the rest of the building. He left a note in the Building and Grounds supervisor's box that he'd come in but didn't feel well, so he'd decided to take a sick day. Then he clocked out.

When he stepped outside the facility's front door the sky was still dark but lightening to the same slate gray as the waters of the Bay. Just one day left till the Winter Solstice—the longest night of the year. Cal walked up to San Pablo Avenue and caught the bus to the intersection with University Avenue, empty of street people at this early hour. As he waited for the number fifty-one to arrive he looked over the bank of news-vending boxes behind the bus stop benches. He put some change in the slot of one of them and opened it to take out the holiday issue of the *Berkeley Monthly*, featuring its end-of-the-year wrap-up of music, films, and art. Cal riffled his thumb through it for a moment without looking, then made himself tuck it under his arm. Time to really study it when he got home, he told himself. But the blood in his veins tingled. He couldn't help wondering. What would he find? A review of a new film directed by River Phoenix? Would Jim Henson, venerable but spry, have concocted another muppety bit of enchantment for the pleasure of children young and old? If he found those sorts of things in the pages of the *Monthly* he knew he wouldn't have to look at any front page headlines. Cal shivered not from the winter's morning chill but from anticipation. In that instant he remembered what it had been like to be a child at Christmas: Waking with a bright heart, knowing that the greatest gift was that for that one day the impossible might be possible.

The number fifty-one pulled up. Cal climbed the bus steps and handed the bus driver his transfer stub. "Long night, huh, Bub?" the bus driver said.

Cal's smile was weary. "You have no idea," he said.

When they approached the Shattuck Avenue intersection, Cal looked to his right.

Just like yesterday, the U.C. Theater sat darkened, but the scaffolding was gone and the theater's marquee returned, the ticket booth back in place. Before they left for the night the staff always posted the next day's movie on the marquee so that Berkeley commuters could take note of the coming night's billing on their way to work in the morning. Cal's eyes widened when he read the title for this coming evening's film. Something lifted inside him just as the sun rose over the East Bay hills. He crooned a fragment of a Christmas carol and mumbled-sang to himself, "Peace on Earth, Good will to all..." Tonight the U.C. Theater would screen the 1980 film *Superman II*, starring Christopher Reeve as Superman and Telly Savalas as Lex Luther.