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THE PROLOGUE PAST

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2009

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
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Major Professor: Jocelyn Bartkevicius

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ABSTRACT

The Prologue Past is a collection of four essays and one novella which explore the past in different fashions. Memory, and the ability to reflect and find meaning in our experiences, is an important cornerstone of engaging the past. Decisions I've made, who I am, what I hope to become, and how recognizable or unrecognizable my past self is to the present are some of the mental fragments that ebb and flow throughout my consciousness on a near daily basis. What triggers these thoughts?

I believe that memories—no matter how detrimental or pleasing, significant or forgettable—become a true anomaly of how our inner-consciousness operates or developments. With each day, the past facilitates a special part of our memory bank which we seldom have any control of. While the abilities of people to recall times, events, places, and experiences differ largely in capacity, we all undoubtedly share universal traits in the manner in which we hold onto our memories.

I'm personally fascinated by the notion of unreliable memory or the inability to recall a past event in a concrete moment in time. I'm equally intrigued by what's tied to our most vivid recollections of the past, involving adrenaline and emotion. Having no certifiable experience in neurology, my exploration of memory—and how it's ascertained and utilized—is based on certain moments in my life presented in these personal stories, which range from childhood endeavors to adult conquests, seemingly linked together through particular themes of fear, loss, and hope.

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Pat, your fiction and screenwriting courses have shown me the limitless possibilities in both genres, and I can't thank you enough. Lisa, your nonfiction workshop was invaluable, and it allowed me to reach a level that far surpassed my writings as an undergrad. Thank you both for your contributions to this rather lengthy thesis.

I want to thank my family: my father and mother, my stepparents, brother and sisters, and everyone else who provided the material for these stories. I hope you can see what an inspiration each of you are to me. Thank you, Rosie, for having always been a good friend.

Thank you to my colleagues and the outstanding faculty in the MFA Program. I've met so many great writers and wonderful artists, it's hard to imagine a better writing program anywhere else. I won't have it. And thank you to the U.S. Army for paying my tuition. Couldn't have done it without you. I am grateful for the opportunity to have spent two and a half years reading, writing, and growing at UCF.

“If we refuse to do the work of creating this personal version of the past, someone else will do it for us.”

–Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory*

“He who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present controls the past.”

–George Orwell, *1984*

“That is one last thing to remember: *writers are always selling somebody out.*”

–Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*

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VOLUNTEER WORK

How Did I Get Here?

Before I even consider joining the Army, I move from a rented two-bedroom home in Deltona, Florida where I lived with a friend from high school, to my father's house in Cocoa. He and his wife, Marie, have an extra bedroom, and I'm sick of painting apartments in Orlando, so I apply for a job at the DRS Optronics in Palm Bay. DRS manufactures optics and navigation equipment for military jets, tanks, and other vehicles. Both my father and stepmother work there, and I hope that the family connections can make a difference. Whether or not they do, I'm ecstatic to discover that I get the position for stock-room clerk, and I promptly take my meager possessions and re-locate to Cocoa. I transfer community colleges from Daytona to Brevard, with a few semesters left to get my Associates Degree. I'm twenty years old, and everything seems to have fallen into place—for the time being.

My girlfriend, Vicki—whom I've been dating for the past two years—and all my friends for that matter, still live in Deltona, but I visit her on the weekends, as well as hang out with friends from time to time. I possess no lofty goals or ambitions about what to do with my life. I know that I enjoy creative endeavors such as drawing, writing, playing music, and making short films, but I am not serious about anything.

I am spread all over the place with one goal to the next. What am I working towards? Where am I headed? Will I be content with only an Associates? Could I just work at DRS for the rest of my life? Should I break up with Vicki and go out with Brooke? Brooke's the sister of a friend, and she's also friends with Vicki, and I'm starting to like her. These burgeoning feelings are not going away, in fact, they're growing stronger. I fall for Brooke, leaving Vicki behind,

but's it's the only solid decision I make. For a year I travel this conscious routine, back-and-forth like my daily commute to work on US 1 in my used 1997 Pontiac Sunfire. But then, a vast change occurs across America, and history itself, shifts. I feel compelled to make a clear decision on what to do about it.

It's roughly 9:30 A.M., September 11, 2001, and I'm working the stockroom, pulling optical lenses from shelves to fill the requests from the engineers and technicians. I hear talk among my co-workers about a plane hitting the World Trade Center. "What are the odds of that happening?" I ask. We're all thinking a small plane. Maybe a private jet that lost control of its airspace. News reports coming over a portable radio in the stockroom alert us to another plane hitting the Trade Center. "Now that's even stranger than the first one," I say. I go onto my work computer. Several of the news sites are inaccessible, completely overloaded. It is when I hear that a plane hit the Pentagon that a realization sweeps over me. "We're under attack," I say. My observation is obvious, but I feel a profound sensation of loss. The illusion of safety and security so prevalent in the U.S. is shattered with the crumbling of the World Trade Center buildings into ash.

I run to my father's office—a small room with a desk and circular table in the corner—and ask if he's heard about what's happening. He's scribbling onto a notepad at his desk, unaware that anything out of the ordinary had happened. He stops everything that he's doing when I tell him that two planes have hit the World Trade Center, and that one plane hit the Pentagon. He jumps up from his swiveling office chair, and turns on the portable radio sitting on the window sill. We listen to the reports as other co-workers gather into the room with stoic faces. The reports say that yet another plane, United 93, has crashed in Pennsylvania. It's rumored that the plane was intended to strike the White House. For me, there's no going back to

work that day. I have night classes to attend, but I can hardly think about college algebra, a subject I struggle with no matter what the circumstances.

For a week my father, Marie, and I are glued to the television, like most Americans, trying to understand the horrific acts of terror. Three thousand Americans are dead, there's a hole in the Pentagon, a field of debris in Pennsylvania, and nothing left of two of the World Trade Center towers.

Over the months that follow, I watch as the military is called to action to defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan. I read the newspaper every morning detailing the advancements our military makes throughout all of Afghanistan, nearly decimating the Taliban and their ilk. I had always followed the news regularly, but up until that point, I'd never been so immersed with current events before. I spend most of the day after work watching the major news networks, and reading a vast array of websites and publications. Now it's an obsession.

I can't take my mind off it, the significance of what is occurring before me is overwhelming. Is there anything I can do beyond reading about it? For the next year, I contemplate the thought of joining the military. I look at it two ways: I could continue to work in a stockroom aiding in the manufacturing of military equipment, or I could join the military itself. I pass an Army recruiting station every day on my way to and from work. I talk to a few different recruiters, but am not entirely sold. Logistics is the only real-world experience I have thus far. What could I possibly provide the army?

My father was in the Marine Corps in the 1970s and 80s, his father was in the Navy during World War II, and fought in the Pacific. My mother's father was in the Marines during World War II as well, and fought on the beaches of Iwo Jima. There is a military lineage in my family, I just had never considered that I would be a part of it. I feel a generational call to fight

against those who waged war on us on September 11, 2001, and the acts of terror they had committed against Americans and others before then: the USS Cole bombing in 2000, and the US Embassy Kenyan bombing in 1998. The decision seems to come naturally, and by October 22, 2002, I sign the paperwork and enlist in the United States Army as a supply specialist.

A Shock to the System

It's early morning around 4:00 A.M., and I'm awoken by bright overhead lights coming on and the sound of a voice over the intercom speakers. "Welcome to another fabulous morning in the United States Army." The night before, a group of guys and I arrived at Basic Training in Fort Knox, Kentucky. It is early February, 2003 and Fort Knox is cold. There's snow on the ground, and being from Florida, I'm not acclimated to cold weather. I have only one pair of civilian clothes—blue jeans, a red polo shirt, leather jacket—and that's what I arrive in. I'm wondering when we're going to be issued our uniforms. The basement we sleep in serves as a temporary barracks and it's filled with metal-framed bunk beds from beginning to end. The frigid concrete floor makes me shiver. We're at "in-processing," and our official day of Basic Training hasn't started. I've been mentally preparing for this experience ever since I signed the papers at the MEPS center in Jacksonville, and it's time to go ahead and get it over with.

By the afternoon, a hundred of us sit on packed green duffel bags waiting to be picked up and taken to the barracks to begin Basic Training. We've since been issued our green and black camouflaged uniforms—otherwise known as BDUs—and a slew of Army equipment that fills our duffel bags to the brim. There are physical fitness uniforms, socks, shirts, black boots,

canteens, a small shovel, a helmet, a laundry bag, a sleeping bag, a ruck sack, and more things than I can keep up with. We're issued a manual that will be used as our guide throughout Basic Training: *The Soldier's Manual of Common Tasks; Warrior Skills Level 1*. It is a small, thick book with hundreds of spiraled laminated pages. I read this book daily. We are always told to read it. When we're not training we're reading, or at least pretending to be reading.

We're taken to the barracks on a bus, and several full-uniformed men with brown Drill Sergeant hats are eagerly awaiting our arrival. At twenty-two, I'm older than the other enlistees, most of them eighteen or nineteen. There is, however, an older heavy-set man in our group who looks to be in his late thirties. None of us have said much to each other through the first few days of in-processing. By now, we've all had our heads completely shaved, and there's nothing but skin left. There is no longer any stylistic distinction about hair—impossible tell who had long hair, short hair, or who was naturally bald. Before joining, I had long hair to my ear lobes, parted in the middle and shaved on the sides. I cut it short before leaving, and now my head has been shaved bald. We're issued our military ID cards and our pictures are taken wearing fake dress green uniforms in front of an American flag. This is the picture they will give us to send our parents. Back home, when our parents see this picture they will be proud, unaware that the picture has been taken before Basic Training even started.

The surrounding area is lush with trees, fields, roaming hills and identical government buildings. The brick buildings have no distinguishable characteristics other than signs posted outside that say things like "Mess Hall," and the building number.

"Maybe the Drill Sergeants will be nice to us," I think as the bus parks in the open lot near the two-story building I will call home. A Drill Sergeant slowly climbs into the bus and instructs us to take our duffel bags and form into a line outside in the parking lot, or "drill pad,"

as we soon refer to it. We do as we're told, and then the shouting begins. This is what's referred to as the "initiation process," where our sensibilities are shaken to the core with conflicting demands that startle and confuse us to no end.

"Move out! Move out!" they shout. "Get into a straight line and dump everything in your duffels out onto the ground! Move!" Once everything is dumped out, after being so carefully and painstakingly packed in, they time us to see how fast we can repack the duffel. "Now put everything back in there! Fucking move!" It isn't snowing, we're lucky. Rain, or shine, it would be the same drill, but the weather is normal, if not cool. I'm wearing BDUs and a green camouflage winter jacket. None of us manage to pack the duffels in time, and because of this failure we're told to drop on the ground and do push-ups. We try again and fail to reach the impossible time of one minute, soon finding ourselves back on the pavement, pushing like floundering guppies.

There are more Drill Sergeants around than before—about one for every ten of us. We form into separate rows, a hundred or so of us in all. Clothing and equipment is scattered everywhere. I hope I can recover my things as I'm pushing up and down against the pavement, already reaching muscle fatigue. My arms feel like they have reached the extent of upper body usage. There's nothing left. A Drill Sergeant takes keen notice of my struggles and falls to the ground with me. "Oh come on, McKee, is that the best you can do? Keep pushing!" He must have read the name on the back of my hat. I do what he says, wondering when the charade will end. However, it goes on for the next hour, and it becomes clear that we belong to them for the next two months.

We're divided into four platoons that will last the duration of Basic Training. I'm placed in 2nd Platoon with thirty other enlistees, and we're taken upstairs to the barracks and assigned

bunks in an alphabetical order. I know no one in this platoon and no one knows me, but we're all nervous and ready to do what we're told, knowing now that we're in this for the long haul. We have three Drill Sergeants, all former infantry men—foot soldiers sent in first during a conflict or engagement—who display a wide-range of personality traits.

There is a short, quiet Drill Sergeant who only speaks to give us an order. He'll say, "Privates, do some push-ups," in a booming southern accent and walk away. There's a large bulky Drill Sergeant who has a mean streak in him a mile-wide. At first he's nice to us. He has a big smile on his face, and tells us that we're better than all the other platoons. "We're going to show them how good we are by yelling 'Bushmasters' at the top of our lungs. We'll yell it so loud that we'll put them all to shame." The name "Bushmasters," our platoon name, evidently comes from our ability to navigate through the wilderness and engage the enemy.

Later, he takes a private outside the building who said or did something wrong and "smokes" him for an hour. "Smoking" is what we become used to as it is a daily process of having us do repeated military exercises well past any semblance of muscle fatigue: push-ups, then rolling around on our backs, kicking our feet in the air in rhythmic succession, then jumping up and jogging in place. The third Drill Sergeant is large and built, and his temperament is like a cross between the quiet one and the no-nonsense borderline sadistic one. He's not around as much as the other two, but when he is, he doesn't seem interested in humiliating anyone, he only wants to train us.

They refer to us as "Privates" as in "Listen here, Privates," or "You Privates are all ate up." We refer to them only as "Drill Sergeant," as in "Yes, Drill Sergeant," or "No, Drill Sergeant."

We're taught the basic fundamentals: the Soldier's Creed, the Army Song, the Army Values, and our eleven general orders. The Soldier's Creed is about a paragraph long, and fairly easy to remember. It's the rules all soldiers must live by, and it starts out with, "I am an American Soldier, I am a warrior and a member of a team." There are seven Army Values: loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, and integrity; each with their own footnote. The Army Song is series of repeated choruses and refrains centered on the main verse, "And the Army keeps rolling along." We sing it just about every day. Our eleven military general orders detail what is expected of us as basic training enlistees and soldiers for the rest of our career.

A week after arriving, we're lined up at our bunks after dinner as usual and asked about each of these basic fundamentals. The meanest of the Drill Sergeants calls me to the front of the room where he stands. I'm at the very last bunk at the opposite room, so I run to him saying, "Moving, Drill Sergeant!" He asks me our first general order, and I know it without an issue.

"My first general order is that I will guard everything within the limits of my post and quit my post only when properly relieved, Drill Sergeant."

Without missing a beat, he continues, "Okay, what's your second general order?"

Shit, the second one. What's the second one? I choke. They generally *only* bother us about the first three so the *only* reason I can't recite it seems to be that my heart is going on overdrive. I manage to conjure up a hybrid of the second and third one to no avail.

"I will report my special orders and anything not covered I will report to the commander of the relief," I say.

"Go back to your bunk and knock 'em out," he orders, clearly disappointed in my nonsensical answer.

The days are long and unending, and we're often lucky to get three or four hours sleep a night. In the first week, most of time is spent in classrooms, watching power-point slides as we struggle to stay awake. It's a constant battle, and part of our mental assimilation. We're taken to obstacle courses, firing ranges, and engage in military combative exercises and simulated scenarios. I roll with the punches and write home when I can. I console myself with letters to my girlfriend, Brooke, and read her weekly letters telling me about how things are going back home.

As soon as I feel like I'm getting used to the place and that it's not going to be that bad after all, things start to get worse. I'm being tested in new and unexpected ways. In the second month, I wake up late at night with some kind of gunk in my left eye. It's itchy and inflamed, and the more I rub it, the worse it gets. I'm required to go to the medical center where they tell me I've contracted Pink Eye, or conjunctivitis, and I'm assigned to be quarantined away from my platoon in a room down stairs. I'm given eye drops and sent on my way. This is in addition to my swollen shins, referred to as shin splints, from running and marching daily. I go the medical center again, and I fear I might be put on crutches like so many of the enlistees I see around me. The most dreaded word in our lexicon is "recycle." It's a term used to describe the process of starting Basic Training all over again.

Fortunately the medic says I won't need crutches. He gives me some Ibuprofen and sends me on my way. My left eye has crusted over so badly with slime and puss that I can't even see straight. I'm moved out of quarantine and placed back within the Platoon. I'm told we're going to the firing range, we're now in Blue Phase of Basic Training, and have only a few weeks to go. I don't know how I can possibly fire a weapon with my limited vision. I feel hopeless, I don't think there's any way I'm going to do it. I fear that I won't qualify on the rifle range and get

“recycled” like the enlistees I see in the other platoons who re-started because of medical issues or insubordination.

Before the Army, I’d fired a pistol and a shotgun once at a friend’s house near a cow field. At Basic Training our main focus is rifles, by far the most common weapon in the military. We’ve been issued M16A2 carbine rifles, and it’s my turn to fire. Though we’ve been out to the range consistently for a week, I’m certain that my condition will prevent me from hitting enough targets. I try not to wipe my left eye, but it’s nearly impossible to resist. I’m mainly relegated to the vision of my right. We’re lined up at the outside firing range under the bright sun with two twenty-round magazines of 5.56mm ammunition. We get into our firing positions and prepare to hit the green silhouette targets that vault upward from behind small hills some 350 meters away.

Lying down on my stomach behind two sandbags, I hold the barrel of the rifle with my left hand, using my elbow to balance and aim. My right hand clutches the handle and my index finger touches the trigger. In all, the weapons weighs about five pounds. Breathing has everything to do with accuracy. That’s what we’re taught. I breathe steadily, hold my breath, and pull the trigger. I hit some and miss some, but I haven’t a clue as to whether I’ve hit enough. We have to hit at least twenty-three targets out of forty, and when the ordeal is over, I’m immensely relieved to hear that I hit thirty. It seems like smooth sailing from here on out, with only a few weeks to go. My Pink Eye begins to subside, and we are gearing up for one of our last physical fitness tests. Passing the test means that we move on to the final stage of Basic Training.

Up to this point, I’ve managed to stay low-key for nearly two months, even given my eye infections and shin splints, but my fortunes soon change, and I am thrust into the spotlight as the one who the Drill Sergeants believe isn’t going to make it.

It's early morning during our physical fitness test, and we're lined up in the parking lot outside our barracks. The first event is push-ups, followed by sit-ups, and then a two mile run. I think that I have missed my push-up goal by four. Having sore, fatigued muscles has taken its toll over the past few weeks. In our hands we hold individual score cards, and I forge the number of push-ups I did, changing thirty-one to thirty-nine. I'm desperate and confused, thinking I need at least thirty-five to pass, but I later find out that I only needed thirty. I pass the sit-ups with seventy and the two mile run in fourteen minutes. Running is my strongest attribute, and my time has improved from my initial score of sixteen minutes. There is, however, nothing to celebrate.

The Drill Sergeants discover my forgery because my score card doesn't match theirs. I never consider that they were keeping track of our scores on their own sheets. I'm immediately taken to an office and told that I'm going to receive UCMJ action, which stands for Uniform Code of Military Justice. "And you can forget about passing Basic Training now," they say. "You're a definite recycle."

I write home and tell my father that I'm not going to make it, and that I have failed myself and my family. I'm distraught for the next week, working kitchen duty while the rest of the platoon completes training. I beg the Drill Sergeants to let me reenter training. They tell me to get the hell out of their office and go back to kitchen duty. The other Privates in the platoon are smiling and excited because it's the last week. I have nothing to smile about. I think I'm going to have to do it all over again. Other enlistees feel bad for me, and try to tell me that everything is going to be okay. I'm scared and desperate, angry with myself for doing something so foolish. Sometimes, in secret, I cry. Other times I pray.

I have no illusions about completing the training and feel about as low as I have ever felt in my life. I can remember doing poorly on the SATs in high school because I was weak in math,

and I can remember how I screwed things up with a high school girlfriend I cared greatly about. I can remember saying things I'd later regret to my parents or friends during an argument.

Nothing, however, can measure up to how I feel now. Sometimes I'm included in the training, other times I'm not. Every test, everything they administer—grenade training, land navigation, and first aid combat casualty training—I pass easily, but feel that it's not going to matter in the long run. I re-take multiple Physical Fitness tests to show them that I can do it, but it doesn't seem to matter. I go to the very last day of Basic Training wondering when I'm going to have to re-start everything.

On graduation day, the meanest of the Drill Sergeants asks why I'm not wearing my dress greens like everyone else. I tell him that I don't think I'm participating in graduation. He tells me to get dressed and ready, and walks away. Somehow, miraculously, I make it. It seems surreal, almost like a dream; as if I had been part of some joke that everyone was in on except me. I jump into my dress uniform in a matter of minutes. The ceremony takes place that day, and my family is there. Everything the Drill Sergeants had told me had filled me with dread, but I graduate Basic Training and it's over. It's not the way I would have preferred to have started my military career, but I learn something about integrity that I hope to hold on to for the rest of my life.

A Not-Yet Winter Wonderland

I spend two glorious weeks at home in July before my assignment to my permanent duty station, Fort Drum, New York. I've finished Basic Training and Advanced Individual Training—where we focused on the specifics of supply roles in the Army. Basic Training was geared towards the type of infantry tactics every soldier should know, such as field operations, weapons

training, drill and ceremony, platoon leading, and first aid, while AIT was specialized training, more specific to my military occupation. There we learned about property accountability procedures, physical security of equipment, the signing of property, and a litany of government forms and documents. As I leave for Fort Drum, there's nothing to worry about, but I'm still nervous about moving to a place I had never been before, and anxiety is in my DNA. I remember thinking on the bus to Basic Training, "Man, I hope this bus crashes." After leaving home, I take a small plane from JFK to Watertown, the town outside Fort Drum, and ponder my future.

"I just wish this plane would crash," I think to myself. "Sure I'd be dead, but I wouldn't have to worry about anything." But if the plane descended suddenly I'd probably shout, "I didn't mean it, it was just a thought! I want to live!" Then as the plane steadied, I would say, "Well, this sucks." Then it would descend again. "No, I'm too young to die!" Over and over again just like that. Then the pilot would come over the intercom, "Could the self-absorbed passenger in seat 2A make up his mind already?"

I arrive at Fort Drum and it's not snowing yet. I'm told that it snows ten months out of the year, but it's every bit as bright and sunny as my home state. Fort Drum is tucked away in the middle of nowhere, like many military posts, and I see vast wilderness and some interesting wildlife whenever I'm on foot—which is most of the time because I have no car. The small town of Watertown is just outside the base, and there are plenty of hills and mountains in the distance. Because of the lake effect, they say that Fort Drum gets even colder than the coldest parts of Alaska. They send soldiers here to conduct extreme cold training. There's more in-processing to be done, and I'm placed in temporary barracks with other newly arrived soldiers, young men like me, who have recently joined up. My orders state that I will be assigned to the Headquarters and

Headquarters Company of 1st Brigade Combat Team. “That’s a lot of headquarters,” I think. I work for a man named Sergeant Bonnet—the “t” is silent—a stocky Creole man about my age.

“Private McKee,” he says upon meeting me. “Are you ready to go to Afghanistan?”

“Roger, Sergeant,” I say, and am taken to our Headquarters building adjacent to the infantry barracks for single soldiers, carrying only my duffel bags with me.

Sergeant Bonnet wears a Desert Combat Uniform (DCU), a definitive sign that he was not feeding me bullshit. I’m still wearing BDUs, and I stick out among most of the soldiers in our company who are dressed in desert tans. He immediately lets me know who’s in charge of his section of three other supply soldiers. I work for him, and answer only to him and our Commander. I better be willing to work and do what I’m told at all times. Once I’m taken to my room, I’m told to report to the parking lot at 0630 hours for physical fitness training. He closes the door, and I’m alone to contemplate my new home away from home. There are two beds, two desks, and a mini-refrigerator in the room. I haven’t received a roommate yet, which I figure won’t be too much longer, and cherish the temporary privacy. The bathroom is shared with the room next door. There’s no air conditioner, only a heater as I’m told they have no reason to install air conditioners in the room.

Our supply team consists of three other soldiers who have been with the company much longer than me. They’re young guys who joined years before, and seem to know their jobs pretty well. One of them, Specialist Weary, runs the gas mask distribution and maintenance in an office referred to as the NBC room. The other one, Corporal Whitman, runs the arms room and the issuing of the weapons. CPL Whitman had been to Bosnia years before, and tells me stories of what a dump the place was. Another soldier who works under Sergeant Bonnet isn’t too keen on the whole “Army thing” anymore. Specialist Smith is a tall and overweight black man, a

specialist, one rank above my own, but he's not wearing DCUs like everyone else. His enlistment is up, and he's getting out of the Army altogether.

“Man, this is just a whole bunch of bullshit here, man,” he tells me. He's always at odds with Sergeant Bonnet, and constantly getting into trouble. He even steals MREs from the supply cage and sells them to a local Army Depot store. I don't know if I should tell Sergeant Bonnet any of this, as I'm still very new to the company. Specialist Smith is gone before we leave for Afghanistan; back home to continue on with the rest of his life.

I soon fall into a certain routine, similar to the routines we were so inundated with in Basic Training. We have an office in the headquarters building, a supply cage of equipment, and a highly secure weapons vault. This is my place of business during the day, and my tasks consists of inventories, weapon maintenance, and supply pick-up at the warehouse a few miles away. There's morning formation, physical fitness, breakfast, personal hygiene, work, lunch, work, final formation, dinner, then personal time. I go to the gym, call my girlfriend, Brooke, watch television, call it a night, and do the same thing all over again the next day.

Life at Fort Drum is initially short-lived as I'm only there for a close to a month before we're gearing up and ready to take the flight to Kandahar, Afghanistan—another place I've never been before. It gets colder with the passing month, and suddenly we're gearing up to leave. On that cold September day, hundreds of soldiers wait outside the headquarters building with two duffle bags and one ruck-sack each to load into buses that haven't yet arrived. I make my last call on my personal cell phone to Brooke back home and hesitate, wondering if I should tell her that I love her. I've never said it to any girl before, but it feels appropriate. It's not that I fear what lies ahead, just that it will be a long time before we'll see each other again. Our relationship

is relatively new, but I know that she means everything to me. It's every bit as true as any sentiment I've felt, and she feels the same, taking me completely by surprise.

"I've been wanting to tell you the same thing. I love you too." she says.

The buses arrive and we're taken to the airport for a thirteen hour flight to a country called Uzbekistan where we'll fly military cargo—courtesy of the Air Force—to Kandahar, Afghanistan. I don't want the plane to crash because this time things are serious. The unlikelihood of a bus crash to Basic Training or a plane crash over Fort Drum propelled me to desire the worst to combat my anxiety. Now I want to survive and go home in the end.

When I signed the papers nearly a year before, I didn't imagine deployment would be so quick.

The Mountains of Mordor

A group of us arrive in a Chinook helicopter at Kandahar Airfield. The Chinook rattles us against our seats, and it's hot and stifling inside. We're all wearing helmets and camouflaged vests with metal plates inside. There are Headquarters soldiers on the flight that I've gotten to know over the past couple of weeks, men and women who comprise the commo section, the maintenance section, the medics, finance, operations, records, and administrations. My section is, of course, supply. Sergeant Bonnet left before me and he's been in Afghanistan for a week or so, setting up the various accounts we need to function. From the moment I get off the helicopter and walk quickly down the runway with my gear, I'm struck by intense heat. It must be at least one hundred and twenty degrees out. The air field is limitless, more than I can take in. I hear nothing over the blaring of aircraft engines, and feel disoriented upon our arrival in the desert.

I'm wearing my helmet, tan boots, sunglasses and a set of DCUs. A large ruck sack full of whatever I think I'll need out here weighs heavily on my back. An M16 rifle is slung around my neck, hanging over my chest. In both hands, I'm carrying full duffel bags.

We're surrounded by mountains on all sides. They seem to operate as lower extensions of the stratosphere, awe-inspiring, and fundamentally absurd to take-in with one look. I have never seen such vast mountainous ranges, even throughout the American landscape. We arrive in a welcome tent, drop our gear, and take a seat. There's bottled water everywhere—a welcomed sight. A Sergeant First Class that I recognize from the operations section welcomes us to Afghanistan. He's a Cuban man with slicked-back black hair and a slight accent. "Make sure you drink plenty of water out here, it's the hottest time of the year right now," he says. We're given the rules of the base—where we're allowed to go and not go—and some brief factoids about the area. We're on an airfield operating as a base. We're not to leave the base under any circumstances unless given the proper clearance. Weapons are to be carried with us at all times, and we're to drink water frequently, no matter how hydrated we may feel.

Kandahar Airfield (KAF) is a Forward Operating Base (FOB) located in southern Afghanistan, near the Pakistan border. FOBs are military locations that act as areas of operations to the conglomerate of forces working together towards bringing security to a specified region. I know little of the area, or its people, but I bring some books with me about Afghanistan, hoping to learn more. Most of the population in the area identify themselves as Pashtun. Kandahar is a province, and Kandahar City is about ten miles away from the airfield. The airfield itself used to run as a major airport until the Taliban took it over. Coalition forces re-took the area and now the airfield is used for military operations. I hope that there is something I can do to assist with everything that is going on. We're supposed to be helping the Afghan army keep the Taliban at

bay. Present circumstances far transcend personal aspirations, and I realize that I am but a small part of an organization trying to reach a larger goal; a goal that seems less clear as time progresses.

There are some impressive building structures in view from the initial airport construction. Afghan National Army soldiers are located on their own side of the base, and I rarely ever see them. We have our own wood huts and offices located throughout the base, most of them are embedded behind large concrete walls to protect them from rocket attacks. We're surrounded by giant wire mesh containers filled with sand and gravel, called HESCO barriers, which act as a fortified walls. Other than us and our wooden buildings, there's nothing but desert out here.

Sergeant Bonnet picks me up on my first day in country in a Humvee and takes me to our quarters. There's an office in the front with two computers, and some office supplies on the shelves. In the back is a darkened room with a few beds. Sergeant Bonnet, Specialist Weary, Corporal Whitman, and I are all roommates now, and this is where we'll be living for the next year. It's a bit cramped at first, but being in the military is all about adapting to your circumstances, and we do so accordingly. We divide the room into different sections with military blankets and bookshelves, and before long we all have small, but modest areas of privacy that serve as a sanctuary at the end of the day.

Our supply operations center is located along a line of huts occupied by the infantry, i.e. foot soldiers. We have three infantry companies in all under the brigade. They're mainly young men, experienced and efficient in their abilities, but when we hang out at the end of the day, it's just like talking to friends back home. They have many stories to tell about foot patrols and where they've been and what they've seen. A few soldiers and I talk about music and playing in

bands and what we want to do when we get home. I have no war stories to tell, but we play shoot 'em up video games at night until it's time to turn in. At twenty-three it still seems like I'm older than most of the soldiers I encounter. Most soldiers my age, are sergeants, and I'm still a Private First Class.

There's also Romanian, French, and Canadian soldiers staying around the base. I try to recognize the difference between the uniforms of different countries. You can tell their nationalities by the flag sewn onto their right shoulder sleeve. The Afghan military wear uniforms similar to our own BDUs, along with black boots. For all I know, they could be wearing old US military uniforms. The men have beards, and they are transported into the base in large trucks. They look like men just taken off the street, and it's at our base where they'll train to take the fight to the Taliban. Their military induction process obviously differs from our own, but to them, the war is inescapable and it looks like the Afghan government needs all the help it can get.

The daily activity of the base is busy. There are military trucks and Humvees arriving and leaving throughout the day and in all hours of the night. Black Hawks, Chinooks, C-130s, and United Nations envoy flights touch down on the runway and fly off in constant succession. I don't see any Marines, but there are plenty of Air Force. The lack of Marines means that the ground operations are heavily reliant on the Army, and that the bulk of engagement against the Taliban will have to be done by the soldiers in my brigade. The Marines are elsewhere, fighting other fights, which makes Kandahar U.S. Army territory.

An endless billow of black smoke trails in the distance every day from the giant trash pit at the far end of the base, where trash is taken and burned. The bathrooms consist of portable toilets, or Porta-Potties, and mobile bathroom units where we take showers. Afghan locals come

onto the base and clean them regularly. There's a mess hall, a gym, and a small Military Exchange store where we can buy the basics: snacks, hygiene products, books, CDs, and even DVDs. Life on the FOB isn't too bad, but there's no denying that all of us long for home.

I don't know exactly what my job entails just at first, other than doing what Sergeant Bonnet says. We have a gas-powered motorized mini-car called a Gator that we use to travel around the base. All supplies are flown in, and distributed at a make-shift warehouse on base. I take the Gator to get vehicle parts for the mechanics and drive them to the motorpool. I take radio parts and deliver them to the comms section. Everything else, I take back to the supply office. We conduct monthly inventories on all the company's weapons, radios, vehicles, and equipment. There's Humvees, rifles, machine guns, gas masks, and handheld radios to keep track of. In addition, we order personal clothing and equipment, such as a replacement helmet or uniform for the soldiers that need it.

I sometimes wonder if I'm making any kind of difference in the grand scheme of things. I know that I am here, that I have a job to do, and I feel far removed from danger. Nonetheless, I believe in efficiency and getting the platoons what they need in order to conduct their mission. I have nothing to prove, and just what is required, however ambiguous it may be. We are to have our rifles on us at all times, and it soon becomes second nature. Our rifles hang over our shoulders on weapon slings. You bring them to eat, you bring them into the bathroom, and you bring them anywhere you travel on the base.

The only time I fire the weapon is when we go to the range, which is usually monthly. I don't see any combat, but the infantry companies that go outside the wire get into mild skirmishes with Taliban forces from time to time. So far, there are no casualties, and I hear of these firefights as mostly success stories. I'm not afraid because it seems like we are winning.

The Taliban seem few and far between, and the base continues to grow and flourish, but for how long?

Supply, I soon find out, isn't the only job I will be doing at KAF. Sergeant Bonnet volunteers me for anything that comes up, and I hold nothing against him as I prefer delegated tasks to sitting around the office during our seven-day work week. By my second month there, I'm told they need a radio operator to work night-shifts at the Brigade building where they devise directives for every mission that takes place outside the base. I work nightly in a room with several radios in it where I monitor and log the communications from the local infantry night patrols to Headquarters. A large map of Kandahar is affixed to the wall and there are two sets of radios and hand microphones at two different tables. A laid-back sergeant in his late twenties runs the place, and I take orders from him. He speaks with a low, calm growl and drinks coffee by the boatloads. He tells me about his time stationed in South Korea and how deeply fond of the experience he is.

“South Korea, man, there's just nothing like it. I was stationed there for six years, and loved it. Love the women. Love everything about it. I can't wait to move back.”

The radio-lingo takes me a couple nights to get used to. Most of the time, my log consists of receiving simple radio checks. “Say again,” “Roger,” “Break,” “Over,” and “How Copy?” are common words on any given night. Most of the calls happen like this:

“Bravo One, this is Echo Tree Echo radio check, over.” “

“Echo Tree Echo, this is Bravo One, over and out.”

One night there is an attack on a position, and they call it in. It's a startling difference from what I'm used to coming over the radio, and the sergeant next to me takes over the radio and gets their position.

“Roger that, say your location,” he says.

He begins to scribble onto a notepad and is in complete control of the situation when a gruff Sergeant Major with a crew cut bursts into the room with several other high ranking officials. He looks directly at me and demands answers.

“What are they saying? What the hell happened out there?” he asks.

I begin to explain what I know of the situation when he pushes past me and points to a large map on the wall of the area.

“What are their coordinates?” he asks me. I know nothing just yet, and tell him, the best I can, what they said in their last transmission. The radio sergeant turns around and fills the Sergeant Major in on the details. The platoon has some Romanian soldiers with them, and one took a bullet through the throat. They’re bringing him back to the base for medical treatment. By the time they arrive, the soldier is dead.

After a month of duty as a radio operator, I’m volunteered for gate duty to scan and search Afghan men entering the base for construction work and other menial employment. There are never any women. They can be seen outside the base wearing burkas, but I don’t see an actual Afghan woman my entire duration in Kandahar. I do see little girls, around five or younger walking with their fathers sometimes. Instead they wear small robes, much like the men. The Afghan men coming into the base are polite and friendly, and I want to be nice to them, but have to remember to be alert and not become complacent. I am, after all, searching for weapons or bombs. Their robes are dirty and many of them are barefoot. It takes a while to get used to patting them down and combatting the odor, but I have to remember that this is a third-world country, and the people are deeply impoverished.

After gate duty, I'm assigned a two-week detail untangling hundreds of air craft ratchet straps, rolling them up neatly, and placing them in large bins. These long, flat rope-like extensions, are generally used in military aircraft to hold down pallets of equipment within the belly of the plane during flight. After a flight, they're reused or simply tossed aside. We're dealing with the aftermath of months, or perhaps years of ratchet straps that have been used. It's monotonous work, and a small group of us work for eight or so hours a day under the sun digging through piles of ratchet straps near the runway. The job requires little, if any, thought so I allow my mind to drift and think of songs I'd like to write, or ideas I'd like to make into stories. I think of going back home and marrying Brooke. I think of what our house would look like, and how I'd clean it up and have friends over on the weekends. The task at-hand, however, seems endless, but in two weeks we have every ratchet strap neatly rolled into a bin.

There's another detail and I soon aid in sectioning a new perimeter near the base in concertina wire as a result of base expansion. It's more busy work, but I feel a comradery with the other soldiers around me as we work together to pull the wire and stake it into the ground in an area roughly a mile long. It isn't the most enjoyable work, but we have a task to complete, and work together well even having only known each other a few days. The uniform says it all. A soldier is a soldier, and we're all doing what we have to do identified by the simple fact that we're wearing the same clothes. I'm wearing concertina wire gloves, my desert boonie cap, and sunglasses. We see a moped in the distance with two Afghan men riding towards us. They leave a long trail of dust in their wake, and we take instant notice of their approach.

"Everyone be on the look-out," the soldier in charge of the detail says. He holds up his rifle and aims at the men. They get within a few hundred feet of us, and quickly turn around, riding off the way they came.

“What the hell was that all about?” I say. The best I can get is that they’re either Taliban scouts or two morons lost on their moped. No one knows for sure.

I volunteer for a few foot patrols outside the base just to get a sense of the area outside the wire. There are unoccupied demolished buildings everywhere, and the empty town looks like a movie set. I’m told by the Platoon Sergeant that the structures have remained like this since the Soviet-Afghan war. There are several destroyed Soviet tanks in the area too. In addition to the surrounding wreckage, I see oil tanker trucks lying in ruins. The ruins comprise an aftermath of decades of fighting, as permanent to the area as the dilapidated building structures of this Afghan ghost town.

Weeks later, I’m assigned to a security patrol on the eve of the local elections that takes me into Kandahar City for the first time. I’m behind the wheel of a Humvee in a large convoy on the way to the mayor’s house. Buildings line the road like something out of a George Orwell novel. It’s all very dystopian in a sense. In front of all the worn buildings, shops, and homes are trough-like gutters. This, I’m told, entails their sewer system.

We position ourselves around the mayor’s house, and the soldiers I’m driving exit the Humvee and begin to set-up barricades. I’m told to stay in the vehicle, and I soon find out why. A shot rings out from a nearby rooftop and the security mission is called off. There’s a sniper in the area. All the soldiers run back to their vehicles. “Drive!” a soldier shouts, but the shifting lever is stuck and I can’t move the Humvee. “Who the hell’s driving that thing?” a voice shouts in the vehicle behind us. “Some fucking Private,” I hear another voice respond. At this point, I’m panicking and trying to keep my cool. The Humvee won’t get out of neutral. I eventually get it into drive, and floor the vehicle to catch up with the fleeing convoy. I feel incompetent, and no longer want to volunteer for things outside the base.

In nine months, my time in Afghanistan comes to an end. We leave the area, re-deploying sooner than I had expected, and I find it strange that I'm ecstatic to be back at Fort Drum of all places. I thought we were going to be there for a year, which is what we were originally told, but deployment forecasts have a way of changing though certain echelons beyond my rank. I adjust to life back on the post, which consists of the same routines I had become accustomed to before I left. I take some leave, go back home, and visit for two weeks. My grand homecoming is short-lived, and I'm saddened to have to return to Fort Bliss, but by then I'm promoted to the rank of specialist and placed in charge of the arms room where the weapons are stored. Sergeant Bonnet moves on and we get a new Supply Sergeant, Sergeant Kurtz, who knows a lot about music and chain smokes incessantly.

I make some good friends in my time with the 10th Mountain Division. It's strange to think that I could form friendships with so many different people that I had never met before. We know each other as soldiers first, and the closer I get with them, the more I begin to learn. This is where such connections are formed. I develop a close friendship with a thirty-one-year-old Nigerian man as well as a nineteen-year-old former cop from New Jersey. There's a short, stocky twenty-something infantry soldier who was a lead singer in a punk band back home that I become friends with as well as a young kid from Haiti who joins our supply team when we got back home. The list goes on and on.

By the time my active duty enlistment ends in 2005, I'm not used to the possibility of never seeing them again. But that's the way the army is, people come and people go, and while you can make a noble attempt at remaining in contact, they mostly drift away over time. In the end, I helped expand the perimeter by a mile, moved around some supplies, took a tremendous amount of hassling, played a lot of video games, got acquainted with thousands of ratchet straps,

got some guys away from a sniper just barely, and met several interesting people in a far-off land that was on everyone's mind back then. I'd hoped for something grander, but am not sure exactly what that would be. I wanted to stay busy because it kept my mind off of the bullshit that would add up on a daily basis, and like any job, I was ultimately responsible for my overall performance and attitude. It was the beginning of what I thought would be a relatively short military career, and then back to my civilian life of unbridled freedom and indecision. That wasn't necessarily the case, as I later transitioned from active duty to the Army Reserves, a status I still hold today. It's a strange to think of an experience from so long ago when I was an inexperienced novice. I look at that soldier and see someone who had little idea of what he was doing, and who just wanted to stay out of trouble. The friendships, however, will always stay with me.

THE FRIENDS YOU KEEP

It always amazed me to think that you could be thousands of miles away from home, in a far-off Middle Eastern country like Afghanistan, and still receive an email from a friend, husband, wife, boyfriend, girlfriend, parent, brother, sister, aunt, uncle, or cousin just as if you were on vacation. When making a call back home, of course there are certain time zone differences that you have to contend with as Afghanistan time—referred to militarily as Zulu Time, or Mountain Time—is roughly thirteen hours ahead of the Eastern Time Zone I'm most familiar with in sunny Orlando, Florida. Through my experiences overseas, I've witnessed quite the evolution of correspondence in terms of letters, email, social media, instant messenger, video chat, cell phones, and yes, even text messages.

One of my friends, Rosie, relied heavily on such correspondence due to Cystic Fibrosis, a genetic disease that she struggled with since birth. Her condition worsened over time, but she never stopped fighting. As a deployed soldier, largely using email and social media to communicate with people in your life was something we had in common. Rosie and I wrote frequently to each other through social media during a significant time in both of our lives in 2011. I was deployed to Afghanistan, and she was tirelessly awaiting a lung transplant. We were both going through stressful experiences, and found that time—whether counting down the days to go home, or counting them until a pair of lungs were available—was something measurable in ways that were new to us.

Like the others stationed overseas, I enjoyed communicating with those I cared about. Modern technology has erased problems once caused by distance. Correspondence was crucial in

maintaining sanity among those of us who spent months in combat zones during military tours in Iraq and Afghanistan.

When I first arrived in Kandahar Airfield in southern Afghanistan in September of 2003, it was a moderately built-up base with wooden huts, some shops, and a gym. The mountains surrounded us on all sides, and the airfield was a constant hodgepodge of activity for Chinooks, Blackhawks, C-130s, and every other sort of military aircraft used during those early years of the war. Our infantry companies were centralized in Kandahar, and there was little movement as a brigade. I seldom saw the world outside the airfield or “outside the wire” as they say. We had electricity and even some limited Internet access. It was a big step up from how the place looked a year prior, so I was told. Some of the guys in my unit were there during the initial invasion in 2002. They had slept in tents, or simply under the stars, used holes in the ground as toilets, and lived off MREs. Over the next ten years, I often found myself stationed at FOBs that had been updated and qualified as livable by first world standards, like my first time in Afghanistan.

That first year, I wrote letters back home longhand form, to my parents, and girlfriend, Brooke, something I had been accustomed to in my short time with the Army. I was only a few months out of Basic Training and the second phase of specialty training, referred to as Advanced Individual Training (AIT). Soon after my twenty-second birthday, I arrived at my duty station in Fort Drum, New York—a long way from Florida—home of the 10th Mountain Division. I was told by my sponsor from the 1st Brigade Combat Team, a few days after my arrival in August that we were leaving for Afghanistan in less than a month.

He was a stocky and intimidating ethnically Creole Supply Sergeant from New Orleans named, Sergeant Bonnet (the “t” was silent), and I was his new Supply Clerk fresh from AIT. He said little, but when he did, it was brief and to the point. He exuded authority ultimately as a hard

man to read. Strangely enough, we were around the same age, but age meant nothing there. He had been in the army for five years, and had experience and rank under his belt. I had been enlisted for approximately five months—four of those involved initial training. Sergeant Bonnet was clearly in charge. We were the supply team for the Headquarters section of roughly three infantry companies under the Brigade.

I met him during my first week at Fort Drum. I was locked-up at Parade Rest—a standard military position where your hands are interlocked behind your back—when the first thing he asked was if I was ready to go to Afghanistan. I told him that I was. What else was I going to say? It was why I was there.

With three deployments behind me, I've started to think of the Afghanistan and Iraq war in terms of advanced correspondence from the soldiers on the ground to their loved ones back home. They still wrote letters in the Gulf War. They certainly wrote them in the Vietnam War, Korean War, and World Wars of the 20th Century. The American Civil War was no exception in this regard as soldiers on both sides scribbled impassioned letters back home, often frankly describing the absolute horrors they faced daily. Union and Confederate soldiers alike had no guarantee that the letters they wrote would even reach their intended recipients. But it was the sole means available to them.

These soldiers would often comment on the agonizingly lengthy wait between sending a letter and receiving word from back home. Letters from loved ones would sometimes never reach their hands. I know this because of an archival paperback I received as part of a care package back from my girlfriend during my first tour in Afghanistan, *The Mammoth Book of War Diaries & Letters* (1999). It detailed such historical accounts from the American Revolutionary War to the Gulf War of the 1990s. The book, and letters from Brooke and my

family sustained me through my first deployment. Anything I received from back home went a long way.

My second deployment came four years later when I was sent to Iraq in August of 2007 with my reserve unit, the 841st Engineer Company, out of Orlando, Florida. We frequently moved around the north-eastern part of Iraq, including Ramadi, Fallujah, and Tikrit. Baghdad was never far away, and if you ever wanted to see an outright example of an exceptionally built-up FOB, Baghdad was it. They had a movie theater, some restaurants, large military shops, and air conditioned buildings. It was the centralized military “hub” throughout all of northeastern Iraq.

I was surprised by the availability of Internet access wherever we traveled, and back then, your loved ones were only a Myspace message away. That was the main thing back then, as hard as it may be to believe, but someday we may say the same thing about the computer itself. In spite of that dated method of social activity, nothing excited me more than getting a Myspace message from Brooke, or reading updates my friends and family were posting about back home even, though it was all done in the rather archaic style of amateur website design that the tools of Myspace allowed its users. I was there for about eleven months, and Myspace essentially made letter writing obsolete.

In the summer of 2011, I deployed again to Afghanistan with the same reserve unit, but by then we had been restructured as the 689th Engineer Route Clearance Company. We operated primarily in the northeastern region of Jalalabad, in the Nangarhar province right along the border of Pakistan. It was a volatile area with no shortage of rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) utilized by enemy Taliban forces. Sometimes they would be so bold as to launch rockets directly from surrounding mountains only a few hundred

feet away from the base only to be subsequently vanquished by the merciless stationary machine guns operated by soldiers from the Afghan National Army (ANA). I didn't witness such exchanges as much as I hunkered down in the ubiquitous bunkers with everyone else following the standard bomb siren, which was more of a nuisance than anything else.

After a long, difficult day of processing destroyed equipment, requesting supplies, conducting inventories, and maintaining logistical support for the company, it was usually a blessing just to get some sleep. Being in the Army for ten years at that point taught me how to value even the simplest comforts, such as rest, privacy, independence, and friends and family.

By then, not only was the Internet widely available on FOB Fenty, the fortified base where I was stationed, but several soldiers there had cell phones and would make calls back home with relative ease. I was used to stocking up on AT&T calling cards, which had been the routine in previous deployments. Fifty dollars or so would buy a couple of hours that you could use on the pay phones in the calling center to have a normal, though delayed conversation. When I spoke, I had to give it a second before the person on the other end heard everything. This is normal when talking from extremely long distances. It was 2011, and such methods of pre-paid international calling cards were no longer the only options available. Though I never purchased a cell phone for overseas use, I constantly marveled at the fact that my fellow soldiers had them.

Video chatting, such as Skype, had also become relatively common, and though the video communication lagged and would slow down, a soldier could sit in the comfort of his own makeshift room and talk to his or her significant other. Such was the case at night, when I would hear video chat conversations in our sleeping quarters. The worst was our company's Executive Officer (XO) who had a room right next to mine. Simple plywood dividers separated our rooms and I would hear him talking to his dog as if it were a child. Though humorous, the routine

charade soon proved tiresome. I never used video chat or a cell phone or anything beyond what I was used to from previous deployments. There was Facebook, however, and I found myself navigating through the social media stratosphere, just as I had done on Myspace, in order to keep in contact with people back home. Regardless of how easy it was to make contact, I felt remote from everyone I knew during my entire duration overseas at that point. The happy postings I read suggested that my absence from home was insignificant.

What can I say about Afghanistan that hasn't been said already? It's hot during the summer and freezing during the winter. The terrain is desolate in some areas, lush and green in others. It's a war-torn country of various tribes, sects, and alliances. The U.S.-led military operations have been going on for ages it seems, battling in the volatile regions throughout the diverse and significantly complex country. I do know that it's a place where women have virtually no rights at all. In my observation, for the average Afghan citizen, daily survival was a constant struggle. In the more rural areas, children as young as five roamed the streets, ravaged with infection and disease, and there was little the overwhelmed US medical personnel could do to help them. Life was and is tough there, and it's a struggle that no one in the United States, and in most developed nations has to face or even acknowledge.

Ten years into my career, I had acquired my fair share of responsibilities, and for the first time, I was completely in charge of my own supply section that oversaw five combat engineer platoons and roughly two hundred soldiers. Before this, I worked directly under Supply Sergeants, doing many of the same tasks—replacing equipment, conducting inventory, and ensuring that the soldiers had their gear—only then I wasn't directly responsible for decisions made that affected the company's logistical readiness and sustainment. Having supervisors was

always a comfort, as though I could remain behind the scenes, unnoticed by our superiors. But by 2011, I had been promoted to sergeant, and put in charge of my own supply section, which mean I had to answer for everything.

Our Commander signed for over 80 million dollars' worth of equipment upon our arrival in theater. This included over twenty MRAP vehicles for conducting route clearance, radios, weapons, and containers full of equipment, some of it useful to our mission, and all of worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. I had to ensure this equipment was properly accounted for by the platoons using it and that the Commander wasn't directly liable for any loss or destruction of the equipment. A lot of my work had to do with maintaining this careful balance through an extensive paper trail of receipts, forms, and documents. Paperwork is one side of war never discussed, largely because it's so much less exciting than combat.

The supply sergeant role in a combat company has to be the least understood job in the entire military. It's the sort of the job that is hard to explain to civilian and military alike because the only way to understand what a supply sergeant does is to do it yourself. This isn't to say that other jobs in the military aren't similar in their ambiguity, but it's a job that one can only summarize by stating that it is one of heavy responsibility, headache, and tremendous attention to detail. Sometimes, in a combat environment it feels as if there is no end in sight. But you adjust.

The availability of amenities that operate as windows to the outside world, such as Internet and social media, help soldiers maintain a sense of normalcy in their surroundings. We were always trained to believe that complacency kills—and it does, especially on the road when bombs are hidden under trash, or buried underground. Normalcy, however, was never directly mentioned, probably because of its synonymous relationship with complacency. The concept of normalcy was more natural and possibly more dangerous than complacency because it's what is

normal that makes us feel safe in our surroundings, thus leading to carelessness and complacency. When you're complacent, you're not paying attention. And when you're surrounded by enemy forces constantly trying to kill you, sometimes the only weapon you have, besides a rifle or machine gun, is attention to your surroundings. "Stay alert, stay alive," the Army says. But was anything about Jalalabad really normal?

At times, certain things were. Every soldier at one point or another feels isolated after so long in theater. It's not an isolation in the sense of being alone. Soldiers look out for one another, and I had no shortage of support within the "family structure" of our company. But even with all the support in the world from your fellow soldier, you can still feel alone. Perhaps it was nothing more than a personal preference. I liked to work alone even if the task at hand—such as submitting a report listing the location of every single piece of equipment in the company—was daunting and lasted all through the night. Many times I realized I had to let go and delegate more to the soldiers under me; a constant challenge to my leadership skills. The military stresses teamwork and team building. There are no individuals, as stated in the Army's slogan: *An Army of One*. The problem was that I was too individual, and my attitude as an "individual" would adversely make my job harder than it needed to be without my even realizing it.

Every day during deployment was a simple countdown to how many days I had left. Contact from the world left behind was crucial. It helped remove the illusion that the time spent in theater was unending. Sometimes you can feel yourself fading away the longer you're away from home. Knowing that there are people back home, a life back home waiting for you, is perhaps the single greatest motivating factor in accomplishing the mission, whatever it may be at any given time.

Rosie's correspondence reminded me of this fact during my second time in Afghanistan. We'd known each other for years, her family, the Bumpuses, were like a second family to me. We grew up together in Deltona, Florida. Her brother, Jason, has been a childhood friend since elementary school. Rosie was younger when we were children, but by the time she was a teenager, I noticed that she was very creative and artistic, like many of the other Bumpus children. In high school she was the editor of the school newspaper, always the top of her class. Our relationship was soon solidified through a creative partnership in both movie making and music, and I can think of very few people I've encountered who were consistently as warm and friendly as she was. She was the kind of girl who could make you laugh by the sound of her own laughter alone, because when she laughed, it *had* to be about funny. Her appeal wasn't entirely due to her being a nice person, she had something in her—a spark of greatness—that resonated with me. I admired her spirit and artistry.

I was in the second grade, when I discovered, among other things, how to tie my shoes properly and the joy of books. The nearest elementary school in the area, aptly called Osteen Elementary School, was located in the nearby town of Osteen, a land of cow pastures and dirt roads. Like many boys my age, my interests consisted of dinosaurs, cartoons, and videogames. The concept of “friends” was relatively new as I was a seven-year-old child who had only been in school for two years to that point. I can remember my first crush in Kindergarten—yes, as far back as then—on a girl named Jessica, whom I was so terrified of, I could barely speak to her. And I don't think I ever really did. I got along with some of the other boys in school, but my best friend at the time was my neighbor, Ryan. He was a boy who had been born precisely a year and eight days after me. We were essentially brothers, or at least that's how it felt, as I have no recollection of first meeting him. He was always just there.

By second grade I met a boy named Jason, a blond-haired kid who somehow became my friend, probably because we, like most children our age, liked to joke around. Most of our time in elementary school was indeed spent making each other laugh through our child-like imaginations. When we got together, we would improvise stories as far and idiotic as they could possibly go within our shared and immature sensibilities.

“So one of the Muppet Babies was actually a werewolf and he turned into a werewolf and bit Gozno, and then—“

“No, Miss Piggy got bit first, then she attacked Kermit, and then they were *all* werewolves—”

“Then the nanny walks in and they bite her on the leg with those stupid green and white-striped stockings she wore.”

We created a juvenile scenario, “Muppet Werewolves,” based on Jim Henson’s treasured puppet creations. Who on earth knows where any of it came from, but during lunch time and recess, ridiculous stories would ensue usually mired in popular culture references of the time. We also shared a love of drawing, and soon found ourselves in each subsequent school grade together up to high school.

I became a regular at the Bumpus household and found Jason’s family fascinating in their sheer numbers I came from a traditional nuclear family of two boys and two girls, but Jason had several brothers and sisters at the time, and their numbers would only grow. The Bumpuses, a large family of, eventually, ten children, included three girls and seven boys. Jason was the oldest boy. Their first child, Kelly, died as an infant due to complications of Cystic Fibrosis. Had she survived, there would have been eleven Bumpus children. Her parents, as they found out after her passing, were both carriers of the CF gene. In most cases, dual carriers have an

extremely high rate of passing the gene along to their child. But a lot was not known back then about Cystic Fibrosis and how to test for the signs and symptoms as a child. I was not aware of the disease and its affects, but the closer I became with their family over the years, the more I would discover about this ravaging recessive genetic disease.

Jason and I loved movies like *Ghostbusters*, *Gremlins*, *Labyrinth*, and *Batman*, and we watched and discussed such films incessantly. They inspired us, and in response, we consumed them heavily. Naturally, we discovered our parents' video cameras and shot camcorder bits, pieced together in succession with no editing, and the production values you'd expect from kids stumbling upon video equipment. I was often designated the "idea man" for the stories, which were incredibly far-fetched, sometimes derivative, and always outlandish, not to mention incredibly stupid at times.

The advent and accessibility of cheap video equipment throughout American neighborhoods in the 1980s most likely contributed to a certain spike in kids who thought they were going to be the next Steven Spielberg. While we had no illusions of film making mastery. We often made these movies as an extension of our own warped ideas, scenes, and scenarios. For instance, what if Alf—from the television show *ALF*—was actually a homicidal maniac and not the lovable plush alien hiding in suburbia? One of Jason's brothers owned an Alf doll that allowed us to make this story a reality. What would happen if the Godfather—from the movie *The Godfather*—got terrible service at his favorite Italian restaurant? Jason wore a suit, put a pillow under his shirt, drew a mustache above his lip, and used the Bumpus dining room table to capture the rest.

We discovered our groove in middle school, and regularly shot and completed most movies within a few hours over the weekend. Other times, we'd stop, lose interest, and never

finish what we had started. I don't even know if you could call them "movies" in the conventional sense. I mean they had "moving" images captures on videotape, but most of them were only few minutes long, while others just stopped and ended with no closure. This was of little concern, as the simple joy of seeing ourselves on the television was reward enough for our time and work. When it came time to shoot the movies our actors consisted mainly of me, Jason, and his abundant siblings. The backdrop was usually different rooms in the Bumpus home, or his back yard. Rosie, Jason's youngest sister, was very young at the time during our initial film endeavors, probably around five or six, but we eventually yanked her along to play certain bits, if not anything more than an extra.

At the time, I knew that she was a sick child who had trouble breathing, but it didn't alarm me. In their large and dimly-lit living room, I can remember seeing a young Rosie sitting on a brown recliner as a portable machine pumped oxygen into her lungs through a mask attached to her face. She did this routine every day. The machine's small engine hummed and I saw what looked like steam rise in the air around her. Before then, she would lie on her father's lap as he patted her back in rhythmic succession. This, I would learn, was a manual method of loosening the mucus buildup in her lungs. I discovered that these treatments were related to Rosie's inheriting the genetic recessive disease known as Cystic Fibrosis.

Jason did not have the gene. His younger sister, Lindsay did, however, and so did Rosie. Cystic Fibrosis is a generally rare disease that effects up to 30,000 children and adults in the United States. It predominately affects the lungs, making breathing a difficult and challenging daily exercise. The disease also negatively affects the pancreas, liver, and intestines. A patient's susceptibility to CF is measured by their percentage of lung usage. Often, a person with a severe level of gene mutation uses only twenty to thirty percent of their normal lung function. The rest

is provided with the aid of machines, medications, treatments, and breathing exercises. Rosie fell into this particular category of severe Cystic Fibrosis patient whose lungs functioned at their most minimal rate. That's why she had affliction to the frequent treatments I witnessed when we were children. She was too young at the time to really form a friendship with, but when we became friends she just always seemed to be there.

In high school, Jason and I ventured further into our movie making escapades with the school equipment available to us in TV Productions class. We used large VHS Panasonic camcorders, and video editing machines that seem archaic by today's standards. No one had cell phones or digital cameras back then. We were utilizing the basics, and it was a start. I admired the technical aspects of movie making, but was keenly relegated to coming up with the stories and written material. Our class project, simulating "decades" of the 20th century in snippets—from the great depression to the 1990s—won us a spot in a Universal Studios High School Video Contest where we were able to use the grounds of Universal, Orlando to make a short movie for entry into their high school film festival.

We came in third place, and the results, a largely melodramatic script written by our teacher, are laughingly unwatchable today. The fifteen-minute movie portrayed the contrasting paths people take in their lives in an attempt to make a serious piece so that we could enter the festival. Our entire class came together to make the project, and though it was a pretty dumb movie, the experience was thrilling. Our parents, at the time, thought us destined for Hollywood. I think Jason and I believed it would be a calling not too far off. Such grand illusions don't always turn out the way you think they will when you're a teenager.

I graduated from high school and enrolled in community college in Daytona Beach. I worked in the produce department for Winn Dixie, where I had been employed for the last three

years. Heads of lettuce, celery, mangos, apples, oranges, bananas, watermelons, potatoes, and other wonderful fruits and vegetables were my life at the time. Oddly enough, I had little direction, and was not career-goal oriented. I knew I wanted to finish college and be a writer or comic book artist, but such things take much more commitment, drive, and determination than I possessed at the time. I don't know what the hell was wrong with me. Maybe I thought I had all the time in the world. I moved out of my mother's house and rented a house with a friend. Our group of long-haired misfits—all friends from high school—drank heavily, played in bands, worked odd-jobs, and hung-out together almost on a daily basis. Jason and I would still make movies time from time with these friends whenever the opportune moment arrived, but they were mainly for fun. Alcohol was heavily involved and it showed.

Rosie was in high school around then, and seemingly lived the life of a normal teenager. Behind the scenes, however, it was a different story. According to her parents, she was not a child who enjoyed the daily routine of treatments. What child would? This set the stage for a rebellious streak on her part where she would often skip treatments that consisted of lengthy breathing-aid intervals involving a vest, and medications. The Vest was a relatively new product available to CF patients that helped them shake the mucus buildup in their lungs. Rosie would don the thick vest, press a button and sit there for an hour or so as it shook against her chest and back like a vibrating smock. It's hard to imagine so much responsibility put on a girl her age. CF patients have to take their illness very seriously considerably early in their lives, and in the words of her parents, "They would have to always watch her," to make sure she was doing her exercises. We were not close friends at the time, but out of all of Jason's siblings, she would later admit that she always looked up to us because of our creativity. She was similar to me and Jason

in that regard, and I would soon find out that an artistic connection between us was not too far off.

In 2003, I was in Kandahar, Afghanistan, far away from friends, family, movie making, playing music, and everything else that was familiar. I did, however, have plenty of books to read to pass the time. I mostly read non-fiction war books or other books detailing the vastly complex history of Afghanistan. The subject matter was challenging especially dealing with the dynasties, rulers, and sects that conquered the land over hundreds of years of civil strife. The current ethnic makeup of the country consists predominately of the Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek groups, but there are several others. The myriad of ethnic groups identify largely with their own people, and the concept of nationality is near-nonexistent. Regardless, the Pashtun and Tajik are easily the majority among the nation and its many provinces. I figured that I was in the country for a year so why not learn something about it in the process? My eagerness to learn brought a wealth of knowledge to my youthfully addled mind, but it soon vanished years after like a chalkboard wiped clean.

Sergeant Bonnet stayed on me throughout the entire deployment, and it became clear that he wasn't going to let up as time went on. Though we became close, almost equal peers, he always had to remind me who was really in charge.

“McKee! Get in here!”

“McKee! Go down and pick up these supplies!”

“Hey, McKee! What are you doing?”

“Hey, McKee! Do some push-ups!”

It got to the point I couldn't stand the sound of my name. I was a Private First Class and he, a sergeant, which meant I knew nothing and had to do everything he said. He was a hard worker though, often working all throughout the night sorting out the company property book totaling in the millions of dollars. The incessant whirring of military choppers leaving and departing at all hours of the night was a typical atmospheric ambiance. It wasn't until I ran my own supply section that I would discover just the amount of weight and responsibility on Sergeant Bonnet's shoulders. As a primary team, we operated out of a small hut. Our office was in the front and our beds were in the back. Sometimes he grated on my nerves, and other times we got along fine. He *was* extremely good at keeping me on my toes because I didn't understand the job fully, and had to learn quickly.

In 2004, around the same time I was in Afghanistan, one of the short films I'd made with my friends and Rosie's brothers premiered at the *11th Annual Brouhaha Film and Video Showcase* at the Enzian Theater in Orlando. I had written a story about a boy whose parents turn into zombies, soon infecting the entire town. It was our most ambitious project yet, and received quite the response from the crowd. Jason and I had completed the film shortly before I joined the Army, and I often thought about the experience during my time abroad. Many of our friends and family were at the premiere, and witnessed the hard work of everyone involved. I, obviously, was not in attendance, but my girlfriend, Brooke, described everything to me in detail during a phone call center far away from home.

"Everyone was there, the place was packed," she said. "They laughed at all the right moments."

"Did Jason get any footage of it?" I asked after a five second delay.

“Yeah, he was recording,” she answered as static crackled over the phone.

It filled me with elation beyond all measure to know that our short zombie movie was selected to play in the festival. It felt, at the time, like the most significant thing we had done so far in our years of absurd little movies. In the audience, as well, was Rosie.

I arrived home from Afghanistan in the summer of 2004. Home, for me, at the time, was Fort Drum, New York, and it would be another year before my active duty enlistment ended and I would return back to my *real* home in Florida. Having completed my AA Degree, I knew that I wanted to pursue a bachelor’s degree, but in what? Engineering? Astrophysics? Business Administration? None of those sounded appealing, and I wasn’t the best math student in school. For a while, I wanted to go to film school, but something about a degree in English and Creative Writing seemed the right path. It clicked like a bullet in a revolver. I would apply at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, near home and try my hand at their illustrious undergrad program. The educational aid and benefits of the Army helped.

Settling in back home took a couple of months, but I was eager to get my own apartment, a new job, and go to school. My girlfriend, Brooke, was still at my side, for the time being. I would take her for granted like many things in my life. I applied for a job with Delta Airlines. During the interview, my military experience undoubtedly helped and they hired me for the position of Service Representative, where I ordered and maintained supplies for the check-in ticket counters. Everything was falling into place when I decided I wanted to make another short film just for the hell of it.

I enlisted the aid of Rosie’s brother, Jason, who was working as a video editor for a wedding company, my friend, Ryan, and someone who I hadn’t yet played a major role in our movies, Rosie. The story was about a dystopian society that demanded video-taped confessions

from all of its citizens on a monthly basis. I don't know where exactly I was going with the idea, but Rosie, early twenties, played the role of a secretary who worked for the company that collected the tapes. We filmed her scenes at the Deltona Regional Library, where my mother worked, and she showed up in the early morning long before I did, eager to shoot her scenes.

"You've got some real professionalism there, Rosie," I said to her after arriving in the parking lot and seeing her waiting. She looked the part of a secretary, wearing a skirt, dress shirt, and glasses. Her blond hair was evenly cut around the shoulders and she just looked at me and smiled. It was a smile that genuinely said, "I'm going to enjoy this." Good help is hard to find and Rosie proved herself as a valuable asset to the production. You wouldn't think upon seeing her work all day on the movie shoot that anything whatsoever was physically wrong with her.

Rosie soon moved out of her parents' house for the first time and into a dorm room to attend college at Stetson University in Deland, Florida. Her independence was something new, something cathartic that pushed her towards her goal of getting a degree in teaching. This was also during the Myspace days, and I came across her music page entitled: *Rose Alma*, a variation of her full name, Brittany Rose Alma Bumpus. The page had several tracks of keyboard and vocal arrangements she created where she sang in subtle and compelling tones. I took an interest in her music, and being a piano enthusiast myself, asked if she wanted to collaborate on some tracks.

Our frequent correspondence filtered through email and Myspace messages, and she was always excited about the prospect of working together. I sent a track of a very basic keyboard pattern and she wrote and sang lyrics to it. Our song, "Warrior Children" detailed a collective fight against Cystic Fibrosis. I would send other tracks as well, often amazed by what she would do with them as well as the insightfulness and maturity of the lyrics. We shared a mutual love of

the arts: music and film, mostly, and there was never anything to apologize for. Our connection was as natural as breathing.

As a student at Stetson, Rosie made several short films herself, including one entitled 22, that detailed the twenty-two percentage use of her lung functions. She displayed a humanitarian side of the disease, and won the 2009 Campus Movie-Fest, in Atlanta Georgia. She had her own film-making ambitions, and when it came time, in 2011, to make another film to play at the Enzian, Rosie was tasked by Jason and his younger brother, Tyler, who wrote the script, to play the lead role. It was an episodic story involving the mishap adventures of a brother, played by Tyler, and his sister, played by Rosie, throughout Central Florida. It would be a movie on the scale with our earlier zombie film in terms of a large cast and several different locations. Though by this time, much had changed in Rosie's life, and much in our own.

I had recently returned from the Iraq deployment with my reservist unit in late 2008. The Bumpus family had moved to Maryville, Tennessee, a favorite vacationing spot of theirs. Jason had moved up there as well and found an apartment in Louisville. Rosie had moved to Tennessee with the rest of her family, but we always stayed in contact. It became quite apparent that after she graduated from Stetson University in 2009, she would not be able to go into teaching, as she had planned. Her illness had made her too weak to hold down the demands of a fulltime, or even part-time job. She flourished within the confines of her room, because that was a place where she spent most of her day, doing her treatments and exercises. It was during this time that her artistic abilities really developed. She invested herself in blog writing, and video confessionals. However, there was little opportunity for her to venture beyond her enclosed surroundings. This is how our relationship grew more to a strictly correspondence based one.

In the year leading up to her transplant, while living in Tennessee, Rosie established such blogs detailing her daily thoughts and affirmations. She also had a video page where she detailed her unrepentant optimism in the face of her disease. She was a real whiz on the computer. She wrote several deeply introspective narratives, often detailing her outlook on the world. She called her blog: “We are One,” and established several activities for her followers, such as a “Random Acts of Kindness” project, where she instructed her readers to email random acts of kindness they did for strangers during their normal routine, and in return, she would post them on her blog. She also continued to dance and sing within the bright colored walls of her room like something in her was trying leap out and wrangle life by its throat.

I was home from Iraq and trying to complete my bachelor’s degree at UCF. I found a place in Sanford, Florida, and never went back to my job at Delta because I wanted to give school my full attention. Dragging through the undergraduate program for five years at that point had taken its toll and I just wanted to finish the degree. I had saved up money from overseas in order to do so. It was around this time that we started work on Tyler’s script where he and Rosie played hapless siblings encountering comical scenarios throughout. She traveled down from Tennessee with one of her brothers to visit and work on the film. The main backdrop of the film was the house I was renting in Sanford with my roommate, David. She met David briefly then went back to Tennessee after a fond farewell.

They apparently hit it off, both being vegetarians and into Buddhism and all that stuff I’m in no way into. She later sent me an email asking, “Where have you been hiding your friend, David?”

“I don’t know. He’s a pretty good guy, are you interested?” I asked.

I was a little skeptical, but he had a job, was a nice guy and I don't know what else is expected of us by women. I encouraged her to pursue things with him because I felt that it could possibly work. From the beginning it was, and always would be a "long distance relationship," something I didn't know if David was ready for, but nonetheless thought them old enough to make their own decisions. Through correspondence, their relationship grew stronger. She visited again, on David's account, this time staying for weeks. Her family was a little concerned given the state of her health. The constraints of Cystic Fibrosis had confined her to not venturing far from home. Visiting us, and to a greater extent, David, provided her much needed freedom.

We would have Rosie with us for a few weeks to brighten up our dark man cave. When she arrived, there was a moderately sized breathing machine in the trunk of her car with tubes and a vest. Several oxygen tanks as well. We made several trips with the equipment from her brother, Tyler's car to the house and finally brought it all in. How all this equipment worked was beyond me. The oxygen tanks she carried allowed her to remain mobile and move freely in her daily routine. She would don a nasal tube and be fed oxygen from the tank. To put it more simply, it was oxygen on-the-go.

I also got a detailed glimpse into her daily routine. She had to sustain repeated intervals of breathing exercises with the aid of a portable machine that monitored her oxygen levels. Its low hum could be heard constantly from outside David's room. She wore the breathing vest as it did its part to shake loose the mucus buildup in her lungs. Our kitchen counter was filled with more prescription medication than I've ever seen any one person own. The bottles were made up of various vitamins, antibiotics, enzyme boosters, bronchodilators, anti-inflammatory drugs, and some other medications that I can't spell.

Every day, all this medication and treatment. How could anyone get used to this?

David and I were hanging out on the porch one night when he confided in me some issues he was having, mainly with himself.

“She’s just too good a person. She thinks I’m *such* a great person, and I don’t see it. I don’t think I’m good enough for her,” he said in an assortment of rambling frustrations.

“She probably just sees something in you that she likes, I don’t know,” I said with obligatory neutrality.

“What if she...” David stopped.

“What?” I replied.

I knew what he was thinking. It was the burden of her condition that was weighing on him.

“If the worst happens, I don’t think I’ll be able to handle it, it’s just too hard,” he said.

I remember thinking, “you coward,” but maybe he had a point. Maybe he wasn’t ready to commit to a relationship that had such serious implications.

A few weeks later, I came home at night and saw Rosie crying outside. David was nowhere to be found.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

I’d never seen her so upset. Actually crying in front of me like this. What had I done in pairing these two together?

“Where’s David?”

She wiped her eyes. “He’s up on the roof.”

“The *roof*?” I asked. I knew him to frequent the roof when he struggled with things.

“He keeps saying that I’m going to leave him. He’s drunk. I don’t want to get into it, I just want to go home,” she said, crying.

I did the best I could to provide some comfort. I told her everything was going to be okay, and that no matter what happened between her and David, we were always going to be friends. I had vouched for David, but after they had split up Rosie would later tell me that he “just wasn’t right for her.” Throughout all of this, the thought of a romantic relationship with Rosie had never crossed my mind. Maybe I’m just utterly blind to such things, or maybe knowing her for so long had made her like a sister to me. A real sister, just like one of mine I could talk to and confide in. I don’t know how I would have handled things differently than David did. What more could I offer her but support and friendship? Maybe, like David, I didn’t feel like I was a good enough person for Rosie.

I soon deployed again with my reservist company, just after getting my bachelor’s degree. The next step was naturally grad school, but I knew that would have to wait as the needs of the Army called once again. For twelve months I moved throughout the northeast of Afghanistan, from September 2011 to August 2012, frequently to take care of the needs of our five platoons. I don’t think I’ve ever worked so hard in my life:

We just need you to make this helicopter flight at 0300 hours to take you to FOB Wright so you can transport the plate-carrier vests to the platoon as well as inventory hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of equipment including trucks, vehicles, and radios, and make sure that everything is accounted for and that the Platoon Leader signs for everything. And we mean everything. Then when you’re done, get to FOB Airborne and do the same by the next three days.

It was like that most of the year. And that was only when everything went right. When things went wrong, when soldiers in our company were conducting route clearance and their vehicles were hit with improvised explosives, or equipment was destroyed, it made an already

stressful environment worse. Nearly every day around Jalalabad, it seemed that *someone* had been killed from a roadside bomb, but we were lucky for the most part.

We had brand new state-of-the-art recovery trucks that cost roughly \$600,000 a vehicle. They were crucial to the route clearance mission, because when a vehicle is hit by a roadside bomb, the platoon needs to be able to recover the vehicle and remain mobile. The recovery vehicles were like advanced tow trucks, and were operated by specialized mechanics who trailed the route clearance convoy, ready to make repairs or tow a downed vehicle. The enemy grew wise to this and purposefully sought recovery vehicles as targets. A roadside bomb strike on these trucks immobilizes a platoon's recovery methods and has a detrimental effect on the mission. They eventually hit each truck out of our five platoons, often causing great injury to driver and passenger, most them not older than twenty-one. Most of our mechanics we went home due to combat injuries, but thankfully there were no casualties. Not everyone, however, was as lucky.

Requisitioning a replacement truck was my responsibility, and it was nearly impossible because they were newly manufactured vehicles, and there simply weren't enough in theater to replace the ones we had lost. The enemy was blowing them up faster than we could replace them.

At the time, Rosie had heard that she was getting closer to receiving approval for a double-lung transplant; her name had been on the list for over two years. It was great to hear the news through our correspondence while I was in Afghanistan. I assumed that everything would work out because Rosie, in my opinion, was a good person and she deserved it. What constitutes a *good person*? I believe it to be someone who is nice, genuine and honest. It's really no more

complicated than that. She always ended her emails with saying - *just know that you are loved back home*. It was an inspiring reminder because after being away from home from so long, you start to forget.

The last time I had written letters longhand in a combat environment was in Iraq, 2008. Back then I received “pen pal” type letters from children and adults who were part of some program where they would write deployed soldiers. It was encouraging to get word from back home, even from complete strangers who wished you well. Of course, the obligation to write them back would get a little frustrating at times. I did, however, appreciate the sentiment. By 2011, those types of letters were nearly nonexistent. I don’t know if that speaks for the technological age of advancement or the public’s waning interest in the war, but either way, the most common form of communication was email, Facebook, or—for the soldiers who wanted to shell out big bucks—cell phones.

Before we left for Afghanistan, during the summer of 2011, we were mobilized at Fort Bliss, Texas. This is the process where a reserve company trains and prepares for deployment to theater. It’s perhaps the most ridiculously stressful time for any military personnel, like me, in the field of logistics. Not only are you preparing all equipment for issue and containment to theater, as well as overseeing every aspect of uniform and gear issues, but you’re expected to conduct all the training as well. This would be what I would refer to as my “long nights,” often training all day then working in my makeshift office until three or four in the morning. Then you had to be ready to go at 0500 hours to do it all over again. Around this time, I had heard of Rosie’s engagement to her new boyfriend, Alvaro, through her Facebook page.

In spite of her growing illness and placement on the transplant list, Rosie was determined to live her life normally. Getting married had a lot to do with keeping her spirits high, and from

what I could gather, Alvaro, a boy she had known since elementary school, was dedicated to her. I didn't hear from her until two months at FOB Fenty, when I came back to my room one night after a long night in the supply office, roughly a mile on foot away from our sleeping quarters. I opened my email, and noticed a letter from Rosie in response to my telling her that I demanded the "head usher position" at her wedding:

Excerpt response from Rosie: November 18, 2011

And yes, thank you's! The rumors are true, little Wosie's getting MAWWIED. Don't know when yet, but some beautiful day to come. His name is Alvaro, and we've actually known each other since fourth grade, hehe. He's been living in FL all this time (about 7 months), but he's actually moving up here this weekend. SOOO exciting. But you are MOST DEFINITELY invited to the wedding, whenever it will be! And I expect you to be in attendance, or I will send out my secret assassins to eliminate you for your betrayal, Head Usher... Tread lightly, my friend. Seriously though, I would absolutely love to have you there. Expect an invitation in the future.

Hope you're doing well on your journey and in your travels. Still in Afghanistan these days? I'm sure everyone misses you in FL, as we do here. It was always very noticeable when you were absent. The house and the group lacked a certain warmth and friendliness and kindness. Truly, Shawn.

And I'm not sure if you've talked to Jas since this message, but he's with us in TN now. Turns out his main reason for moving back here has a lot to do with my "madness" I mentioned earlier... I actually haven't been doing my best healthwise. I'm in the hospital right now, and have been for nearly three weeks, as you might've picked up somewhere, I'm not sure. But my latest exacerbation has been pretty bad, the worst I've ever had. And because of it, I was recently moved to the top of the transplant list for my blood group. We actually got our first "false alarm" call for lungs this past week. Could be any day now. And luckily, I am finally improving enough to possibly go home soon - which I am so happy and grateful for. It will be nice to be with family and in my own bed, hopefully before the holiday.

It was great to hear that the wedding preparation was going on as planned. She was a little vague about her condition, probably because she didn't want to bog me down with the details. I would have wanted to hear it, but what more could she have said? The second deployment to Afghanistan back then was a strange experience. I was busier than I had ever been, and the pace never slowed for a moment. I wouldn't say that I was lonely, for there were other soldiers around me all the time, wherever I went. I couldn't escape them if I wanted to. The problem lay in the fact that I didn't have a significant other back home to regularly talk to. Though I was in my thirties, I didn't have a wife or children to contact. It seemed as though

every soldier around me, in the hut, and back at the office, had a wife, girlfriend, husband, or boyfriend to talk to. Hell, my XO even had his dog to Skype to.

I wasn't a "family man" by any stretch of the imagination. My longtime girlfriend Brooke and I had split up. Perhaps there was woeful neglect on my part. Perhaps I missed my chance. Sometime before the deployment, she initiated the breakup, slowly and carefully, and it wasn't long before I realized that she really meant it. I would have to do Afghanistan without her. We had started dating months before I went into the military, but it didn't last. Having no one close to you to talk to back home was new territory for me. I could contact my parents, yes, and their words were often comforting, but I had no family of my own to speak of. I was a "single soldier," a miscreant, I felt. This could perhaps explain my tendency to work until 1200 or 0200 hours at night, sixteen hour days, for the most part, as the job became my primary focus.

But it was always something special to hear from Rosie. Her correspondence became less frequent the worse her illness and treatments got. It was getting so bad that she was moved up on the transplant list. I couldn't follow all of the details fully, but I knew that months prior to the prospect of a lung transplant, she was in the hospital, already undergoing several treatments to sustain her health for the eventual operation. A great deal of time had passed between us where I hadn't heard a word from her.

Excerpt from my email to Rosie: November 20, 2011

It's good to hear back from you. No apology necessary, I know you've been going through some rough times, I only hope that things get better for you and all the "madness" going on. I've seen the pics of you in the hospital and it's very concerning, but I'm extremely happy to hear things have gotten better. To be honest, I'd be scared out of my wits to experience just a little of the process of waiting for a transplant. Your courage and spirit are a testament of strength and positivity, and I mean that. Aside from all that, it's great to hear that you're "Back in Action," killing deadly street punks at random for whatever revenge-based reasons you may have. Get ready for the Sequel "Back in Action 2: REALLY Back in Action!"

Excerpt response from Rosie: May 10, 2012

Happy Thursday!

Let me start by saying: I can't believe I never responded to your November message! Please know that it meant a lot to me, and put a smile on my face, during a time that was rather difficult. So THANK YOU for that, dear friend.

So how are you, and how is life? I know I wouldn't see you even if you were in the USA right now, with the states between us and all; but please know you are truly missed. I am always so very thankful for the time I got to spend in FL two years ago; it allowed me to truly know you as a person and a friend. And your friendship is one of the best things that grew from that period of my life. Thank you for that, Shawn. Never forget how loved you are - no matter the distance.

Take care, be safe.

Peace and love. Rosie

Rosie—then a twenty-five-year-old woman about half my size—was an emotionally strong woman. Her illness was a part of her daily life and routine so much that when I saw her as child donning a breathing vest, and as an adult, taking hours out of the day to succumb to lengthy self-treatments, she made nothing seem out of the ordinary. Three of the Bumpus children, including Rosie, suffer from the recessive genetic disease, Cystic Fibrosis, but she had it the worst out of the three. What was this randomness attributed to? Jason, my friend since the second grade, did not have the CF gene. It skipped him and went to his younger sister, Lindsay. It skipped their younger brother, Tyler, and went full-force directly at Rosie. After her, it skipped a few children, and went to Jason's brother, Dillon. One might ask why the Bumpus parents, Larry and Vicki, continued to have children. In their own words, "They were meant to have lots of children."

Before and after my last deployment, I did my own research on Cystic Fibrosis, filling up three notebooks worth of notes, scribble, and chicken scratch. There are an assortment of books available, some more accessible than others. I was surprised by the abundance of books written

in medical-type language, nearly impossible for laymen to understand. Where was a book that just explained the disease, its symptoms, and methods of treatment not written for medical students? Was this a disease that really had no cure? I learned that CF patients have a life expectancy rate of no older than forty years old, and that is the most optimistic outlook. Overtime, the outlook has grown. CF patients in the 1950s, for instance, didn't live past their twelfth birthday. It's a disease that wasn't even scientifically identified until the 1940s. CF inflicts perhaps the greatest horror by frequently denying the patient the ability to breath. I couldn't imagine living with such a disease, as I'm sure hundreds of thousands of Americans who aren't susceptible to the effects of CF couldn't either.

Cystic Fibrosis patients have to meet specific guidelines to be considered for transplantation. They have to completely understand what is involved in the grueling recovery process, post-transplantation. After the process, they're still living on a ventilator as the new lungs get used to the body. Most of the time, the patient is confined to the bed, given several medications throughout the day and monitored frequently. Their physical therapy process is painful because the surgery has vastly weakened them. Assessments prior to the surgery include the physical and psychological ramifications of the patient and the subsequent therapy involved in maintaining a standard of health and functionality. There are a million things that can go wrong, even after a successful surgery. First, the body can reject the newly implanted organ. Even after they meet the criteria of body weight, age, and condition, they have to prepare themselves for the multiple possibilities of such failures.

The survival rate has been generally impressive in regards to double-lung transplants over the years. But each patient is unique and recovery can never be determined by pre-assessment alone. They must be ready to cope with the operational and strict post-operative follow-ups and

compliance with drug treatments. There's also the issue of finding a donor whose organs fit the body type of the patient. It is for this reason mainly that the CF patient has to be ready at any given time. The process is miraculous in itself, but extremely difficult to gauge. Even with a successful surgery and post-recovery, the fact remains that transplantation only subsides the destructive effects of Cystic Fibrosis. It's not considered a cure.

When I returned home from Afghanistan in 2012, I moved into an apartment in Altamonte Springs, Florida, and initiated my pursuit for MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Central Florida. It was my first semester of grad school at UCF, and I had no idea what to expect. I chose not to find employment outside of monthly reserve duty so I could finish the program in two years, or slightly more. I came home in August and started school in September, and felt the adjustment back home more abrupt than before. It might have been the reason why I was in no rush to get a job. Being deployed as a single, childless miscreant has its advantages in some financial regards. I paid the Bumpus family a visit in October and spent a couple of days with them, including some quality time with Rosie, catching up with her and her big wedding plans with Alvaro. She had an oxygen tube in her nose and canister in tow, but seemed as free-spirited as ever. I had dinner with her family and later we watched *The Walking Dead*, laughing about the absurdity of the latest apocalyptic zombie scenario. I ventured back home after the weekend and went along with my routine: school, readjustment, reserve duty, bills, reading, writing, and watching movies.

Complete Message from Rosie: November 6, 2012

Dearest Shawn,

It was truly wonderful to have you here in Tennessee. I wish we had more time. I had wanted a chance to say a few things in person. But I am so very grateful and glad you are safely in the US again. And I am so very thankful to call you my friend... Your friendship meant a lot to me back when I was staying with you guys in that Florida house. They were emotional (and yet beautiful) times for me back then. David is a wonderful person, and I still and always will wish him so much love. But in truth, he never

treated me right. And whenever things seemed hardest, and I felt most alone, I always found you there. Trying to make amends, trying to help us stay together.

I will always remember one night in particular... things were at their worst, and David was emotional and on the roof, insisting that I would leave him. I was crying and lonely in the house, and you slowly approached me in the bathroom doorway. With tears in my eyes, you told me things would get better and we would work it out. You said that David was a good guy, and you could tell we really loved each other. And you were right about all of those things in the end. David is a good guy deep down, there was and always will be so much love, and things did work out. Just not the way we might have thought. But what stuck with me most that night, was you. In my weakest darkest moment, you were there. Being a friend. Offering love and comfort the way you knew how in the moment. You are a beautiful person, and an amazing friend, Shawn. I've always seen you for that. And I wanted you to know it.

I'm sorry if this is too serious. But I find more and more that life is too short to not say what I feel in my heart. Thank you for being my friend.

Peace and love. Rosie

I wrote Rosie back a typically lengthy response and never heard back from her. By December 2012, she underwent a double-lung transplant at the Emory University Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia, after years of waiting on the donor list for the opportunity to receive the surgery. By then she had succumbed to some of the worst of the effects of the disease, lung deterioration and respiratory failure, and was looking at a life expectancy not exceeding her thirties. When she finally received the transplant the lungs they removed fell apart like bits of broken glass. They had just made it.

It's important to stay in contact with people, depending on how you feel about them, because you may soon realize that it's too late to catch up. Sometimes, out of the blue, I'll say, "Holy Moses! When was the last time I talked to him (or her)?" I hadn't had that problem yet with Rosie, although I didn't write her for months after the surgery. I wasn't sure why I didn't. Maybe I had thought that because she had surgery, she didn't check her email, which was a woefully misguided perception. Maybe I just wasn't sure what to say.

I followed Rosie's condition closely through my correspondence with Jason. He, like many of the Bumpus siblings, uprooted their lives and became temporary Georgian residents, awaiting Rosie's recovery at Emory Hospital. What do you say to in an email to someone who had their lungs removed and replaced with another's? What do you say to someone who has been heavily sedated for weeks on end, waking up to a rigorous, difficult, and agonizing recovery process? To someone who eats what little they can through a tube? Someone who can barely walk because they don't have the proper oxygen levels for physical activity? Someone with an oxygen tube in their throat at all times? Someone who can't talk above a faint whisper?

Do you say, "I hope you're doing well?"

Or, "You're in our thoughts and prayers?"

No, because that sounds too close to implying that the person is dead or is going to die. In our best health, do we ever want to be in anyone's prayers? Is it appropriate to tell someone *after* surgery that they are in your prayers?

My Rejected Rosie Draft Openings:

~~Rosie, I hope you're doing well.~~

~~Hi Rosie, I just want to check in and see how you were doing.~~

~~Hey Rosie! How's my favorite patient!~~

One month after her surgery, in January 2013, I sent her a card signed by my family. I wanted to include a letter in longhand as it would be a change of pace from what I thought she would be used to. At least that was my rationale. In addition to writing back anonymous "pen pals" in Iraq, I can recall writing my girlfriend in Basic Training in such a way where I passionately scribbled banal complaints across sheets of notebook paper about the mean Drill

Sergeants and lack of sleep. But I did feel a certain passion as I wrote my words out as opposed to typing. Maybe it was just my hand getting tired.

It's even more difficult to compose a letter to someone after they go into what is called Septic Shock, a side-effect of lung transplantation caused by severe infection. Then you read an email from her mother, Vicki, who hasn't left the hospital since December, and this is March, that after months and months of physical therapy and tedious rehabilitation, they can't seem to get Rosie off the ventilator. You hear that they don't think that the new lungs are ever going to work completely. They are simply not providing her enough oxygen to replace the ventilator.

I never wrote the letter, I sent just a card. I didn't think Rosie was ever conscious, but of course she was. I sat in the room of my apartment, and sorted through my notes on Cystic Fibrosis. I was interested in doing some more research in the matter. Throughout my relationship with the Bumpus family, I was always aware of the disease and its effects, but hadn't really learned anything in-depth about what my friend was battling. I decided that, at the very least, more education on the disease could assist my state of mind if I were to write her.

Reasons I needed to write Rosie:

- To let her know I cared.
- Because she needed the support.
- Because I felt like it was necessary.
- Because I didn't want her to think she was forgotten.

Reasons why it might not have mattered (which lead me to procrastinate):

- Her world did not revolve around me
- She was going through a difficult recovery process and was heavily sedated most of the time. At least the first few months. She was fighting for her life. What could I have said to her?
- I was very, very busy.

In her later years, before her transplant, Rosie had an inspiring outlook on life, full of positivity and joy. It was apparent in her blogs detailing her commitment to love and peace. Love, above all, she felt, was the most powerful weapon. Not in a John Lennon, ambiguous sense, but through a true love of life and people that surround you. In one of her video blogs she stated that if you had feelings for someone, you should simply tell them because life was too short not to do so. While it's hard advice to follow among the cynics, like me, I could see that she knew something about life: the fleeting frailty of our time in this world.

She never seemed scared of death. Ever. Though I know this outlook is what's generally expected of patients, young and old, with life threatening diseases. If I were in her position, I don't think that I'd have such an outlook, even if it was expected of me. I've seen her frustrated before. Angry that she can't do the simplest things, like jog down the street, or ride a bike. Her coughing fits would come out of nowhere in the middle of conversation, violent, and unrelenting. She's had her struggles, and like us all, moments of doubt, frustration, and negativity. But she did shine as one might refer to as a positive force. She fought for the ability to breathe. Something we do each and every day without conscious thought or appreciation.

I felt a solemn realization after the failure of her new lungs, when her brother, Jason, told me that his family was now just hoping that she could have "a few good years" after the second transplant, if that ever happened. Saying "I wish you the best," sounded so generic, so open-ended that I'm not sure if it really expresses anything overall. But I did know that she was a fighter, and I had faith that she was going to push herself in ways that the average person would struggle with.

I never did write Rosie a letter. I took the easy way out and sent her an email. I knew that she had been making some progress and that normally, throughout the day, she sat on her

hospital bed with her laptop. My email was respectfully brief because of the large gap in time, and what she had been through did not compel me to endlessly ramble on about what I was doing or thinking about. I started the message with: Hey Rosie!

I told her that I was looking forward to coming up and visiting her soon at the Wesley Woods facility in Atlanta where she had been moved to from Emory. I hoped to make the trip soon. I hadn't heard back from her. But I didn't mind. This was when her post-recovery process was the most grueling. I visited Rosie in June of 2013, and was able to spend a few hours in her hospital room. She walked around the hospital a couple of times on a walker, while her ventilator, pushed by nurses, followed her from behind. The tube never left her throat.

I told Rosie that I couldn't wait until she got out of the hospital, back home again. But no one knew that sentiment more than she did.

She whispered, "Thank you, Shawn," in her frail, but recognizable voice.

After hugs and well wishes, I left the hospital, and it wasn't until a month later that her mother notified everyone about Rosie's death on July 17, 2013. She was twenty-five years old, and her passing came a week before her twenty-sixth birthday. Her new lungs could not sustain her, and while waiting for another transplant, her body could fight no more. She had a tremendous impact on people who knew her. It was hard to believe that someone could be so brave in the face of death while being so loving and caring to other individuals. She was a light in the darkness.

Jason's younger sister, Lindsay is thirty-two, and his younger brother, Dillon is twenty-two. They both suffer from Cystic Fibrosis. I am thirty-five-years-old and have no expiration date beyond whatever damage I chose to do to myself. Rosie's passing had a hugely significant effect on all who knew her. I honestly can't think of any young life more promising than hers.

Her family is coping, but has realized that there is no silver lining, only day after day of remembrance.

Some months later, Jason and I decided to focus our complete film prerogative on documenting the struggle his family has experienced. It was an extensive creative leap from zombies, mayhem, and everything else we had become accustomed to, but there became a project no more important. Our documentary, entitled, *Our Family and CF*, would be an endeavor unlike anything we had approached. The project, thus far, compiles ten years of footage Jason captured of interviews with his family, medical professionals, and other CF patients. Most of the work has already been done, but the film still needs a sense of narrative structure that I have been working on with Jason to complete. In another year from now, I hope to see the results so we can present the story of his incredible family and their fight against Cystic Fibrosis.

Rosie's ceremony was a joyous occasion of friends and family coming together and celebrating her life. There were no drab colors, everyone was instructed to wear bright, spring colors, the kind Rosie used to wear. Jason performed "Hey Jude" by *The Beatles* on his acoustic guitar as the audience clapped and sang along. He later presented a video montage of her years to an overwhelmed and somber crowd. I sat within the audience, a mere spectator among many. There was a moment where Rosie sang to a track playing over her laptop. It was a webcam video. The music alerted me to something eerily recognizable. It was track I had sent Rosie years ago, before my last deployment and before her lung transplant. I never thought she had the time to do anything with it, and here she was, singing beautifully to the song I had long forgotten.

ON BEING SERIOUS

I don't have detailed memoirs of my early experiences of going to church. Although much of that time was a blur, there was no doubt a lasting significance. My inability to take things seriously enough in life has plagued me much throughout my life. Such flippant attitudes could be attributed to thoughts about family, friends, relationships, career goals, national politics, world affairs, and life in general. It could be a personal defense mechanism, or something far more dangerous: an inherent stubborn arrogance that I am alive and know what's better for me more than anyone else. In regards to religion, this has been the case more times than I can remember.

From the time I was six to about twelve years old, I would be shuttled off to Sunday school in my parents' station wagon, then later the family van, every week on Sunday around nine-thirty in the morning. After much deliberation on my part, my parents and three other siblings would arrive at the First Church of Christ Scientist in Deltona, Florida—the only church I've ever regularly attended. Church, to me, has always had a similarity of a rock concert by a band I may not be entirely into, but still like enough to go to their show. That may be a weak comparison, but it was something about a self-conscious sense of belonging.

Some people may ask, what's a Christian Scientist? Is that some kind of Scientologist? Is that the religion that forbids the use of modern medicine, instead relying solely on prayer? Do they mandate subscriptions to the *Christian Science Monitor*? I don't have the answers to these questions, as I've never thoroughly explored the religion to its core, and am no means a reliable spokesman for the faith. But didn't I purportedly sit there in Sunday school for about seven years? Did I not learn anything? What in the hell was I doing, day dreaming about tinker toys?

For the record, I never had tinker toys as a child. When my parents were married, they attended the church regularly, as my mother played organ twice a week—on Sundays and Wednesdays. Our “Christian Science” roots were largely from my mother’s side, as her mother was, and still is, a devout Christian Scientist. As far as I remember, my parents never forbade us children from taking medicine, but the emphasis on prayer played a significant role. My mother would always pray for us when we were sick. We were told that “Spirit is the real and eternal. Matter is the unreal and temporal,” which is a quote from the Christian Science handbook, *Key to the Scriptures* by Mary Baker Eddy. As a child, I heard that Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, had slipped on some ice in Massachusetts, and was severely injured, almost blinded. Much of her time was spent in solitary. A life, apparently measured by a powerful sense of loneliness.

After my parents divorced, I never heard my father mention religion much again. If he still had faith, he kept it hidden. Had he been humoring my mother all that time? After they split up, our weekly church attendance became more flexible, as it was harder for my mom to micromanage us. I soon stopped going altogether.

In bitter pre-teen angst, I developed an attitude that considered sitting in Sunday school for an hour a malicious affront to my sensibilities. It got to the point where any response to the Sunday school teacher had to be forced from me. It got to the point where an older boy, around fourteen or fifteen, who actually *wanted* to be there, took me aside after a Sunday service and told me, “You don’t have to be here if you don’t want to.” He was right. My mother made me go, but that was no excuse to take it out on the elderly men and women who had volunteered to sit in there with me, my siblings, and other random kids and try to make us interested in religion.

Sunday school lessons took place in a room with four tables separated by four white dividers over a red carpet speckled with black spots. I spent a lot of time staring at those black spots over the years as my mind drifted further and further away from the day's lesson. The tables segregated us by age. There was my older sister at the high school table, my younger brother and I at the middle school table, and my youngest sister at the elementary school table.

I can recall my primary Sunday school teacher, Mrs. Hogan, who, like many of the church attendees and volunteers, was a warm and friendly person. She was also patient with me and my brother, and we weren't the easiest children to contain. There was a boy around my age who exceeded my lack of interest in the day's lesson so much that he made me look like an altar boy. He was a freckly-faced smartass kid with thick glasses and a black-haired crew-cut. Half the time Mrs. Hogan had to focus her attention on him to keep him out of trouble, as he would try to wander away, or use the restroom and never return. One time she grabbed him by the arm and said, "Sit down, Adam!" I felt threatened by him because if anyone was going to show their lack of interest in Sunday school, it was going to be me. One morning, she told us to open up our bibles to the Book of Genesis.

He said, "You mean, the Book of Sega Genesis?"

"No, Adam, that's not what I meant."

He thought he was a real joker, though I didn't care for him much. My ambivalence was solidified when I saw him outside of class one day, unaware that we even attended the same middle school. He was walking with some friends, and I was walking to lunch.

I said, "Hey, I know you."

He said, "Yeah, I know you too, and I don't like you," then laughed and walked past me.

I was stunned. I disliked *him*, and felt he had no right to do the same. “That little... shit,” I said to myself in disbelief as he walked by.

In my last year of middle school, I moved up to the older kid’s table where my sister was, and become as bad as Adam in the eyes of the teenage boy who had pulled me aside to tell me that I didn’t have to be there. I wasn’t rude or disrespectful during our lessons, I was just quiet. Silence, for me, has always been about mentally shutting down and becoming unresponsive. To become catatonic in Sunday school, I felt, was the only defense I had. Nothing was going to come out of me, and nothing was going to come in. If you had asked me back then if I considered myself a Christian, I would have said yes. There was a quote written on our church wall attributed to Jesus Christ that said, “Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” I always liked that quote, and I saw much truth in Christianity. But my internal conflict had a lot to do with the fact that I wasn’t being honest with myself about how I felt about anything.

The church was a tight-knit group of people who, from my perspective, seemed to be hundreds of years old. Church was boring. I would rather have stayed home and watched television, wrote a movie script, or even did yard work as opposed to hearing what they had to say. I had never experienced a longer hour in all of my life. Sixty simple minutes seemed to stretch to an eternity. Though I always thought Mrs. Hogan was nice, I felt sorry for her. I didn’t know the details of her personal life, but I believed her to be long widowed. It seemed that she and many of the other church goers—widowers or widowed—were also long retired individuals trying to find or maintain a certain peace in their lives that one can only aspire for in their elderly years. These were people who were teenagers or younger during World War II. Some of them even had memories of the Great Depression. They had seen and experienced things that a kid like me from the 1980s & 90s simply couldn’t have fathomed.

They struck me as incredibly lonely people, and it wasn't clear if their immediate family—children, grandchildren perhaps—kept in contact with any of them.

Mrs. Hogan, a woman with short, gray curly hair, glasses, a navy blue blazer, and a long skirt, always wore a large wreath medallion pin over her jacket on the left side, directly over her heart. I imagined that she and the others looked forward to attending church as a way to get out of the house and socialize. They seemed to revel in the company of children, as the volunteers for Sunday school were never in short supply. But what did I know of her or anyone else? For all I knew they partied hard during the week, did cannonballs at pool parties, or joined biker clubs. Mrs. Hogan could have been an avid skydiver for all I knew. Maybe she was an artist, a free spirit, a leader of a commune for other seniors who assembled together to form bands and play rock music—Christian rock music of course. I only went by perception, and could have been completely off. Maybe they weren't lonely at all. I hoped I was wrong.

The very first job I had was cleaning the house of an elderly woman from church. She asked my mother if any of her children were interested, and my mother gladly volunteered me. I had always cleaned up around our house, and kept a neat room, and my mother felt there was no one better for the job, or no one more susceptible.

“She'll pay you each week, and all you have to do tidy the place up,” she told me. Before I knew it, my mother dropped me off and left without turning back.

The woman was in her early nineties, which I thought—at nine or ten years old—to be ancient. I can't remember her name, but I remember how I would vacuum, sweep the patio, and clean the bathroom and kitchen. I regularly counted down the three hours I was there each week, but also noticed a certain emptiness to her three-bedroom home. She would sit in her recliner over a plush orange carpet in her living room and talk to me. Even when I was in the bathroom,

scrubbing the tile, she would continue, showing no concern of a response. Initially, I found it annoying, but soon realized that part of my being there was about providing her someone to talk to. If all she needed was something as simple as that, then I could do it, along with cleaning her practically already clean home.

When they were married, my parents had an additional room built on our house for my father's parents to live in. They stayed in the room for a few years until I was about eight-years-old, then moved to an apartment in Merritt Island. After my parents' divorce, when I was ten, my mother rented out the room to help pay the bills. A man moved in and lived with us for a few months. His name was Dick Searles, and he was a realtor with Searles Reality. I don't know if he owned the business or if his last name was purely coincidental. I imagine the same confusion could arise if I got a job with McKee Construction, a local contracting company I often see everywhere. He was a tall, lanky man with slicked-back white hair and glasses. I remembered him and his outgoing wife with curly, red hair from church. They had recently divorced, and "Mr. Searles," as I called him, needed a place to stay. "Do people still get divorced in their fifties?" I wondered. Apparently, I had a lot to learn about the world.

In a furtive act of near criminal behavior, my older sister and I went into Mr. Searles' room one time when he wasn't there, just to see how it looked. The door could be unlocked with a butter knife. All the blinds were closed and the cleanliness of the room was impeccable. The bed was made, there were no clothes on the floor, and the surface of his desk was wiped clean with nothing on it. I didn't even look like a person was living there. It looked similar to a hotel when you first walk in, minus the welcome information and cable listing. It was a room that could be best described as minimal, in every sense of the word. There was a small mini-fridge in

the corner of the room that we opened. On the inside rack sat a single apple and container of yogurt. We closed the mini-fridge and looked around. There was nothing of remote interest to consider. We left the room and locked the door behind us.

“What a weirdo,” my sister said.

“Big time,” I replied.

I was struck with the same feeling I had about many people from church. Mr. Searles was a lonely man. Lonely people didn't have many things because there was no reason to have a lot of things if you didn't have anyone to share them with. Such ephemeral thoughts ignited an inherent fear of growing up and becoming old. It seemed as though loneliness was the cost of aging, and that it was unavoidable no matter what kind of life one lived, or how piously they lived it. I thought of monks and nuns who lived in temples, took vows of silence, and served lives of solitude.

Though everything about the church exuded loneliness, the elderly members may not have felt the way I did because they believed in the presence of God surrounding them. Such a belief isn't strictly a matter of religious faith, I believe that it has something to do with opening up your heart to see things from outside your own being. As a child, *my* existence was all that mattered, so I naturally didn't see how anyone could be less self-centered, and not feel a singular focus on being alone.

What I do remember is that the church became very familiar to me over the years. I learned the basics: the Ten Commandments, the story of Noah and the Ark, Daniel and the Lion's Den, and the teaching of Jesus Christ, but I also have no earthly reasoning to explain my insolence in the later years, when I simply wanted nothing to do with the church. In later years I

would attend services to see my mother play the organ. I never felt agnostic towards Christian Science or Christianity as a whole. It was about something else.

On the one hand, I find myself serving as a proponent of Christianity against the onslaught of atheists, on the other hand I find myself jokingly mocking religion of all kinds. I guess I want it both ways, but will soon have to make a choice, if it's not too late. In terms of seriously held beliefs, it's all been fun and games. I simply haven't taken life, spirituality, and religion seriously enough. Perhaps I have no foundation, no moral compass, no strong beliefs or idea of who I am or what my purpose is. Such a thought is terrifying.

I do know, however, that I believe in taking care of the elderly. That is to me one lesson I took away from childhood. As a social, political, and cultural issue, I think quality of life care for the elderly—to include, providing the services they need, or simply just talking and listening to them—should be paramount in our modern society's list of priorities. And while I know this rhetoric sounds nothing short of a political tagline during election year, I truly believe that our goodness is measured in how we treat others who cannot necessarily care for themselves. Perhaps this is what I learned from the friendly elderly people at the church I disliked going to. They might have broken through my impenetrable shell of self-centered angst and taught me something after all, without my even knowing it.

VARIOUS METHODS OF ROAD SURVIVAL

A family I've been good friends with over the years owns a salvage yard containing acres of junk cars. This is a place where cars go to die. Once relinquished by their former owners, they find a place among the other dead and are subsequently stripped of parts until there is nothing viable left. Other times, the junk cars are mashed into blocks and sold for scrap. Such steps are necessary for automobiles, of all kinds, that have served their purpose.

When I was five or six, a childhood friend of mine and I journeyed far into the woods behind my house. As children, we honestly thought that we were the first people in the history of mankind to have traveled the woods back there. Anything we came across had been previously undiscovered. Imagine our shock when during one of our expeditions, we came across an abandoned car. It was fascinating to behold: a blue, four-door road hog, slightly rusted, with a cracked windshield. The exterior of the car was covered in leaves and pine needles, the tires were still intact, but flat. We wondered how the car got there. Naturally we believed its origins were related to some supernatural force, and referred to it as the "ghost car."

Our version of events involved the story of a man behind the wheel of the car, who got lost one night in the neighborhood. A bloodthirsty killer grizzly bear appeared just as the man was turning a corner. He swerved to miss the grizzly then found himself off-road and descending down a large hill into the deep, dark woods below. The grizzly was soon upon him. The door was jammed shut so the man frantically kicked the driver's side window until it smashed into pieces. The grizzly raced nearby, panting with bloodlust. Before the man could run, he was instantly torn to pieces by the grizzly's enormous claws. But our story didn't stop there. Some years later, we believed that the same grizzly killed a group of teenagers who were hanging

around the abandoned car. Though there was no evidence of this existed beyond our wild claim. And there we were, hanging around the very same car that we claimed to have been linked to several brutal deaths. I had never seen a bear in our neighborhood, or anywhere in the surrounding woods. We were, after all, in Florida. There were snakes, spiders, opossums, and palmetto bugs, but bears? If one existed, I had yet to see it. The ghost car remained a permanent fixture of the pine-needle laden woods we often ventured into. It never went anywhere.

Years later, I was driving on the interstate and saw an abandoned vehicle on the side of the road covered in notices, probably from law enforcement. The car had been in the same spot for weeks. It's funny how abandoned things look after a while.



Figure 1: A car from my friend's junkyard, similar in resemblance to the "ghost car."

I often wonder what it's all about. Not life, but my car insurance. It seems to fluctuate each month, and I haven't gotten a ticket in years. Maybe I'm not paying enough attention to my premiums, but it seems that there is a slight increase in my payments each month; a few dollars one month, five dollars the next. It's as if no matter how safe my driving record has been during the past ten years, I'm always paying more. One day I'll no longer be able to afford car insurance, and combined with current fuel prices, I'll then have to resort to walking.

I won't say what assholes I'm currently insured with, only to say that they're better than the other assholes I had before them. Isn't that pretty much how most women feel about new relationships? *At least he's better than that other asshole.* I imagine that I've been "that other asshole" a few times, especially after I wrecked an ex-girlfriend's new car in a collision at an intersection some years ago. I don't think my driving skills differed much from back then, when I was eighteen or nineteen. Fortunately I haven't been in an accident since then. There is no guarantee, however, that it will be my last, for the unpredictable awaits us around every corner. Be afraid.

It's surprising that in the age of diversionary bombardment, vehicle-related fatalities have declined over the past two decades, according to the U.S. National Highway and Traffic Safety Administration. I'm honestly amazed that every driver on the road hasn't been killed by now, leaving an empty highway of smoldering metal, broken glass, and ravaged cars. I can picture one lone driver who's late for work, scrolling headlines on his smart phone as he swerves too far to the right, causing his vehicle to ascend in the air like a drunken trapeze artist off the shoulder of the road into a fiery death below. Without a single driver left, the roads will finally become safe for cyclists. But how long will *they* last?

Drivers like me have managed to cheat death. And this is even with the advent of those shoe box cars—Smart Cars, as they’re called. One could argue that automobiles are being designed with higher safety standards than ever before. That’s good enough for me, because I honestly don’t think we’re any better driving. So what about motorcycles? When I was a child, my parents owned a motorcycle, but they didn’t keep it for very long. Motorcycles are obviously more dangerous than cars, just like real cigarettes are obviously more dangerous than electronic cigarettes. An unloaded pistol is safer than a loaded one; depending, of course, on whether you need it or not. But what looks *cooler*?

Some motorcyclists don’t like to wear helmets, and would rather have their brains splattered on the pavement after a crash. Others, who take all the precautions in the world—replete with neon safety-vest, bulbous helmet, eye protection, gloves, boots, knee-pads and elbow-pads—could still end up in two mangled halves following a traffic collision. The safest automobile driver in the world could still be pulverized into fragments in mere seconds by a teetering eighteen-wheeler. It’s all in the context of statistical “likelihood.” Nothing is guaranteed in life, including true love, but our behavior and choices influences the “likelihood” of a situation far beyond what we can foresee on any given day. I knew a guy who’d been arrested over twenty times for petty crimes like vandalism and assault over the past decade. If you look him up on the local mug shot depository, there’s a mug shot for each year. I tend to try to stay away people like that for the same reason that I put my seatbelt on every time I drive, something about self-preservation.

Perhaps concern about motorcycle safety is what persuaded my parents to sell their motorcycle. I was six or seven years old. We had just re-located to a new town in Central

Florida, an underdeveloped piece of suburbia called Deltona. It's the type of place people from up north move to because the housing is cheap, and the area is relatively safe. My father had recently purchased a maroon '85 Honda 500 Silverwing that, at the time, looked like something you couldn't picture James Dean—or even Keanu Reeves—riding. It was a large bike equipped with a camshaft engine, small windshield at the front, dual saddlebags, and a seat rest at the end for the second passenger. In essence, it was a “dad bike” similar to my father's then-contemporary attire of dad sneakers, dad jeans, leather dad belt, tucked-in dad shirt, dad watch, dad glasses, and mustache. My dad was 80s irony before it was cool.

I don't recall ever riding on the bike; however, it was an enjoyable pastime for my parents. My mother donned a motorcycle helmet—over her shoulder-length perm—and they'd drive off into the sun set. Maybe they had it for economic reasons, or maybe they yearned to live like outlaws. Aside from the motorcycle, they owned a standard and uninspiring Ford Escort for the family. We had just moved into a new house in a new neighborhood. It was the very same neighborhood where I discovered the ghost car with my friend. My dad worked. That's what he did. As an engineer, he worked all day, and into the night. A few months after they got the bike, I seldom saw my dad use it. He rode it to work less and less. It seemed a novelty more than anything else.

Having four kids had perhaps sullied their dreams of an *Easy Rider* lifestyle, and they reportedly came to a mutual understanding that the bike had to go. My mother told me that she liked the bike. My father said the same. Who made the call? I may never know. Such answers, I imagine, are sealed indefinitely like government files on the Kennedy assassination. Did it no longer serve any practical use? I can only speculate, as both my parents have recalled fondness for the bike when asked to take a trip down memory lane. I conclude, through outright

assumption, that an inherent concern for safety could have played a role. The bike may have been dangerous—though a butter knife can also be dangerous if used improperly—but its limited lifespan seemed to have more to do with impracticality than anything else.

They got a taste of living on the proverbial edge, and decided to go in the complete opposite direction. It was only a matter of time before the next inevitable step: a family station wagon, which solidified us as a family unit, eliminating any chance of escape for either parent. Before that landmark stage, they needed to sell the bike. My father took a picture of his prized possession, with my youngest sister—then only two or three—sitting on the seat, and placed flyers around the local grocery store, advertising: “Motorcycle for Sale.” I remember this picture. They used my sister as some kind of manipulative facade to warm the hearts of potential buyers. It’s like the way car salesmen use children or dogs to gain your attention, or affection. Such techniques have no effect on the cold and indifferent, but most people seem to go for that sort of thing. And it worked. They sold the bike to a nice gentleman within a week. I would argue that they could have probably sold it even faster if I had done the flyer.

**1985 HONDA 500 SILVERWING FOR SALE!
Only 1,000 miles! Rides Great! Barely Been Used!**



← Artist's Conception

Figure 2: Photoshop version of my parents' motorcycle photograph. Pictured: my younger sister, Amanda.

We need to get rid of this bike soon before we change our minds. It's been fun, but we have to accept the fact that, as much as we love our children, they've ruined any possibility for us to be adventurous and have fun anymore. We've come to the point where it was either the kids or the bike, and by a two-to-one vote, we've decided to keep the children (we had to involve an outside individual because the vote initially ended in a tie). Please take the bike. We'll make you a good bargain.

Soon after the sale, followed the purchase of the family station wagon, an '87 four-door white Buick Century with hatch-back tail gate seats where two passengers could sit and face the rear of the vehicle. Out of four children, my older sister, Dawn, and I would usually be the ones seated in at the rear of the car. Oddly enough, many years later Dawn would be the one to destroy the family station wagon with one ill-fated stroke of careless driving with me in the passenger seat.

When we rode in the back together as children, I would turn to her and say, "This is pretty fun. It's like we're traveling backwards." She would say, "Yeah," or probably just hit me.

Then I would hit her back. Then one of us would scream. Then an ominous male voice would come from the front: “You two kids stop it NOW!” Utter silence following. This is a picture not too different from what you’ve seen depicted a million times with families in station wagons traveling on the road.

The station wagon entered our lives a few years after settling into our new home in Deltona, on Wallingford Street. Before then, we had moved throughout different locations in Central Florida as my father looked for steady employment. During his pursuit of a degree in engineering, he worked several odd jobs, including the bowling alley, while taking night classes at the University of Central Florida. He soon got a job with a major defense and aerospace manufacturer, finished his degree, and we subsequently planted our roots in Deltona. After the birth of my youngest sister, Amanda, there were now four children, and the first casualty to my parents’ lifestyle was the motorcycle. It was conceivable at one point that three children could fit into the Ford Focus, but Amanda changed all that. Something was going to have to give.

We had a three bedroom house in Deltona. My younger brother, Patrick, and I shared a room as did Dawn and Amanda. My parents’ room made up the third and largest room. We had an aboveground pool in the backyard, and new neighbors, the Conley family, who had recently moved to the area. The mother of the family was a childhood friend of my mother’s—they grew up in Orlando together. Imagine my parents’ reserved apprehension when the Conleys arrived unannounced, and informed them that they would be moving in next door. Surprise! That was the way things were back then. New houses were popping up all over the street, and with that came more people, and more families looking for places to settle down.

I was about eight years old, and excited to hear that we were getting a new car. I went to the dealership with my dad to pick it up and saw a white four-door hatch-back Buick station

wagon ready for us to take home. It was a car, that much I understood, and I like to think that I remained excited about my family's new vehicle despite its resemblance to a large sea vessel.

We took frequent trips in the Buick to St. Augustine, or one of our other favorite spots, Chattanooga, Tennessee. It was the first vehicle my parents bought new—our first *real* family vehicle. They traded in the Ford Focus, and the old car became a faded memory of the past. The Buick served us well, and we got plenty of mileage out of it through trips to the grocery store, school, restaurants, the video store, vacations in Tennessee, and other places we traveled within reason. My mother soon completed her degree in Library Science, and got a job at the Volusia County Library. I was elated to find out we were getting a pool built in the backyard, a considerable upgrade from our above ground pool.

The Buick trailed on as did our lives, and it seemed that nothing unexpected was on the horizon. This routine shifted when I was around ten years old. My parents sat us down and told us they were getting a divorce. My mother took ownership of the car, along with the house in Deltona, and the new pool in the backyard. In both instances, these things were once new—the house and the Buick—and with my dad's absence, they became relics of their former selves. My father moved away, as the divorce finalized, and I thought it strange that I immediately knew that my mother was the one who wanted the divorce. She was the one who seemed to want to move on. My father, on the other hand, took on the role of someone simply trying to cope.

They both remarried years later. My dad met a woman from Canada at a business conference, and later moved up north to be with her. My mother dated a man from the area, a mechanic who she later married after a string of failed relationships. As children, we were all just witnesses, not understanding what either parent was going through. Our Buick became less a family vehicle—as it was originally intended—and more of a community vehicle for my mother

and older sister, who had recently gotten her driver's permit. The car hadn't been completely paid off, but I remember how my mother took pride in eventually completing the final payments, even though she told me that she hated the car. At the time, I didn't know what the station wagon symbolized anymore. It still got us around, but there were no more family vacations to the Smokey Mountains, or trips to Denny's after church. The car became a preliminary step in my older sister's quest for independence, sold short with a simple act of carelessness.

1987 BUICK CENTURY FOR SALE!

SLIGHTLY TOTALED, BUT COULD BE USED FOR PARTS!

OWN A PIECE OF MCKEE HISTORY TODAY!

COULD BE USED FOR SCRAP OR HOWEVER YOU SEE FIT!



Figure 3: Dilapidated vehicle at my friend's family-owned junkyard.

In the early 1990s, just as our cherished family station wagon was paid off, my older sister, Dawn, and I were driving home to get some forgotten party favors for our younger brother's birthday party at the local bowling alley. Dawn was driving, and I, a twelve-year-old

know-nothing, was sitting in the passenger seat. She had just gotten her driver's license, but was not insured. I believe my mother allowed her to make the trip because she didn't want to have to leave the bowling alley. Most statistics state that the majority of vehicle accidents happen less than twenty miles from home. I don't know if my mother knew that, but it was an understandable oversight on her part. If drivers really considered the possibility that they would get into a car accident just to get a loaf of bread, I don't know if we would ever leave our homes.

Growing up, I had never really spent that much time with my sister. We got along reasonably well. She was a few grades ahead of me—already in high school. She had stuck up for me at the mere hint of any other kids messing with me. I was a small kid, and prone to be picked on, but it seldom happened, even given my size. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that I never intentionally sought out trouble, though I was far from perfect, and still got into fights sometimes. My sister's high school fights were something else. She punched, kicked, pulled hair; whatever she had to do to take a girl down. Kids at school called her “the Wolverine.”

Nearing our neighborhood, she took some back roads. The afternoon was illuminated in a spring-like hue. Our windows were down; early *Pearl Jam* was playing on the radio, and a nice breeze circulated throughout the car. She complained about my mother always giving her a hard time for wanting to drive. My mother had an instinctual premonition against fully trusting my older sister, but tried time from time. It was difficult for her.

“I've had my license for months, and she still wants to give me shit!”

“Yeah, she needs to get over it,” I said.

“I'm tired of it. I should have my own car by now,” my sister declared.

I nodded in agreement and could sense the irritation in her voice and the erratic movements in her driving. Typical mother-daughter spat, I thought. She wanted to show me that she was an experienced driver, and started speeding. The car in front of us was clearly going too slow. To this offense, my sister, without hesitation, shifted into the left lane to pass the lumbering vehicle ahead of us. It was at this moment that another car, on the left side of the road, was backing out of their driveway, not looking. What followed felt instantaneous: we were in a ditch, the car upside down in a matter of seconds.

My sister had panicked in her attempt to avoid the car backing out. This caused her to immediately shift behind the car she was trying to pass. The overcompensation to the right caused the station wagon to fly off the right side of the road into a drainage ditch, but not before hitting a cement drainage block, causing our car to fly up and land horizontally on its roof. In one fell swoop we were airborne, then after a thunderous *crash!*—motionless. As fast as time moved, I can still remember a mental “capture” of the episode. From my view the world shifted upside down. My sister was clutching the side of the driver’s door, screaming in mid-air.

After instinctively unhooking our seatbelts, and falling onto the ceiling, we crawled out of the car like two wounded soldiers, and my sister, fueled by adrenaline, immediately staggered over to the driveway of the vehicle that caused her to swerve.

“What the hell is your problem?” she asked the bewildered elderly man as he exited his station wagon. Soon an ambulance arrived. Then the police. Then my mother, who got a ride to the scene after being contacted. Dawn was still adamant that she had done nothing wrong, but it became clear that her speeding had caused the accident. My mother got a ride to the scene from one of the parents at the birthday party. She stood in the middle of the road, and shook her head in disappointment. Then again, it could have been relief. The Buick station wagon had been

eliminated in one fell swoop. A tow truck fastened chains to the car and pulled it upwards out of the ditch. I looked over at the dangling wreckage, certain it would be the last time I ever saw the car.

This incident was the catalyst of sorts for my sister and mother's fractured relationship throughout her teenage years. From that point on, for my mother, any reasoning behind distrusting my sister involved the demise of our family station wagon.

Our Buick had become a ball of scrap faster than any of us could have ever predicted. I don't recall if we ever actually made it to the birthday party. Fortunately Dawn and I had worn our seatbelts. What car would we get next? Would my sister have to pay for it? That was between my mother and her insurance company, and we later got a used Chevrolet van. It large enough to fit all of us kids and my stepfather's three young boys. Problem solved.

Was Dawn a reckless driver? Did she fall within the statistical likelihood of car accidents happening within a short distance from home? I may have thought she did until my own traffic accident nearly ten years later, where I learned that reaction time isn't always what it's cracked up to be. Before I fully understood the unexpected dangers of the road, and the arguably unavoidable circumstances in which they often materialize in a flash, I had gotten my first car, a 1985 Chevy Citation. It lasted throughout my last two years of high school, and I didn't get in a single wreck. Despite my clean driving record to that point, I had my hands full. It was an old car that drove as if it were on life support. It passed away one day, out of the blue, never to start again. I had it towed to the junkyard and bid the car farewell, though some memories of our time together still exist.

FOR SALE: TEENAGER'S FIRST CAR

1985-ish CHEVY CITATION! HAS CHARACTER!

ADVENTUROUS CAR AVAILABLE TO A PROUD OWNER!

AN ASPIRING MECHANICS DREAM!



Figure 4: More junk cars at the junkyard.

Few have heard of such a thing as a Chevy Citation. But for the obscure collector out there, the Citation is quite an anomaly. What planet was it from? I don't know. But somehow, it ended up in a dimly-lit, nearly barren used-car lot in Sanford, Florida. I first became acquainted with this oddity while as I strolled the premises with my stepfather, Ken. Following my mother's remarriage, I eventually got acquainted with her new husband, the mechanic.

He was there to help me find a new car. It would seem that he'd already made the arrangements. The price written on the windshield said \$250. For a part-time stock boy at Winn-Dixie, it was quite the steal. Ken lent a hand when it came to mechanical matters, and was certain that we were going to find a car that day. I trusted his judgment, and figured that the car looked pretty decent considering its age. It was a small two-door orange Pinto-looking relic from

the 1970s. But my estimations were off. The car had been manufactured in 1985, around the same time my parents got rid of their motorcycle.

“Here it is,” my stepfather said. He proved his mechanical skills that evening—again, to some degree, as I purchased the car—cash—and we left the car lot. I had been anticipating having my own car for some time then, as I imagine any fifteen-year-old would. He followed me home just in case anything went wrong with the car, and sure enough, it did.

Generally, we drive automobiles to get from point A to point B in a decent amount of time. Such expectations are overrated. Sometimes, a car needs to take a breather every now and then. The Citation needed plenty of breaks, and would often stop accelerating in mid-movement no matter how hard my foot was on the gas. It was a car that engaged in one of those lengthy start-ups where it sounds like the engine was choking to death. Nonetheless, I felt the excitement of vehicle ownership as we neared the highway after making my purchase. Dusk was approaching. The car was moving. I was driving and the car was mine. This meant absolute, unadulterated freedom. I could leave my house whenever I pleased, go anywhere I wanted to. I could travel the country—no—the world if I wished. It was a remarkable moment in my life when suddenly, the car stopped accelerating, and slowed to a roll.

I veered off to the shoulder on the road, braking to a halt. My stepfather noticed this predicament, and pulled over. I exited the car, dumbfounded.

“What happened?” he asked.

“It just stopped. I don’t know,” I replied.

I raised the hood and my stepfather examined the engine, but by then it had got very dark.

“Tell you what I’ll do,” he said. “I have some rope in my truck, I’ll just have to pull you home.” I couldn’t even envision such a thing.

So there I was, in tow, carefully guiding the slumbering beast to-and-fro along the road as Ken brought us home.

It's an interesting experience to pull into your high school parking lot and have people tell you that your car is on fire as you're halfway across the parking lot. Moments like those, I believe, are to be treasured for all they are worth. Such a scenario occurred more times than I can remember, but I had the same response every time. "Nah, it's not on fire, the engine always smokes for a little bit after I park."

It had been some time since the car had shut down in mid-movement, but one time, while on a busy road, the Citation decided to enter sleep mode. "Oh no, it's happening again," I said.

Frustrated cars zipped past me as I veered the car towards the grass on the side of the road. I got out and opened the hood. The usual smoke billowed from the engine. "Nothing new here," I thought. I went back to the front seat and looked at the fuel gauge. The car had half a tank. I looked over the engine again. I hadn't a clue. What I thought would be a quick drive around town turned into a long walk. This was before cell phones, GPS, and On-Star. I learned something that day that I had forgotten from my childhood years: it takes a very long time to get anywhere on foot.

The car ran most of the time, providing adventurous rendezvous to the beach, pool halls, or wherever the road took me and my friends. Throughout any journey, the fragrance of gasoline fumes was always in the air. My next car was an '87 Oldsmobile Cutlass. It was a hand-me-down from my stepfather, but it actually ran most of the time. Coincidentally, both the Citation and the Cutlass are no longer manufactured today. A few years later, my vain desire to drive a nicer looking car to a wedding video shoot proved to be a vast mistake.

FOR SALE: MAZDA WRECKED BY ASSHOLE BOYFRIEND!
OWN ANOTHER PIECE OF HISTORY!
MAZDA PARTS AREN'T THE EASIEST TO COME BY; THIS COULD BE
YOUR POTENTIAL SOLUTION!



Figure 5: The graveyard of forgotten vehicles.

It started out innocently enough, in the year 2000. Fresh out of high school, I was working part-time for a company that specialized in wedding videos and photography, in addition to my regular job as a stockroom clerk for a parts manufacturer. I videotaped weddings—wedding after wedding—which, after a while, made me numb to the whole concept of ceremonies and receptions. But nonetheless, it was a good job with good pay.

My girlfriend, Vicki, had recently bought a new Mazda. She was kind enough to let me borrow it to drive to Daytona to videotape a wedding in one of those ritzy hotels along the beach. Vicki and I had dated for about two years. I was in a troubling part of the relationship where I was thinking I wanted to end things. I wondered later if my doubts were similar to my mother's,

but my commitment was far more minimal. I considered Vicki to be a good friend overall, but I was tiring of the way things were going. Rather than growing, our relationship was receding.

The Oldsmobile Ken had sold me was a decent enough car, but at that particular time I wanted to drive in something better. Vicki had the Mazda for only a month. I went to the wedding ceremony and did my usual bit pre-ceremony bit. I had to get exterior shots of the church, find the groom so I could mic him, and position the camera to capture the bride at all times, among other things. Those preliminary steps went off without a hitch.

Once the ceremony ended, I drove to the hotel for the reception. I felt good driving the Mazda. It was a noticeably modern step up. There was no missing bumper like my Oldsmobile, and no dangling front turn signal bulbs either. The Mazda had style, where my car may had character. I'd take style over character any day. The windows were down allowing for a perfect cool, summer breeze. A good song was on the radio. I was making record time. I had my seat belt on, was well aware of my surroundings and felt not a single distraction.

I neared an intersection with traffic lights close to the beach line when a car appeared, driving from the right side only inches ahead of me. One of us was clearly at fault for running a traffic light, but I was certain that it wasn't me. I slammed the brakes in a startled panic. The scenario was in tune with the most fundamental laws of physics. There was absolutely no stopping in time. As soon as I saw the car, it was too late. I hit the brakes, but still smashed into the car on its side at such breakneck speed that the driver's side airbag exploded out of the steering wheel, pummeling me in the face. I turned the car to the left as it rattled, heaved, and crawled to the side of the intersection. The adrenaline factor came into play again, just like my sister's reaction to her car accident before.

I jumped out of the car, not realizing that it had been totaled, and paced around in confusion. The sight must have been something to behold: a kid in a tuxedo with his face and hands bloodied walking in circles looking dazed and unsteady. Soon there were police on the scene. I walked towards the car I'd hit.

“What the hell happened?” I demanded.

The driver, a dazed black man around my age, sat in the driver's seat holding his head. His car had been crushed directly where I'd hit it. His door was mangled and the airbag had deployed.

“That was all you, man. You ran that shit,” he said.

I denied any wrong doing, and I walked back to what was left of the Mazda. Not much by my estimate. A police officer tried to calm me down.

“Sir, just take a seat, please,” he insisted.

“I've got to go. I have to be somewhere,” I insisted.

I started fishing for the video equipment, which normally takes two trips on average to carry. All I could hear were the endless sounds of sirens coming from all sides.

“Look, I gotta go,” I said.

Amidst the noise was a vibrating buzz from my pocket. To stifle this irritation, I clutched inside my pocket and pulled out a beeper—beepers were common back then, and mine was on overdrive.

It was my boss. He was at the wedding reception performing the duties of a DJ. His number was flashing across my beeper like one of those NASDAQ tickers on CNBC. Some time had passed, more than I had fathomed. I was asked a litany of questions.

“Where's your driver's license?”

“Do you have insurance?”

“Where’s the registration?”

“Whose car is this?”

I knew I had to get out of there, because by then I was certain that the wedding party had already made it to the reception. The thought of the entire reception ceremony waiting on me was terrifying. No one outright told me who was to blame for the accident, so it wasn’t clear. Before I knew it, the Mazda had been towed. The other driver was already gone, traveling with the tow truck that took his car. One police officer remained, jotting notes on his clip board. My video equipment sat on the curb in a pathetic lump: a large camera bag that you could probably carry a toddler in, a tri-pod, wheels for the tri-pod, a light set, and battery pack.

“Can I get a ride?” I asked the officer, a mustached, laid-back gentleman, wearing aviator sunglasses. I explained my dilemma and he agreed to give me a ride. Within a few moments we were off. I ignored the never-ending vibrating of my beeper. What was I going to do about it? I felt the hopeless weight of having completely screwed up really bad. To counteract thoughts of dread, my mind raced with various solutions.

“It wasn’t that bad of a wreck. I’ll pay for the damages. Money fixes all. Yes, green, crisp, beautiful money. It makes everything go away. The wedding party probably doesn’t even know I’m gone. I’m not that late anyway. I’ll show up and everything will be perfectly back to normal.”

I sat in the back of the police car and pointed ahead to an outlandishly exotic hotel called the Desert Inn.

“That’s the building there,” I said.

The officer let me out on the curb at the front entrance. “Here you go,” he said.

I grabbed the equipment in one heave, defying my earlier belief that it could only be done in two trips, and exited the vehicle while thanking the officer.

“No problem.” He gave me his card and was off. I hiked up the stairs of the hotel lobby. Inside, the place was huge. I was lost. I knew that I needed to use the phone immediately to get a hold of my boss, Dave. Two female clerks were chatting at the front desk as I approached, sweaty and disoriented. I tossed the equipment to the floor.

“Could I use your phone please?” I asked.

They agreed, so I took the phone and dialed my boss to find out where in this labyrinthine wonderland I could find reception.

“Where the hell have you been?” he asked. I told him that I was at the Desert Inn and had gotten into an accident on my way to the reception.

“What are you doing there? We’re at the Hilton!” he yelled. I put the phone down, and placed my head in my hands. I felt royally screwed on all conceivable ends. The Hilton was about a mile from the Desert Inn. The walk nearly killed me. I should have gotten a taxi, but wasn’t thinking clearly. Soon I could see the Hilton. “Only a little...bit...further,” I said, exasperated. I was dragging the equipment on the ground when a car passed and pulled over to the side of the road. A middle-aged woman in the passenger seat rolled her window down, her husband at the wheel.

“My God, are you all right?” she asked.

I crouched near her window and delivered a series of nonsensical ramblings, confounding them in my delirium.

“Hotel...,” I pointed, “...need to get to that hotel.”

They offered a ride which probably saved my life because—no doubt—I would have ended face-down on the side walk two-feet from the hotel with this headline soon to follow:

DRUNKEN SPRING BREAKER PORNOGRAPHER FOUND DEAD ON SIDEWALK
AFTER APPARENT HIGH SOCIETY GATHERING

I was met at the Hilton by my irritated boss who paced back and forth outside the lobby. “Get yourself together, everyone is waiting,” he said, and then took a closer look at me. “And wash your face!” I was covered in sweat and tears that had dried around my eyes and onto my cheeks.

Totaling that Mazda felt like a minor set-back to the day that I could look past and move on. I genuinely believed that the most important thing that day was getting to the wedding at all costs. Vicki’s car was an afterthought. It was something I didn’t want to deal with at the time, much like mustering the courage to end our relationship. Later that evening, I discovered a ticket in my tuxedo pants pocket for running a red light. I was to blame for the accident and I didn’t even know it. I would never knowingly run a red traffic light, especially when I wasn’t in any type of rush. In my memory of the incident, there is no light—red, yellow, or green. The only thing remaining is that stupid car, just coming out of nowhere as I plowed into it.

When I called my girlfriend that night she didn’t believe me. “I’m being completely serious with you,” I said. “I wrecked your car. It’s gone. They towed it.”

After the initial shock, she understood, and said, “I’m glad you’re okay.” She was completely selfless in her concern for me, and I struggled with the guilt of not only wrecking the car, but knowing that no matter how nice she could be, I still wanted to break up with her. It only made the process more difficult before I initiated the inevitable split a few months after the incident. I tried my best to work out all the confusion with her insurance company and my

insurance company, and ensure that she received money for a new car. In the end, however, I still left her, and that was, I imagine, more hurtful than what I did to her car. At times, when things happen that could be described as “bad,” I think that I’m still paying for mistakes made. But in life, as with cars, you move on in a continual search for the next best thing.



Figure 6: Stripped of the sum of their parts.

Over the past few months, my monthly car insurance payments steadied, but there was still a dollar or two increase here and there. Maybe I just didn’t understand the insurance market. I’d changed companies before, but there was little recourse but to accept things for how they were. Just as I had to accept that I was at fault for wrecking that Mazda.

It wasn’t my fault that my parents got rid of their motorcycle, or that my sister flipped my mother’s station wagon, or that my mother wanted a divorce from my father, or that my first car was questionably unfit for normal road travel. Those things just happened, just as anything happened—good or bad—and there was little point in thinking that you could do anything to change it. Maybe there was no reason to dwell on past vehicles, relationships, and family dynamics when what lay ahead was so new and enticing.

This wasn't always true, as memories often produce nostalgia—the single most emotive feeling that comes with age. I've had many close calls, near misses, and stumbling failings to speak of. The experience with the Mazda did prove, however, that you can do considerable damage in a moving vehicle and still walk nearly a mile to video tape a wedding, barely scathed. So I guess cars are considerably safer than they were forty or fifty years ago.

It's a good thing to live in an age of ingenuity. No matter what means we choose to travel: car, train, bus, plane, spaceship, or horse and buggy, the potential for a collision is always there. Just the other day I almost ran into a man while I was jogging around town. It only takes two legs, but we could still have both been injured, had we collided. And just like some clueless, doddering driver on the road, the man moved carelessly into my path. It was a clear violation of my space, but there are a lot of people on this planet trying to get to where they need to go, just like me.

THE TIME DANCER: VOLUME I

Chapter One: The Plan

The rudimentary physics of time travel aren't as challenging as they seem. I've been working on a time machine for the past six months, making some real progress along the way. It started out as a broad concept, in the eighth floor of my studio apartment, where the endless racket of neighbors on both sides of the wall haunts my dreams and disturbs my daily consciousness. The often grotesque hacking from the chain-smoking woman next door joins the ear-piercing yipping of the three or so terriers on the other side. The majestic cacophony of competing sounds is inescapable to the casual tenet who happens to have the misfortune of living between these cheap, paper thin walls. My name is Lewis. I'm a thirty-nine-year-old, recently-divorced man writing a book about time travel. Not the theory of time travel, mind you, but the actual practice of it.

My plan is simple. I've constructed a time machine to go back and manipulate the past to my advantage. And all I had to do was throw some parts together; a little wiring, some insulation, and I have my time machine. True, it hasn't been fully tested yet. The storage shed where I've been constructing the machine closes at nine, so I don't always have the option of working on it as much as I would like. What I did want to do was to keep a running journal to chronicle the successes and failures in my attempts at changing history. Then someday I will publish my exploits based on my travel journal which is full of my daily thought cards. For instance, my thought card for today says:

You should call your time-travelling story *The Time Dancer*.

The internal editor in me says that I should have chosen a different title.

“Why would you call your story *The Time Dancer*?”

“Because it sounds enticing.”

“No, it’s misleading.”

“What do you mean?”

“You clearly refer to yourself as a ‘Time Dancer,’ with the accompanying tag line: ‘dancing through the past, one track at a time,’ but there’s no dancing in the story. Not one scene. It’s a false representation of what your story is about.”

He was right. And by that, I mean, I was right. I’m not much of a dancer. When I married Angela, our “first dance” was quite an abomination because of my inability to keep even the most basic movement, rhythm, and timing. Though I had managed to cover up this debilitation throughout our entire courtship, there was simply no hiding it any longer. The look on her face said it all.

However inept I may have appeared on the dance floor, the future then looked bright. My life *now*, as of late, has spiraled into a routine of heavy drinking, fits of rage, and all around discontent. But this will soon be changed once I take the old “Time Dancer” for a spin. I’ll be sure to get everything back on track. You may be curious about how I can be so reasonably confident in my pursuit at forging the space time continuum. Simply put, research is the key.

I must have watched the *Back to the Future* series one hundred times by now. I’ve read *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells and some incredibly boring books by Stephen Hawking. In addition to my studies, I also watched a miniseries on Albert Einstein and read an article about Sir Isaac Newton. And I truly believe it can be done. You see, I’m a man of science. Not officially, but one Halloween I did go to an office party dressed up as a “boob inspector.” I

thought it was pretty funny. My co-workers thought it somewhat juvenile. Several women were repulsed.

“Come on, ladies,” I said. “Lighten up!”

No, the hit of that party was none-other than my arch nemesis, Raymond McKee. He had dressed up as a Hooters waitress, which I felt was equally as sexist as my costume. But for some reason, people loved it. That is when I knew that truly I hated this man, though I didn’t even know his name at the time.

I don’t know where he came from, seemingly out of nowhere. Before he arrived, I was an up-and-coming representative at Glendale Inc., an esteemed insurance company in San Diego, California. I had a beautiful wife and a lovely home in the suburbs. Now I work at a convenience store, with a manager half my age, and an apartment that has ants. My nightly meals consist of pickle on rye, if I’m lucky. My future was stolen by this contemptible human being. This outright fraud. A man who should be suffering my fate. I tried to warn the office about him, but he always seemed to get the upper hand. We were like Mozart and Salieri in the movie *Amadeus*. I, the brilliant, revered musician, and he, the jealous court composer.

There were moments when I entertained the notion of killing this man. The first time was when he got the very promotion at the office that I had been vying for. He waltzed in one day—a fresh face, they said—and in no time, he was regional sales director. In a way it was theft. Theft of the position I was preordained to hold. It was a crime against God. You know what they did to thieves in the old days? They probably executed them. So isn’t it ironic that if I were to murder this man, *I* would be the person behind bars?

At the time, I let the promotion affront slide. I thought it better to be patient and wait for another position. Maybe regional sales director wasn’t the job I wanted anyway. So for three

months I worked diligently, increased my sales, and gave the job everything I had. The extra work and long hours soon started to have an adverse effect on my marriage. I failed to notice that apparently I wasn't fulfilling my wife's needs. What she didn't realize was that everything I was doing was to make a better life for both of us. My only mistake was introducing her to my nemesis one day when she stopped by the office to have lunch. At the time I had to hold my tongue and shield my contempt.

"Honey, this is our new regional sales director, Raymond McKee."

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. Lewington," the smarmy bastard said.

"It's a pleasure," she replied.

They exchanged a simple hand shake and that was that. I never thought in a million years, that somehow, someday, she would soon leave me. And if you had told me that she would leave for the very same malcontent who stole my promotion, a man I hated deeply from the moment I met him, I would have resoundingly told you that you must be out of your fucking mind.

But that's exactly what happened. I should have seen it coming. At the office Christmas party, I noticed them talking near the electronic reindeer light display. Or it might have been the dancing snowman. It's not important. What is important is that a few months later my wife of five years served me with divorce papers. Actually, she didn't even do it herself. She had some *hot shot* lawyer do it for her. The doors to the house had been changed. I don't mean just the locks. She actually replaced every outside door to the house. Gone were the French doors we both loved, replaced with standard wood panel. A little excessive, I thought. My belongings were sitting on a sad lump at the end of the driveway. But she wasn't going to get rid of me that easily. I stood in yard and yelled towards her window, "There's a lot more stuff in that house that belongs to me!"

She told her lawyers that I was a drunk. That she could no longer be in the same house with me. I told her that I only drank because of all the long hours I was putting in at work. She said that before we were married I had promised to control my alcoholism. I told her that a few drinks a night didn't make me an alcoholic. She said that I lied to her. That I had no credibility left as far as she was concerned. That I could be having affairs for all she knew. But the thought had never crossed my mind. She was my wife, and such a thought I considered unthinkable. Then the lawyers told us to calm down. I thought it odd, and a little unfair, for her to bring my drinking into everything. I just couldn't understand how that could be a catalyst in itself—along with my emotional distance—that made her want to pursue divorce with a man she vowed to be with until *death do us part*.

While I thought her actions incomprehensible and even a tad suspicious, I didn't really want to believe that she might have been seeing someone else. But when I was driving by my former home, one dark Sunday morning, and saw his car in our driveway—*His car in our driveway*—I couldn't even believe my own swollen and bloodshot eyes. He was in the house that *I* paid for, sleeping with the woman that *I* married, after stealing the position that *I* wanted so bad that I could feel it. I nearly suffered an aneurysm upon seeing the unthinkable right there in front of me.

I first became suspicious when it was rumored by a coworker.

“Hey Lewington, are you and Angela divorced now?” Johnson asked while filling his coffee mug from the Keurig machine.

“We're going through a trial separation at the moment,” I answered, annoyed at his brazen line of questioning.

“Oh shit, I'm sorry. I was just curious,” he continued.

I looked up from my own mug of coffee and tears and decided to probe him in return.

“Why would you be curious?”

He leaned in a little closer.

“It’s just—I don’t want to get you paranoid and upset, there’s just been some talk around the office about McKee.”

The mere mention of his name sent a flush of anger throughout my body.

“What about him?” I asked.

“I would just keep an eye on him. I’m not saying it’s certain, but there *is* talk about him seeing your wife, or ex-wife, or whatever she is now.”

I couldn’t help but to hunch over. I felt like I was going to puke my guts out.

“You okay?” Johnson asked.

“Yeah...fine,” I said with my hands on my knees, “just fine.”

Once the disgusting charade had become all too clear to me, I knew that I had to take appropriate action. I was going to kill him, there at the office in broad view of everyone. But it had to be a planned spectacle. I would act oblivious to my wife’s betrayal and their indiscretions. No one would expect a thing, until, of course, I beat him over the head with an aluminum baseball bat. The very same bat he had propped against his wall. The bat he boasted about repeatedly after getting it signed by Barry Bonds. I had every step I was going to take meticulously crafted. I would walk into his office and the rest would be history.

“How’s it going?” I’d ask.

“Pretty good. How about yourself?” he’d say back.

“Just wonderful. I mean, I’m no big shot *regional director* like yourself, but I’m getting along nicely.”

It would be at this point that I'd pick up the baseball bat.

"Wow. This is a really nice bat," I'd marvel.

He'd probably look up from his paper work—real arrogant like—and remind me that it had been signed by Barry Bonds.

"That's just amazing," I'd reply.

Then with one fell swoop, I would club him in the head again and again, until there was nothing left but skull fragments and brain matter.

Unfortunately, the real scenario didn't turn out to be as successful as I had wished for. I had gotten pretty loaded ahead of time and had let my emotions get the best of me. The rumors were going around the office like wild fire. Everyone knew about the shameful affair it seemed, but for some reason they *still* didn't pass judgment on him. In fact, it was quite the opposite. I had heard mummings throughout the office of his so-called "admirable boldness" in pursuing my wife in the first place. He was a real "go-getter" they said. Just the type of person "you needed in the insurance market." This further shocked my sensibilities and there was no mistaking the restroom conversation I overheard between two co-workers while I was concealed behind a bathroom stall.

"Lewington's wife? Are you serious?" One of them said.

"Yeah, in no time he moved right in there like a hawk. The nerve of that guy," the other stated.

"Can you blame him? She's pretty hot for an older chick."

"Yeah, I'd do the same thing. It's just too bad he beat us to the punch."

"Tell me about it. He's got some serious brass to be doing something like that. No wonder they made him regional sales director."

“Exactly. I mean, if you’re aggressive enough to sleep with another man’s wife, you’re going to climb the ladder around here in no time, that’s for sure.”

“So where you wanna go for lunch today?”

“I don’t know, I’m thinking Mexican.”

“I had Mexican yesterday. I was thinking pizza.”

“Pizza? You always say pizza.”

“Let’s ask McKee to come with us. He’ll think of something.”

“Good call. Then we can ask him what it’s like to have sex with Lewington’s wife.”

“Perfect.”

And on their meandering conversation went, much to my initial shock. There was nothing left to be said. The entire office had betrayed me in their blind allegiance to my most hated enemy. My first instinct was to go in his office and confront him about it, man to man. I needed to know how long this affair had been going on. Could it have had anything to do with her insistence on a divorce in the first place? I stormed out of the bathroom with the resolve to get to the bottom of the very questions that plagued me. I walked calmly past the rows of cubicles towards his office with my fists tightening and my heart racing. I was going to call him out on everything and make his underhanded treachery known to the entire office. When I approached his door a woman called to me from her desk a few feet away.

“Can I help you?” she said.

Startled, I backed away from his office.

“Yes, I’m going to speak with Mr. McKee,” I replied.

“He just went to lunch with some co-workers, would you like to leave him a message?” she asked.

I walked over to her desk and placed my hand on its mahogany surface.

“I’m sorry, who are you?” I asked.

“I’m Mr. McKee’s personal assistant, Tyra,” she responded.

I was stunned. “They—they gave him a secretary now?”

“*Personal assistant*, yes. Would you like to leave a message for him? I can be sure that he gets it.”

I began to tap on her desk, looking as if I were trying to make a decision, when all I could think about was the fact that he had already gotten his own secretary. This was yet another blow in a sea of endless blows.

“No. No thank you,” I said while walking away.

It was officially “lunch time” at the office and as I wrestled with the day’s developments I did what any rational person would do in similar circumstances: I went to a bar and ordered a few whiskey sours. This would prepare me for the big confrontation after lunch. After a few drinks, however, my mind became a little cloudy. I had a change of plans. I would go to my house first, bang on the new French door my wife had installed, and demand to know everything. It was *my* right to know. If I could prove that the affair had happened before our official signing of the divorce papers, I could dispute the large amount of assets that she seized from my livelihood.

I sped into the driveway, nearly hitting her blue Corolla before jamming my Geo Metro into park. I pounded on the door while screaming her name, oblivious to the attention received from our intrusive neighbors.

“Angela, open up!” I shouted.

I heard footsteps approach, but the door remained close. From inside I heard her muffled voice.

“What do you want, Lewis?”

“I want you to let me in the house that I pay for, that’s what I want!”

“You’re drunk and I’m not opening this door. Just leave,” she said.

I banged on the door a few more times to no avail. I backed away for a moment to collect my thoughts.

“Listen, I just want to talk.”

“About what?” she demanded.

I had had enough of her games, so I got right to the point.

“I want to talk about what a *whore* you are for sleeping with my co-worker. That’s for starters. Then I want to discuss the beginnings of this affair, because I’m pretty sure my lawyer can rescind our entire financial agreement on account of you having an extramarital affair.”

I was surprised with my own “legal language” and thought I’d made my point fairly well.

Angela, on the other hand, seemed entirely underwhelmed.

“Please leave before I call the cops,” she said.

She’d always been a tough cookie to crack, if that is even an expression, but short of beating down the door there was little I could do. Plus our neighbors, the Blackwells, were watching from across the street. I knew that my next move could hurt any legal recourse I would take, so I left.

A few more whiskey sours at the bar, and I’d be back to work ready to engage the philandering degenerate who had ruined my life. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

“Hey, weren’t you in here an hour ago?” the bartender asked.

“Don’t tell me how to do my job and I won’t tell you yours,” I slurred.

“Listen, buddy, I think you’ve had enough,” he said.

I slammed my fist onto the bar, apparently startling the more respectable drunks.

“I want you to speak to your manager!” I shouted.

“You’re lookin’ at him,” he replied.

“Well, sir, you just lost another customer.”

I thought my belligerent comment a game changer, but he had other ideas. He looked at his female associate, a cute girl in her twenties, and said, “Go ahead and close out his tab, Meghan.”

It was time to get back to work anyway. I was ready. Ready to settle the score with enough alcoholic rage to take down an army of men if need be. I swiped loosely in the air for my parking ticket at the gate, and in moments I was in. My parking job, crooked and erratic, was a sure sign that I probably shouldn’t have come back to work after all, but I persisted.

I stumbled out of my Ford Explorer, when suddenly it dawned on me that in the trunk of the car was a set of golf clubs. Before I went into the office I could find his car and do some *real* damage. The parking garage had five floors, so it would be a near impossible task, but if I looked hard enough I was sure I would find it.

Lady luck was on my side, for not even ten feet from me sat the very Lexus he always bragged about. I could recognize his ridiculous *HOT 2 TROT* license plate anywhere. A sliver of pain jolted me as I observed the sign above his parking spot that read: *Reserved for Outstanding Associate of the Month*. It was too much. Rage overtook me. I clutched my nine iron and repeatedly swung at the back window until the glass shattered into broke little bits.

The majestic sound of the implosion was like music to my ears. But that wasn't enough. I dented all the sides of his car in a fervent passion unlike anything I'd ever felt before. When finished with the appropriate damage done to his prized possession, I slipped backwards, exhausted. But there was little time for rest.

Taking the elevator to the eleventh floor had sobered me up a little. The isolating silence gave me a moment to consider what I was about to do. The elevator had mirrors on all sides, and I did my best to look away, but when I looked at myself, I saw the face of a man noticeably intoxicated. Eyes glazed deep within heavy bags, hair an absolute mess. My tie had loosened around the collar of my sweat-drenched shirt. I had the look of a mad man, plus I was still brandishing that golf club. These were all signs that could easily call attention to me, thus giving McKee the upper hand, so I took a few moments to pull myself together and focus. The first thing I needed to do was to find a restroom to clean up a little bit. Then I would continue the onslaught as planned.

The elevator doors opened with a *ding* and I was on the eleventh floor. The quiet chatter of the office created a certain hesitance within me to go through with everything, but then it dawned on me that the conditions were perfect. No one would suspect a thing. As I made my way to the restroom across the hall, I noticed that McKee's office door was opened. He walked into my view, pacing back-and-forth talking business on his phone headset. "It's now or never," I thought as I quickly changed course and moved swiftly towards his office.

"Mr. Callahan wants to see you," Barbara, an associate, said to me as she glanced up from her cubicle.

"Not now, Barbara," I said as I grew closer to my goal.

I could see McKee almost within striking distance. He continued to pace and then in a startling moment of intuition, he closed his office door with me only a few feet away.

Unprepared for this, I nearly hit the door, which would have proven quite embarrassing had it actually happened. Even though I stopped within mere inches, it was later said that I did in fact run face-first into the door, which is a complete fabrication. Having stopped, I *intentionally* ran into the door to give him a scare. This is something that no one seemed to grasp, as if tactics in premeditated murder eluded them on all levels.

Tiffany, or whatever his secretary's name was, looked up from her desk, clearly shaken at my behavior. "Can I help you?" she asked.

"No, I'm thanks, fine," I shot back, still slightly intoxicated.

She gave me a confused look, but I didn't care about what she had to say or think anyway.

"McKee!" I shouted, pounding on the door. "McKee open up!" I tried the handle, but it was locked.

"He's on a very important conference call right now," she said with a hushed voice.

"I don't care if he's on the phone with the President of the United States, I want retribution!" I shouted.

My next move was less tactfully planned, but effective. I kicked his door repeatedly with my right leg causing his secretary to jolt up from her desk and approach me.

"You can't be doing that," she said. "I told you that he is on a conference call right now—"

"Get away from me!" I said, swinging the nine iron in the air.

She recoiled in horror, ran to her desk, and called security. My time was running out. I kicked the door again and again. Each thrust creating the sound of a derauling locomotive. I had everyone's attention now.

McKee swung open his office door. The look of fury plastered on his face shifted to sudden surprise once he saw me. "Just what in the hell do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

"Sir, I've called security, this man is clearly unstable," his secretary said from her desk.

So there we were. Victim and perpetrator, face-to-face. He looked me up and down in a confused manner that only enraged me further.

"Is there something I can help you with, Lewington?" he asked.

I knew what he was doing. He was playing dumb, as any man in his position would. I took a deep breath, gripped the nine iron in my sweaty palms, raised it like a baseball bat and swung at him with the rage of man pushed too far. The secretary screamed. Gasps of my co-workers filled the air. Unfortunately the first swing failed to hit my intended target, striking the outside wall instead. But I still had a few good ones left in me. McKee jumped back causing his headset to fall on the floor. I found it humorous, at the time, but continued.

"You son-of-a-bitch! I'm going to kill you!" I shouted.

All I can remember from that point is being tackled by several security guards. It felt like the force of twenty men upon me, each holding me down in a way to make resistance futile. I was later told it was actually just two security guards, but I can only attest to their power by the element of surprise. This is a concept generally referred to as a "blindside." I was escorted to the bottom floor where the police were waiting, and rather than bore you with the legal details of

what proceeded, I will say that McKee decided to not press charges. I can only surmise that his guilt was most likely the determining factor.

His Lexus, however, was a different story. My insurance had to cover the complete costs of repairing the car along with the damage done to his office door. How he managed to get my insurance to pay for *that*, I'll never understand. At first I denied all involvement of vandalism against his car, but the parking garage security cameras had captured the incident. I was promptly told, by phone no less, of my termination from the insurance firm I had worked at for ten years. Apparently McKee had taken out a restraining order against me and I was not allowed within fifty feet of the building.

“You’ve done fine work with us,” my boss, Mr. Callahan, told me on the phone. “But you’ve clearly reached a point where your professionalism is questionable. I would suggest you get some assistance for whatever you’re struggling with. Once you’ve worked everything out, we can give you a nice reference.”

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” I said, sitting in my barren studio apartment.

“You know, Lewis, I’ve struggled with alcoholism in the past too. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. I can put you in touch with some people that can help.”

“I’m not an alcoholic, Mr. Callahan. This is about one person and one person only.”

“And who is that?”

“McKee! Who else? He’s a menace. He—he’s taken everything from me. Surely you can understand why I would want to even the score.”

“This is what I’m talking about,” Callahan said. “You’re lucky he didn’t press any charges against you. You tried to attack the man with a golf club only moments after vandalizing

his car. What am I supposed to do about that? Why would you do something so insane in the first place?”

“Because I want retribution! How can the world let him get away with what he does to people? I’m not the crazy one. All of you are crazy for accepting it, for accepting him!”

Callahan sighed. “I’m telling you this for your own good. You need to let it go. I don’t know what has happened between the two of you and I don’t care. I really think you should find help. I’d be happy to give you some contacts.”

“You can keep your contacts. I’m not going to roll over and play dead. Not on this one.”

“Just stay out of trouble, it’s all I ask. If you need to talk to someone I’m here for you, but I’m not going to entertain these wild vendettas of yours for any longer. Take care, Lewis.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Callahan.”

And that was the end of our conversation. I was now divorced, unemployed, and apparently pitied by my former boss. Nothing could make me sicker. McKee had effectively utilized the legal system to make further harm against him nearly impossible. There was simply nothing I could do to him without serious consequences. Anything that happened to him would squarely be blamed on me. The golf club incident was my only chance to strike back and I had failed. “But what would he do,” I asked myself, “if I were able to get him *before* all of this happened?”

Chapter Two: The Research

True, up to that point, I'd never *actually* traveled back in time on my own accord, but I believe that with a little elbow grease and determination, anything was possible. I've heard about the dangerous ramifications of time travel as well, and it's my understanding that if you go back in time and mess with something you shouldn't have messed with, the future, or the present as we know it, could be seriously altered as a result. I wasn't going to go back in time to stop any major world events from happening. I wasn't even going to go back to steal lottery numbers or cheat the system in such a way that would drastically improve my life.

My defining goal was to go back in time to eliminate my arch nemesis. By that I don't mean to murder him. Murdering him would be too messy, too easy. My plan would be far more sinister. I was going to prevent him from destroying my life by eliminating any such opportunity. In that regard, I would be destroying *him* in the process.

During the initial planning stages, I compiled a broad chart of possible scenarios and outcomes that would best help me accomplish my mission. I could travel back before the time he was born and convince his parents to have an abortion. That was one idea. Even better, I could go back and stop his parents from ever meeting in the first place. I could steal his mother from his father. It would be like *Back to the Future*, but in this case I would be preventing his parents from getting together as opposed to helping them reunite.

Hell, if I wanted to take it further, I could go back and stop his grandparents, from either side, from getting together. This would eliminate at least one of his parents, give or take, thus preventing any chance of him being born in the first place. The possibilities were endless. What

more satisfactory feeling than to know that you've completely ruined the chances of your arch nemesis to exist in the first place?

First, even before I completed my time machine, I would have to get some background information on McKee. This would help me know when and where I needed to go once I decided to do whatever it was that I was going to do. I hired a private investigator, a rather expensive one, to find out what I needed to know. I found him in the phone book because that's where the very type of no-nonsense individual that I needed would be located. His name was Rodney P. Hayden, Hayden for short, and he told me that he'd find all there was to know about McKee in no less than a week.

"Fifteen dollars an hour, plus expenses," he told me when I visited his office.

"Expenses?" I asked. "For what?"

"I like to eat, but I work fast," he replied.

"Sounds a little too pricey to me, I'm sorry." I said.

He leaned forward. His leather swivel chair squeaked as his burly frame drew closer.

"You can go to one of those second-rate scrubs if you want, but let me tell you a little something, I get the job done. No one digs up the dirt like Rodney P. Hayden."

"I know," I said. "That's what your advertisement said in the phonebook. I don't need you to dig up dirt on the guy, I just need to know the basics. His family history. Who his parents are. Where he was born and raised. Where he went to high school. Things like that."

"Well, that will make things even easier," he said with clasped hands.

"By easier do you mean cheaper?" I asked with a raised brow.

"Not necessarily, but we can hash out all the details after lunch. You buying?"

He stared at me, completely serious, waiting for a response. The air conditioner unit at the window hummed. I looked at my watch.

“It’s ten in the morning, and no, I’m not buying,” I responded.

Hayden rose from his desk. The creaking of the floor followed his deliberately slow movement. The bottom of his tie rested on his protruding stomach.

“Suit yourself, but I need to grab a quick bite before I start this case,” he told me as he grabbed his hat from the nearby rack.

“I never said that I was going to hire you,” I said.

He looked me over intently, probably trying to choose his next words wisely. I could see that we had gotten ourselves into a little haggling game, something I knew private investigators to be notorious for.

“Lewis, can I call you Lewis?” he asked. I didn’t respond, but he continued. “The minute you walked into my office I knew that I was the only man that could help you. I know this because I know your case. This man wronged you in some way, so by my deduction you want to find out about his background so that you can use it to even the score.”

“How did you know that?” I asked, genuinely astonished.

“I just know these things. What I can’t figure out is what you plan to do with the information.”

“It’s—it’s confidential,” I said, looking at the ground.

“Okay then.” He laughed, and placed the brown fedora on his head. “So we got a deal?” he asked extending his hand.

I rose from my chair and shook his hand. “Yeah, we’re good,” I said.

“I’ll have everything to you by the end of the week,” he said. We left his office, went our separate ways and I didn’t hear from him for a week, just like he said.

I took the opportunity while waiting for the background information on McKee to go over my plans for the time machine. It would obviously be something that would need to have the proper mechanics for traveling different to periods in time. I knew this wasn’t going to be easy. “No need to get stressed out,” I told myself. I would build a few prototypes if necessary. My first was barely suitable for road travel, but the basic concepts were there. I constructed a metal frame with bucket seats and a large compartment for the engine. The dash board would have all the electronics necessary for me to input the date, time, and location of wherever I needed to go. However, before I knew it, I was in over my head.

“This is impossible!” I yelled, tossing my welder’s mask to the side. It was a quarter past eight, I knew the storage unit place was going to close soon and I had barely made a dent. Plus I had to work the midnight shift at the Drive ‘N’ Save. It was going to be a long night. My twenty-two-year-old manager, Todd, always got on my back about coming to work a few minutes late as well as admonishing me for my “unprofessional” appearance. This particular night was no exception.

“Lewington, you’re late. And again with the grease stains? I told you to clean yourself up before you come to work.” He was like some nagging grandmother.

“I had to do a little repair work on my car. Just lost track of time,” I said, considering the matter closed.

“Yeah, that’s like the fifth time you’ve said that this week. Just get started on the hot dog rollers, they could use a good clean,” he said while looking down on his clipboard.

“You could use a good punch in the face,” I muttered.

“What was that?” he said looking up.

“Nothing, nothing at all,” I responded.

It would be an understatement to say that I didn’t care for my boss, but I had to stay focused on the goal at hand: McKee. I couldn’t very well spend my days going back in time to destroy *every* single person I didn’t like, but if I did, I’m certain that my boss would have been second on the list.

My routine felt as if it consisted of two jobs, one I couldn’t care less about and the other more important than life itself. During the day I designed several blueprints and attempted to construct them all within my limited knowledge of aerodynamic design and modern engineering. At night, I took hell from the manager, dreaming of the day when I could throw in the towel. Before I knew it, the week had come to an end and Hayden called me with the news.

“I’ve got the information, can you be here in an hour?” he asked.

“Yeah, that shouldn’t be a problem,” I answered.

There was a slight pause and then he continued. “Are you stopping at the store or anything on your way over?”

“I hadn’t planned on it, why?”

“I was wondering if you could pick me up a coffee or something,” he said.

“No, I’m not getting you coffee.”

“Come on,” he pleaded.

“Get your own damn coffee, I’m headed over there now,” I said hanging up.

I approached his building in the shadiest part of town imaginable—replete with dilapidated buildings, endless police sirens, and unsavory looking characters wandering in all directions. I walked up two flights of stairs to his office. I knocked on the door and heard some

shifting from inside. He told me to come in and I entered the office ready to get what I needed to begin my quest. He rocked back-and-forth in his chair, clutching a large envelope with what I presumed to be the information I requested.

“Have a seat,” he said, grinning.

I sat as he tossed the envelope on the desk. “It’s all there,” he said. “Everything you asked for in one nice little package.”

I took the envelope and opened it. It was, to Hayden’s credit, a professionally typed report that read like this:

Name: Raymond Shawn McKee

Date of Birth: August 9, 1979

Place of Birth: Yuma, Arizona

Parents: William McKee/Cynthia Carson (Divorced)

Raised: Deltona, Florida (1985-1997)

Education: Osteen Elementary School, Galaxy Middle School, Pine Ridge High School (Graduated 1997)

On and on the report went, providing me with everything I needed to know about McKee’s past: where he went to college, past girlfriends, an apparent military record. How he ended up in the San Diego I’ll never know, but that was of no immediate concern at the moment. I just needed to know how far back I would have to go in time to begin the mission. His mother was from Orlando, Florida and his father from around Cocoa, Florida. The year was 1973, and they met after being introduced by a mutual acquaintance, William’s sister, Bonnie, who was friends with Cynthia through a church group. She was eighteen years old at the time, and had just completed a year of college. He was twenty-one and had been in the Marine Corps for over three

years. There seemed to be a pattern involving the state of Florida regarding McKee's past. This was not only the area where his parents lived when they met, but where McKee had spent most of his life. "All right, guess I'm going to Florida," I said out loud.

"What was that?" Hayden asked from across his desk.

I looked up, surprised that he had heard me. "Nothing. Um, how much do I owe you for everything?" I asked.

I could tell Hayden was pleased to have arrived at this juncture. He leaned back in his chair, causing the annoying creaking sound I was all too familiar with, and produced an itemized listing that he carefully examined. "Let's see here. At the rate of fifteen dollars an hour, about eight hours a day, you owe me six hundred dollars."

I was slightly annoyed by his price and had some questions of my own.

"You mean to tell me that you worked eight hour days for an entire week just to give me three pages of information?"

"Yes, that's what it took. And we haven't even gotten to my expenses yet," he responded.

"Oh yes, of course, the expenses. *How* could I forget?" I said, throwing my arms in the air.

Hayden continued to examine his paperwork, disregarding my outcry. "My expenses totaled one hundred dollars. Is that too much for you? Can you *handle* that?" he blurted out, rather factiously, I might add.

"I don't know what the hell you could possibly be doing to accumulate one hundred dollars in expenses, but I'll argue it no further," I said, thinking myself the better man.

I pulled my checkbook from my pocket and wrote him a check totaling seven hundred dollars. Money I didn't have, mind you, but a small price to pay considering I had the information needed to lay the groundwork.

"Pleasure doing business with you," Hayden said.

I shook his hand. "Likewise," I said.

As I walked towards the door cradling such invaluable information, Hayden lit up a cigar and belted out a few more words. "Now don't go doing anything stupid. I would hate to see you on the eleven o'clock news because of some foiled blackmail scheme." It was clear he had no idea what I was up to, which I found comforting.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you're up to no good." He laughed.

I turned to face him, growing more agitated by the minute.

"I don't think that's any of your concern," I said.

Hayden raised his hands in a defensive posture.

"Don't mind me. Like you just said, it's none of my business. Best of luck to you, Lewis."

"Thanks," I said. I left the office with a real sense of accomplishment. And that was the last time I ever saw Roger P. Hayden.

Chapter Three: The Machine

Now the real work was upon me. I was on my third or maybe fourth time machine prototype with no real success to speak of. I even resorted to reading some books on quantum physics, becoming completely dumbfounded at the concept the more I delved into the subject. It would seem that to in order for one transcend the fabric of time you would have to construct a machine that operated at such heightened velocity that time literally moved backwards. That much I understood, but I cursed myself for not knowing an actual scientist or engineer who might be able to help me. I was a man who understood insurance. And before that, time shares. I could sell a life insurance policy or a condo in the Hamptons easily—that is what I knew—but I had little talent in understanding the ways in which one could travel from one time period to the next.

When I finally constructed my first full-fledged time machine, I was nearly close to success, but not quite there. It was an aluminum frame with one seat, wheels, and an engine, resembling a Dune Buggy. I realized that the problem with my older prototypes was that I was designing them like vehicles. It didn't matter not if the machine resembled any type of modern day automobile, but if it actually possessed the capacity to transport the subject to the past. The future was of little concern. This was ruled out almost immediately. I wrote the following on my note card of the day:

The future hasn't happened yet so there's no way you could travel to it. The past, on the other hand, exists because it has already occurred. Also remember to pick up some dental floss and toilet paper at the grocery store.

You might ask how I first got the idea to travel back in time. Not necessarily the entire revenge angle, but what brought me to pursue such an ambitious endeavor in the first place. It happened during a late night robbery sometime after I got my job at the Drive 'N' Save. Now I don't mean to startle you or overstate the incident. It wasn't a robbery in the conventional sense; someone stole gasoline from the pump. How they managed to pull it off in the age of "pay before you pump" I have no idea, but they pulled a gas run nonetheless. In the early morning, the day manager, "Kevin," grilled me about the incident.

"I don't know what happened," I told him.

"Well, let's look at the tape," he said.

We viewed the security camera footage and watched the grainy image of a man pumping gas into his car—while drinking a beer if you can believe it—and then driving off. He parked in such a way that it was nearly impossible to make out his license plate. The culprit was also wearing sunglasses and hat for concealment. It was as if he were taking precautions not to be recorded.

"This can't be," the day manager said in disbelief.

He repeatedly reversed the tape, playing it over and over again, trying to get some identification on the gas thief. It occurred to me that this moment in time would remain forever muddled no matter how many times it was revisited. Each time we went back to moment of the gas theft, at approximately 1:14 A.M., the incident would still be the same. It wouldn't provide us any answers. The man, the incident, was transfixed in time, unchanging. It didn't matter how many times we revisited it through the security camera footage, it would always be the same.

At that moment I looked at that footage and formed my own predication about time travel. Yes, the incident remained stuck no matter how many times we observed it from the

vantage point of past history. We could rewind it, we could fast forward it, but it would always remain the same regardless of elapsed time. It was immutable, forged forever in the annals of history. But, if we look at our own lives through the lens of captured footage, we could just as easily press the rewind button and revisit certain moments as if they were just happening all over again. If I could devise some type of machine that followed the same fundamental rules of recorded footage then I could travel back to those moments and change them for the better or worse.

I have to admit, my findings were highly theoretical at the time, not to mention slightly idiotic, but they remained the basis of what would become an obsession to pursue time travel in a non-linear fashion. Just think of life—as you see it—as one big roll of captured film, or digital file, what have you. We could essentially take that footage and move to certain moments freely as we should so choose. There's no doubt that somewhere McKee's footage existed, even that of his parents, and their parents, and so on. I just needed to figure out a way to ascertain it, enter it, and manipulate it to my benefit.

I had my first fully functional time machine ready exactly six months to the day I was fired from my job selling insurance. It was also about the same time that I started writing this story—or when I began to turn my thought cards into a narrative. Six months of back breaking labor at the convenience store. Six months of misery at the hands of my ex-wife, who continued to collect alimony even though I knew that she continued her affair. Six months of impenetrable determination to succeed in my goal involving complete annihilation of my enemy. This was the moment I had been waiting for.

My latest model consisted of an aluminum enclosure built within a Dodge Challenger connected to the space continuum module that would allow the selection of a desired moment in

time. I hadn't exactly fine-tuned the design to select a specified time or place yet, but I figured I had made it far enough to consider a test run. I entered the machine nervously, but confident, wearing a helmet and goggles, for resistance, and prepared myself for a voyage through time.

I knew the exact year I wanted to travel to: 1979. That would give me the appropriate amount of time to enact my initial plan: convince McKee's parents to have an abortion. I considered this the simplest of my options, for you see, abortions were more popular back then. It was a turbulent time of counterculture ideology, and I felt like I could take advantage of such sentiments, dressed up as some type of influential college radical, thus convincing his parents that having such a child would be considered "square."

Of course, I had read in Hayden's notes that McKee's parents had already had a child, a little girl they named, Dawn. She was born in Hawaii in 1976. McKee's father was stationed in Hawaii with the Marine Corps. Okay, so maybe they wouldn't buy the late-70s college campus radical act on account of the father being in the Marines, but if I could get the mother alone for one moment, I might be able to convince her otherwise. I racked my brain thinking of ways I could fulfill the mission by visiting Hawaii instead of Arizona. Perhaps I could disguise myself as a proprietor of a nearby resort and seduce the mother from there. Military wives are susceptible to seduction, so it's rumored. Why not give it a whirl? At the very least I would get to spend some time in Hawaii.

I punched the date onto the dashboard module: **January 22, 1977: Honolulu, Hawaii**—four months after the McKee parents had their first born daughter. This way I was nearing the time when postpartum depression would most likely hit McKee's mother. With the father away at the Marine base she would no doubt be struggling with the new life she had made for herself with a man she recently married and a child that demanded every ounce attention she

had. I mean, think about it. This is a twenty-year-old woman we're talking about here. All I would have to do is come to the door, pretend to live in the area, tell her I owned a few hotels in the area, and then ask her out for a dinner—as friends, of course. I didn't believe for a second that she'd refuse the offer.

As these thoughts rambunctiously raced throughout my consciousness, I prepared myself for what could possibly be the greatest achievement in the history of mankind: time traveling for the purposes of seducing the mother of your greatest enemy. I warmed the machine up, confirmed the date and location of my travels and pushed the ignition switch. A dizzying flurry of white flashes appeared before me, followed by violent thrusts that nearly gave me a concussion. What followed seemed vague and blurry. I opened my eyes after feeling as if I had just been pummeled by the entire front end of the Seattle Seahawks. I was somewhere different, that was for sure. But I couldn't exactly pinpoint where.

I was on an island, much like Hawaii, but nothing looked modernized. I removed my goggles and helmet and wandered around the poorly developed landscape. There were barren dirt roads, and huts littered about. I think I even saw a donkey or two. No one spoke English. That was my first discovery. They spoke in a tongue that indicated Spanish heritage. Where the hell was I? That's exactly the question I kept asking, but everyone just ran into their modestly designed huts without answering me. "Does anyone speak English around here?" I asked. No one answered, indicating the answer to be no.

I went back to the Time Dancer, and hit the dashboard a few times hoping that it would tell me where and *when* I was at. The digital display flickered a few times and then revealed what I thought to be my current state: **January 22, 1877: Havana, Cuba.**

"Cuba?" I shouted. "What the hell am I doing in Cuba?"

I had no idea what was happening in Cuba around this time, but I saw the flag of Spain, as if foisted upon my presence, and I knew that this was not the place I wanted to be. “You piece of shit time machine!” I yelled. I later felt ashamed for lashing out at my invention without any regard to the fact that it had actually worked in such a way that allowed me to transport through time. It was just the wrong place and the wrong time. I sat back in the driver’s seat and entered in the digits of the future, my present time, so as to go back and start over again.

After the same dizzying affects, I was back in the storage shed, weary, but unscathed.

“Just a test run,” I told myself. “There’s bound to be a few glitches at first.”

I spent the following day messing with the wiring, trying to ensure a more accurate passage for my next travel. Maybe 1977 Hawaii was too ambiguous. Perhaps I just needed to jump ahead to 1979 Arizona. Even if I arrived a little off in time and location I could work with that. What I couldn’t work with is 1877 Cuba. I told myself not to rush the process. If I had to take a week or two to get the Time Dancer in shape, then that was what it was going to take. I dedicated the next week to streamlining the machine with all the bells and whistles I could think of. Of course this would be a week where I’d endure the typical petulance of the night manager at my heels. But I knew that the life I had been leading was short lived. For the sooner I got to the past to eliminate McKee, the sooner possibility existed for a brighter future. Nothing, however, could prepare me for what happened next.

Chapter Four: A Special Visitor

I decided to use some of my vacation time at the Drive 'N' Save and work nonstop on the Time Dancer during the day. I slept at night like a normal person, and everything felt at ease. The only problem was that apparently I hadn't acquired any vacation time yet. The night manager, Todd, called me at my apartment halfway through the week and asked if I was ever going to show up for work.

"I'm on vacation," I told him over the phone.

He told me that there must have been some type of misunderstanding because he was under the impression that I was using sick days, not vacation days. I told him that I accepted his apology for the misunderstanding and that I needed to get back to work. He asked what I meant by "get back to work." I knew that I had stumbled so I tried to make a joke about my "work" consisting of sipping Pina Coladas on the beach and watching some "babes" lie out in the sun. After a quick and disingenuous laugh he told me that if I didn't come back to work tomorrow that I might as well not come back at all.

I was growing weary of his underhanded subtext so I attempted to clear the air.

"Is there some kind of problem here?" I asked.

"You've missed three consecutive days of work, two of them being your only sick days. If you don't come in tomorrow, you're fired."

"Enough of this cryptic language," I said. "Can't we just talk about this man to man?"

"Lewington, I don't know what about this conversation you don't understand. You're not authorized to take vacation. You don't have any vacation days. We don't even offer vacation

days. We're a convenience store, not Lockheed Martin. If you don't show up tomorrow night you will no longer be employed with us. Understand?"

"I understand," I said, holding my tongue.

"Good," he said. Then he hung up.

"I understand that you're an asshole."

"Excuse me?" he asked.

So I *thought* he had hung up the phone, but in actuality he was still on the line.

"Oh nothing, I was just talking to someone else," I said.

"Oh yeah, who?"

"My roommate," I answered. It was the perfect cover-up.

"You told your roommate that you understand that he's an asshole?" he asked.

His persistence was increasingly frustrating.

"That's right," I said with utter confidence.

"Goodbye, Lewis," he said. Then he hung up.

This time I waited for the dial tone.

"Goodbye, asshole," I replied.

Then I hung up the phone. It was a close call, but Todd was a moron, so I had nothing to worry about. Now that my vacation had been cut short I knew that I would have to work extra hard on the Time Dancer to get her functioning correctly. I felt somewhat distraught that my plans had been cut short. I was also confused by when exactly Todd wanted me to come back to work. He said tomorrow, but it was 11 P.M. when we had our conversation, which would technically mean that my next shift would have started an hour from then.

He must have meant the next day, meaning twenty-four hours from then. What kind of monster would ask someone to cut their vacation short within such extreme measures, whether they had actually acquired vacation days or not? Todd was a horrible human being and I would have no problem throwing him on the hot dog machine until he blistered and popped like an overdone Nathan's foot long, but even monsters, like him, should have their limits. I went with my instincts and took the next twelve hours to conduct continual maintenance on the Time Dancer. I didn't have time to play around anymore. I had to go back to the storage shed and work through the night, no matter how tired I felt.

It was in the middle of the night and I was being extra cautious because I had never stayed in the storage shed past nine before. This time I thought I would roll the dice and see what happened. I parked outside the gate, and scaled the fence like a secret agent, dodging the well-lit areas, where I would be captured on the security camera. No one seem to take noticed, so I proceeded with my work. I'd never felt so dedicated to a single task in my life. It's hard to explain. Something was pushing me. Some type of energy, where I didn't need sleep or food or any of those things that people need in order to sustain themselves. It seemed I had something to prove.

"Could I truly pull this mission off?" I wondered.

I wholeheartedly believed that I could. I was under the Time Dancer on one of those rolling mechanic seats, lying flat on my back. It was funny to think how far I had come along in my own mechanical skills.

Prior to the Time Dancer, the most I had ever done on my own car was change the oil. I was never much of a car person, or "gear head," as they're called. I, like most modern men my age, had relied on the services of professional mechanics who seem to always find something

wrong with your car that doesn't seem important at the time. Years ago, a mechanic named Bob, told me that my car, a Pinto back then, needed a new fuel injection system.

"Buddy, I'm driving a Pinto here, not a Lamborghini."

"I'm sorry?" he asked, clearly confused.

"I'm just saying that I'm sure the fuel can get where it needs to go without some fancy injection system."

"Suit yourself, sir," he replied.

For some reason, I took his comment as an ominous warning of future events. Like he was one of those mechanics who "just knew things" about life in general. I'm pretty sure his comment was meant to suggest that I wasn't even worth the effort. Did he think that I was a bad person, or worse, neither good nor bad, just simply lacking any purpose? Most mechanics I know would have pressed me further until I gave in, but this one was abjectly indifferent. It could have been a reverse psychology method he no doubt meant to employ. By showing that he didn't care he had probably bargained that I would feel inclined to get the work done after all. I decided that I would reverse his reverse psychology and pretend that I didn't care either.

"Two can play at this game," I said. "I'm completely indifferent about my car. Even more indifferent than you. Hell, I'm probably the most indifferent person you could ever meet. How do you like them apples?"

Bob looked at me as if I had just told him to empty the cash register. On his face first came shock followed by confusion, then a professional smile.

"That's great to hear, sir," he said as he printed out my receipt for the oil change.

Damn he was good. No hint of emotion. No sign of anything that could indicate that I had said something as unusual and unexpected as what had come out of my mouth. But at least he

knew where I stood. Coincidentally the timing belt on my Pinto broke two months later, rendering the car inoperable and as I would soon discover, unrepairable. I went back to the mechanic shop, after selling the Pinto for scrap, so I could find Bob and tell him that I was right and that his reverse psychology had failed. I knew he cared about my car and the fact that I had declined the fuel injection service—and come to think of it, I wasn't even sure Pintos even had fuel injection systems.

He cared, that I knew. But his pride prevented him from showing it. Just like my wife *had* to care that a man she once loved, or purported to love, now had a life barely worth living. The point is, if I had purchased the fuel injection service it would have been a waste of money because the car was junk two months after the fact. When I went back to the mechanic shop, a freckly-faced teenager stood at the cash register eagerly awaiting my business. I told him that I was looking for Bob. The kid had no idea who I was talking about. I asked around, even providing descriptions of the man, but no one knew a thing.

“Bob,” I said. “His name was Bob. Come on! Silver hair. A mustache. Real indifferent. He was working here when I came in two months ago.”

They said that there was never a person who worked there that matched my descriptions. It was uncanny. Had he existed? Of course he did. Maybe I just went into the wrong mechanic shop. Normally my memory is impeccable. I can remember names, dates, and places that employ silver-haired mustachioed prophets like the back of my hand. After a small mid-life crisis following the debacle and the result of fears about turning senile, I went on with my life as usual. I did have a purpose, after all. If the Time Dancer worked, I could possibly go down in history as the most important man who had ever lived. It was crucial that nothing else got in the way. No more distractions, strange encounters, or self-loathing. However, during that night, my focus

would once again be tested as McKee—or at least a ten-year-old boy who claimed to be McKee—came to the storage shed to pay me a visit.

While messing around under the Time Dancer, trying to get her wiring straight, a loud banging came upon the rolling door of my storage shed. It surprised me to the point of nearly jumping up and crashing my head on the thick metal, inches from my face. I rolled from underneath the car and waited. The banging came again and my first thought was that it was the management of the storage facility.

“How did they know I was still here?” I wondered.

Nonetheless, I didn’t make a sound or a movement, hoping that whoever it was would go away. There was a silence, then the banging resumed.

“Fuck!” I yelled while throwing an oil rag across the room.

I quickly covered my mouth as I had just foolishly made myself known. Now whomever it was knew that I was in there. Feeling defeated, I crept to the closed door and rested my hands over its surface.

“Who is it?” I asked.

There was no answer. Another bang came over the door, shaking it. I jumped back, slightly afraid, and picked up a nearby crowbar.

“Whoever it is, you’re about to find yourself in a world of hurt,” I said, clutching the thick, blunt instrument.

“Lewis, it’s me,” the voice said. It sounded like a child’s voice, one I was in no way familiar with. I was completely baffled.

“Who are you? How do you know my name?” I asked.

“Could you open the door please?” the voice asked.

The door wasn't locked. There was no way to lock it from the inside, so I figured the person, or child outside, wasn't going to harm me. If so, they would have just rolled up the door and come in.

"Are you with management?" I asked.

"No. It's me, Shawn," the voice said.

"Shawn? Shawn who?"

"Shawn McKee."

I didn't know what to think. It clearly had to be some kind of sick joke. There was only one Shawn McKee I knew, and at work he went by his first stupid name, Raymond. I didn't say or do anything, but I had to admit, the kid had my attention.

"How do I know you?" I asked.

"It's hard to explain. I've been looking for you for a while. Can I just come in?"

I could have told him to go to hell and leave me alone, but curiosity got the best of me. I knelt down and pulled up on the door. As it slid open, there in front of me stood a child, no bigger than a school boy, holding a flashlight. I looked around and tried to see if there was anyone with him, but all I saw was darkness.

"I'm alone," he said. "Do you mind if I come in?" he asked.

I backed away and held my arm towards the inside of the storage shed in an inviting fashion. "Go ahead, but hurry up, I need to close the door. There are surveillance cameras everywhere."

I figured bringing up the surveillance cameras accomplished two goals: one, to find out if he worked there, and two, to send a warning if he tried anything funny. The kid came in and I quickly pulled the rolling door closed. There was a brief moment of silence where his eyes met

the crowbar in my hand. He shifted away and then moved to the Time Dancer in the middle of the small room.

“Excuse me,” I said, pushing past him. I grabbed a nearby tarp and threw it over my machine.

“Is that your time machine?” he asked.

I froze immediately.

“What are you talking about? How do you know it’s a time machine?” I asked.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he said. “It looks pretty cool.”

I ignored his snide-sounding compliment and got right down to business.

“So who are you and what do you want?” I asked.

The kid took a deep breath and then began.

“Like I said, this is a little awkward, but, it’s like, well, you see...”

“Just spit it out, I’m a busy man,” I said. The lack of sleep had made me irritable.

“I’m Shawn. We met a few weeks ago. You said that you were from the future. Where I come from the year is 1989. At first I didn’t know who you were. I thought you were, like, stalking me or something. You told me that you had come from the future to get even with me. You were going to ruin my life because you said that I had ruined yours. You don’t remember any of this?”

My suspicions that this was an elaborate practical joke grew stronger, but I couldn’t muster a word. Too many emotions were running through me. His eyes met my crow bar again and then looked away.

“What year is this? Maybe I came to the wrong time. You said to visit you in the future if I ever got my time machine working. And I did. I got it working after all the help you gave me,” he continued.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked. I didn’t think that my disapproving frown could run any deeper.

“We’re friends, Lewis. We became friends. You told me about your time machine, your wife, all of your problems. You helped me get even with some bullies who tried to throw me in a garbage can. But now I see your time machine and it looks like you’re still working on it, so maybe you haven’t come to my time yet.”

“I don’t understand anything that you’re talking about,” I said. “What do you mean, *we’re friends*? I’ve never met you before in my life.”

“Not yet, anyway,” the kid added. “You came to my time because at first you hated me, then you got to know me and we became friends.” He stopped and laughed. “We even tricked my mom into letting you stay at the house because you pretended to be a half-brother she never met who was a son from my grandpa’s secret marriage to his first wife. You helped me get into R-rated movies. We built a tree fort. None of this rings a bell?”

“No, it doesn’t. In fact, I don’t know who put you up to this, but I don’t appreciate it one bit,” I said.

A look of sadness came across the kid’s face. I pressed him on whose idea it was, but he persisted in claiming that his story was true. “I’ll even show you my time machine, it’s parked around the corner. Before you came, I was obsessed with time travel myself. I wanted to build one for a school project and go to the year 2015, but it was a piece of crap. You came along and helped me. Now I time travel all over the place, it’s awesome.”

I dropped the crowbar on the ground, walked over to the garage door and pulled it open. “Get out of here,” I said. He didn’t comply and just stood there looking at me with those dumb little kid sad eyes. “Didn’t you hear me?” I asked. “Get out!”

“I thought we were friends,” he said.

“Kid, I don’t know you. Maybe you’re looking for someone else, but you got the wrong person.”

“Lewis Lewington?” he asked.

“Yeah, that’s me.”

“Then you’re the person I’m looking for. I have important news from the future. Something that will change everything.”

“I don’t care. Take a hike,” I said.

I figured, for the most part, the poor kid was just a pawn in McKee’s game. McKee probably found him in the orphanage or something, or maybe just walked up to him on the street and offered him twenty bucks to mess with me. I believed that our little game had gone on long enough and I still had plenty of more work to do. The kid’s voice cracked a little and I noticed a tear streaming down his cheek.

“Are you crying?” I asked. “Why the hell are you crying?”

“You told me that if I ever got my time machine working to visit you. Then I found out some stuff from the future and I wanted to tell you before it was too late.”

“Enough. Look, kid, I’m sorry. I’m sure McKee put you up to this, but it’s not necessary. Just get out of here before I call your parents.”

“You came to me in the first place. I don’t know why you’re being so mean now,” he said.

“I don’t want to hear it. Leave,” I said pointing towards the door. “And tell McKee he can go to hell.”

“But I’m McKee,” the boy said.

I crossed my arms, not saying a word. I gave him an impatient expression and nodded to the darkness outside.

“Just let me tell you about the future, your life depends on it,” he continued.

Something triggered inside me and I rushed towards the boy and grabbed him by the arm. “I told you I don’t want to hear any more of this nonsense,” I said as I pulled him to the exit.

“Let go!” he cried.

In an impressive feat of strength I pulled him up and tossed him outside. I immediately felt bad, though I didn’t show it. The boy landed on the pavement outside, lifted himself up, and patted his T-shirt and jeans.

“Lewis, please,” he said. “You have to see my time machine. It’s the coolest thing ever. It’s even faster than yours.”

I couldn’t bear another word, and I certainly didn’t want to lose my temper any more than I already showed. “Good night, kid,” I said. I pulled the door shut as fast as I could. The last thing I saw of him were his sneakers. I knew at that moment that I had to work faster than I ever had before. McKee was playing games with me; hiring children to impersonate him, which meant that he must have figured out my plans. We were in our own sort of “arms race” now. It wasn’t all that unrealistic to consider. Somehow he got the scoop from the private investigator I hired, Hayden. Perhaps McKee was following me, spying on me, learning of my time travel plans. But if, for one second, I was to consider anything the kid said as factual truth, then I was more determined to destroy McKee than ever before. There was no way I would want to be

friends with him—in past, present, or future forms—and I was certain to eliminate any such possibility. I rested my ear against the door and listened to the sound of the kid's sneakers hitting the pavement. Then he was gone.

Chapter Five: An Effervescent Turn

It was time to take action. Obviously I didn't have much time to do so if McKee was on to me—which I was most likely sure he was—and there would be no shortage of tricks up his sleeve to stop me. I read through his file thoroughly, almost daily, and made several notes on various courses of action. I devised a timeline as well that displayed the significant years of his life in a chronological fashion to help plan my movements. Though not very exciting, his past could be broken into segments of public schooling, moves within Florida, several odd-jobs, and an exceedingly long pursuit of a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration.

I was to choose a time and place wisely to begin my journey, considering the earlier trial-run that sent me to nineteenth-century Cuba. I was certain that I had repaired the mechanical glitches to the Time Dancer that were responsible for sending me to far-off lands of no importance to my mission. I decided to forego exotic places like Hawaii—though, I'm sure I would have enjoyed it—and instead focus on where I could do the most damage.

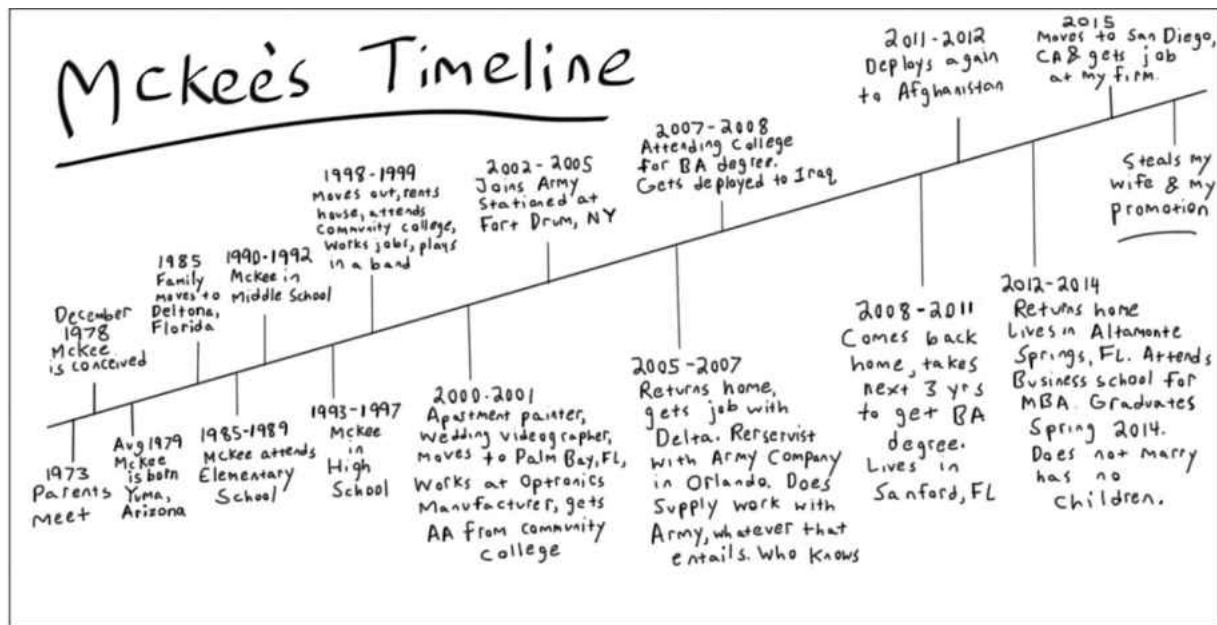


Figure 7: McKee's Timeline.

The abortion plan resurfaced. I would go to the year 1979 and finagle the entire concept of McKee's seemingly inevitable birth. This would probably be the most practical plan of action, not to mention the easiest. If I were to succeed in this regard there would be no reason to gallivant all over McKee's past devising other ways to destroy him. Part of me, on the other hand, believed that in terminating McKee's birth I would then eliminate other, perhaps more enjoyable methods of revenge. I was gambling with an "all or nothing, take no prisoners" approach, and began to grow ambivalent about the idea. It proved to be a very tough choice. Should I prevent him from being born, or should I allow him to be born on the chance that I could plot a more nefarious scheme later down the road?

Around the third day of pacing my studio apartment shoveling microwaved ramen into my mouth in deep contemplation, I remembered that I never did show up for work like I had said I would, and that I was most likely—by that point—unemployed. Though I didn't care much for the job and the tyrannical manager, Todd, I believed that not having any money would prove to be problematic in the long run. I could always show up as if nothing were wrong and hope for the best. Or I could crawl into the Drive 'N' Save and grovel before Todd with a series of heartfelt apologies. I didn't like either option and the job was getting to be a distraction. How many schemes could one man cook up during any given day? I was exhausted. First there was the masterminding of McKee's abortion, then I had to contend with a strategy to get my job back. It was simply too much to take. I decided to give Todd a ring and see where we stood with each other.

"What do you want, Lewis?" he asked immediately. I could tell he was busy.

"This flu is killing me. Been out for three days," I said with a light, raspy voice.

"Well you'll have plenty of time to rest up because you no longer work here," he replied.

“Tried—tried...”

“What? Speak up,” he said.

I partially held my palm over the receiver and coughed. “I said, I tried to call, but couldn’t get out of bed. Worst flu I’ve ever had.”

“Maybe you should see a doctor. I mean, with it being flu season and all in July.”

I picked up on his sarcasm quite easily, but tried to quell my anger and remain in character. “I’ll be at work as soon as I get better,” I said with my voice trailing off in the throes of my crippling illness.

“I’m going to say this one last time then I’m hanging up. You do not work here anymore. You have one check waiting for you. Feel free to come in when you get better and get it.”

Then he hung up.

“You still there, Todd?” I asked. I had to make sure this time.

There was no answer. The bastard actually hung up on me. He had actually fired me as well. I would get a lawyer and sue the place back to the stone-age. I would fight them all and take them down for discriminating against me: a dedicated employee whose only crime was in getting sick, or at least pretending to be sick. I would blow the place up. I would stalk Todd and blow up his house. I would black mail him with doctored photographs of him going down on a truck driver at a rest stop. I would take anything and everything from them all until they begged for mercy.

“Calm down, Lewis,” I said to myself. “You’re getting way off track here.”

I was right. My contempt for Todd was, once again, diverting me from the imperative task at hand. If I really wanted to keep the job I could take the Time Dancer three days back to when I was supposed to show up for work and complete my shift. This thought soothed my

nerves. Once my job was re-secured, it would be time to pay the McKee parents a visit and inform them of the “deformed” and “life-threatening” child his mother was unknowingly carrying inside of her. I no doubt imagined that they would be incredulous about the diagnosis of Lewis Lewington, a man with no experience in the medical field whatsoever. But what if I were to impersonate someone with experience as a personal friend to Dr. Lester Olin, their family physician? For you see, Dr. Olin’s name was on McKee’s birth certificate of which I had a copy.

Raymond Shawn McKee: born August 9, 1979 at 4:09 p.m. at the Yuma Regional Medical Center in Yuma, Arizona. I had the address of the hospital, his parents’ names, their date of birth, and that was pretty much it. I was off to a good start. A wonderful start to a plan that grew more appealing as time passed. I would find this Dr. Olin, ensure that he “missed” one of their appointments, and in the process, play the role of trusted doctor and confidant to McKee’s unsuspecting parents, William and Cynthia. I would be Dr. Manuel Delgado—a name I just picked out of the blue. A slight Hispanic accent combined with my tan skin and dark hair, a white doctor’s coat, and maybe a thin mustache to boot, would undoubtedly do the trick. My backstory would be simple. I would be a visiting physician that specialized in maternal and neonatal care from St. Joseph’s Hospital and Medical Facility in Phoenix. Dr. Olin had personally called me in to address McKee’s parents of certain complications that arose in the development of their growing fetus.

I stood in the mirror rehearsing with just the right tone of empathy and conviction of my role as the expert physician from Phoenix. “Dr. Olin wishes that he could have made it today for this appointment, but he had an unfortunate family emergency involving his wife getting into a multiple twenty-two car pile-up on the highway.”

Naturally, they'd be shocked by this development, thus easing the blow to the detrimental revelations involving the dangers they faced if she were to have the child.

"He asked me personally to travel here and discuss some recent findings based on medical test results involving your pregnancy."

I would begin to tear up a little then try to remain strong for the sake of the spirited, young couple before me.

"Dr. Olin just needs some time to deal with his wife's unfortunate tragedy, so I told him I would do my best to provide care to his patients in the meantime."

"Oh my gosh!" McKee's mother would say. "Is his wife going to be OK?"

I would put my head down in a solemn manner and try to crack a genuine smile to put them at ease.

"Only time will tell, Mrs. McKee, only time will tell. She's a fighter, that one. I'm sure everything will turn out for the best as long as we pray for him and his family."

That would probably do the trick. They were both God-fearing individuals—the mother more than the father, I believe, but once I had their undivided attention, I'd get right to the heart of the matter.

"Cynthia—do you mind if I call you Cynthia?" I'd ask.

"Please, call me Cindy," she'd say.

The trust would then be established. They would believe anything I had to say. I'd take a seat at the desk, again with an expression of deep concern, and shuffle through some medical test results. I'd remove my glasses, fold my arms, and then look them straight in the eye and tell them that their child was showing signs of serious complications. I'd present some manipulated

X-rays that proved that not only was the fetus growing ten-times its normal weight, but that it was on the fast track to stillborn territory.

“Your baby is suffering from what is known as circus freak syndrome. Meaning that—even if it survives—it will most likely only find employment as a giant-headed stump with no arms and legs. But what I’m most concerned about is the statistical likelihood of the mother not surviving childbirth.”

I’d lean in with my most sullen, yet stern demeanor and inform that the pregnancy must be terminated immediately. “I’ll do it myself,” I’d exclaim. “Free of charge!”

I had my script, and while there was no way of knowing for sure whether things would go as planned, it was worth the risk. There was only one way to find out and that was to go to Yuma, Arizona in the year 1979 and put my elaborate mechanisms into action. First, however, there was the matter of my job. I just couldn’t go through with the McKee abortion plan until I had my dignity back. Dignity breeds confidence, and the amount that Todd stripped away from me through his unexpected termination of my illustrious career at the Drive ‘N’ Save was unacceptable. He wasn’t going to get rid of me that easily. I was going to go three days into the past and put the matter behind me. Then I would have enough confidence to impersonate a doctor and offer guidance to McKee’s parents in their troubling decision to end the life of their circus freak baby before it was too late.

I left my studio apartment on a cool, dry Wednesday evening to go to the storage shed where I housed the Time Dancer. My ‘97 Geo Metro was low on fuel, but the nearest gas station on the way, of course, was the very place I was no longer employed. I’d have to take my chances on the road. I’d figured that with an eighth of a tank left I could make the ten miles to the storage shed. This is what living on the edge was all about. I rolled down the windows, as I had been

accustomed to on account of the Metro's air conditioning not working, and took in the crisp night air. I felt accomplished. Tonight, I was going to make a difference in the world. I was going to embark on a journey of such scientific magnitude that even the best and brightest minds in human history could only theorize and read about in science fiction stories.

Where were all these people now? Where were the Galileo's, the Newton's, or Einstein's? They were all dead while I was very much alive. That was the indisputable advantage I had over them. And all those learned individuals who were still toiling at the altar of physics and space-time continuums would collectively shit their pants when they found out that Lewis Lewington, a man who had barely passed high school algebra in his youth, had accomplished time travel in as little as six months. They would hear stories of my wildly successful ventures through history and beg me for even a glimpse into my process. Stunned, they would demand an elaboration into my methods while finding themselves enamored with the sheer brilliance of my every word. But why even explain the results of my work?

The scientific elite was comprised of people who would probably not give me a second thought had they passed me by on the street. Now they would invite me to attend their black-tie galas, beg me to speak at conferences, and insist that I deliver academic lectures to packed auditoriums of fawning college students simply trying to get a peek at the man who conquered time travel. It all seemed a bit much. Was I ready for the fortune and fame? Could I use it to spite all those who had doubted me before, starting with my treacherous ex-wife?

I considered all the far-reaching ramifications of what I was about to embark on, and as I grew closer to the storage facility—twenty minutes before closing time—I realized that I didn't want any of it. I only wanted to destroy the man who had wronged me. If the scientific community knew of the specifics it could possibly compromise the entire mission. They would

want to know about McKee—who he was and who he had been—and I wasn't sure how I felt about exalting him to such prestige. It was best to handle him first then court the scientists at my leisure. *Time* magazine would most likely want to do an interview with me then, before I knew it, I'd be on the front page of *Popular Science*. I would have to clear my schedule for a media blitz of the likes not seen since Napoleon seized continental Europe, or, to reference more recent times, when that one lady cut off her husband's penis.

Boston's "More than a Feeling" was playing over the radio, heightening my level of enthusiasm when I suddenly realized I had always hated that song and promptly changed the station. In the process of flipping through the FM dial, I came across a news broadcast about all the horrible things happening in the world. War, famine, disease, and death were just a few of the developments the announcer touched upon. It depressed me, to say the least, that so many people lacked their own time machines wherein they could control their own fate with such precision as I would soon embark on. Perhaps I could help make the world a better place. I had no idealistic delusions of perfection. The world cannot, by nature, be perfect, nor should it be. But maybe I could help those who, like me, suffered at the hands of malicious malcontents who breezed their way through life without concern for those left in their wake. I was going to stop that seemingly unstoppable trend if my life depended on it.

I pulled up to the "Safe Storage" gate and typed my access code into the electronic keypad. The lights in the office were still on, and I assumed I would have to be quick if I was going to make this thing work. It stunned me to think that I had spent an entire day formulating which direction I wanted to go in. Fortunately, the Time Dancer was fueled up and ready to go. Only premium gasoline would do. I had my briefcase of notes chronicling the time lineage I would take as well as McKee's file which I used for guidance. The Time Dancer operated in

such a way that I didn't need to go a certain speed to reach an effective level of space continuum. It was a stationary machine by design. I couldn't very well drive around the storage parking lot at eighty-eight miles per hour as if I were in some kind of Hollywood movie. This was the real deal. I would have to be discreet and inconspicuous.

I parked the Metro in front of my bottom level storage shed, number twenty-six, and shut the engine off. I had originally planned to use my sometimes-reliable Metro as a prototype, but later realized that it lacked the fortitude of the Dodge Challenger that I had purchased used for just under \$20,000. Metros are economical vehicles that can get a person from point A to point B, sort of like a go-kart for adults, but they're hardly suitable for time travel. This much I knew. I fiddled with the lock on my storage shed in the darkness with only a flickering yellow spotlight to guide me. I could barely contain my excitement of traveling to 1979 and giving McKee's parents the news. I remembered the 1970s vaguely as a time that was chaotic, but preferable to the twenty-first century and my current existence. I mean, back then you could go up to a person on the street and ask them how they were doing without being shot. You could call the President a "self-aggrandizing cock-sucking piece of shit" without people getting their panties in a bunch. You could even smoke on airplanes back then, I think. Come to think of it, the 1970s sucked. At least I was hitting the tail end of that miserable decade.

It felt good to be back in the storage shed where I belonged. It was here, amidst the concrete walls and spider webs of my 1,200 square foot laboratory where things made sense. An overhead 75-Watt bulb provided just the right amount of illumination during the late nights I worked on the machine in absolute secrecy. Now it was ready. I was ready. All the wiring, I felt, was in place, and I had utter confidence that the Time Dancer was going to take me where I needed to go; all the way back to the year 1979. This was the year McDonalds introduced the

Happy Meal among other important world events. There was this thing with Ayatollah Khomeini and the Iranians, plus a bunch of other bad shit happening around the world, but I don't want to get into the details, even though I'm obviously quite the history buff. I, myself, was born in 1974 in Manchester, New Hampshire, but I certainly didn't feel like revisiting *those* days.

The truth was that if I started considering all the possibilities of where I could travel in the past, beginning with my childhood home, my old school, and my old neighborhood, I would never get anything done. McKee would still exist in some way or the other and that would render my entire mission a failure. This wasn't about me, this was about vengeance, plain and simple. When wronged by an individual, some people simply let the matter slide and go on with their life. This, we're taught, is the most practical way in which to deal with things. I was not one of those people. Perhaps at one time I was. McKee changed all of that. Who knows how many lives he had destroyed through his illegitimate reign all because *society* has told us to "turn the other cheek." I would put an end to this notion of passive civility. In the end, I believed, the world would be a better place.

I entered the Time Dancer and placed my helmet and goggles on. The engine purred as I turned the ignition, filling my bones with euphoric wonder. I set the date on the improved dashboard module for three days prior: **Sunday July, 12, 2015: 11:00 P.M.** My desire to reach 1979 had nearly blinded me to the first seemingly smaller task of getting my job back. I inputted my destination as the parking lot of my apartment complex by the portable GPS screen that allowed me to pinpoint exactly where I wanted to travel to. Once this information was added, I pressed the large red button I had installed below dashboard and ignited the nuclear reactor I had attached to the engine's carburetor.

I pressed down on the accelerator forcefully as the Challenger's beautiful roar reverberated through the machine like music to my ears. White vivid flashes of light stunned and dazed me to no end. The electric light show was moderately seizure-inducing in its magnificence. The car shook and rattled violently and I knew that I would soon be vaulted from one time period to the next in a matter of moments. Kinetic vibrancy ensued—almost like lightening—and I was soon thrust into a dizzying tunnel, referred to as a “wormhole” by the eggheads, traveling at the speed of light. I'm no expert in the matter, but we were moving pretty damn fast. My entire body compressed at an incredible G-force rate that I feared I might not survive. And before I knew it, I was speeding through the dimly-lit parking lot of Larroquette Hills—my familiar run-down apartment complex.

I had to immediately seize control of the time machine and veer past the many cars in the parking lot, nearly taking out a street light in the process. I slammed the brakes and turned the car sharply to the right. The Challenger skid across the pavement leaving a trail of smoke in its path. I was unnerved, to say the least, and had to think fast before I found myself with a concussion—bloodied and hanging upside down in a drainage ditch, which was exactly where I was headed. Fortunately I struck a large speed bump which sent my car barreling into the air and landing into an empty parking space, not before grinding against the side of a yellow Honda Civic in the next space over. It was a somewhat more visceral experience when compared to my initial venture to Cuba. I must have given the Time Dancer just enough “juice” to successfully pinpoint the proper time and place where I needed to go. I knew I had purchased that miniature nuclear fusion reactor for a reason. Got a hell of a deal from the Chinese. Those people will sell anything.

Smoke wafted through the parking lot followed by a potent smell of burnt rubber. I was a little out of it for a moment and just stared at the dashboard as the blinking radiator light entranced me. I had to get my senses together before I drew any further attention to the Time Dancer, so clearly billowing with sheets of exhaust where one could assume the car was on fire. I gently put the car into park and switched the ignition off. My goggles had fogged up so I tossed them off, followed by my helmet. Sweat had poured down from my head to my face, and it was a relief to take in the fresh, slightly carbon-monoxide induced air and stretch my legs. I checked my wrist watch, but it only flashed 12:00 as if it had been reset. I knew I had dusted up against the yellow Honda on the other side and expected to find a faint mark along its outer body. “Shit!” I said once I laid eyes on the tremendous gash I found instead. It ran from the rear of the Honda to the front.

“Relax, Lewis,” I said. “You’re only going to be here for a little bit. One shift at the Drive ‘N’ Save and your back to the time period from which you came.”

I looked around the parking lot for witnesses and didn’t see a soul. Sounds of traffic from interstate echoed in the distance. Unseen dogs barked sporadically from darkened areas throughout the complex. These were the usual ambient noises I had become accustomed before I left for work at the night shift. I peered into the car to examine the dashboard module and ensure that I had arrived at the right date and time. The display flashed: **July 12, 2015: 11:00 P.M.** intermittently, so I had to go on good faith that I was on the right track. Or maybe the display module was broken. I didn’t know. On the floor of the passenger seat rested a brown paper bag with my work clothes in it. I quickly threw on my blue work smock and black slacks and jumped back into the Time Dancer to drive to work. Even if I was an hour early, it would show absolute commitment, thus severing any bad blood between Todd and me. I couldn’t have left the parking

lot soon enough, for I had a sneaking premonition that the driver of the yellow Honda was going to come charging out of his or her apartment enraged and brandishing a crowbar.

I had to admit, I felt bad about causing damage to another person's vehicle, but I could always fix the mistake later. After completing my shift I could travel ten minutes before I hit the car and prevent the accident from occurring. Then I realized that if I were to do that then I would have to do the night shift over again. Or possibly—just possibly—I might run into my time traveling self arriving at the same time resulting in a head-on collision of cataclysmic proportions. Then it occurred to me that considering that I was in the past, I would most likely run into myself anyway. The Lewis from three days ago. I hoped not. I knew, however, that three nights ago I was working on the Time Dancer in the storage shed, bothering not a soul in the world. It was the fateful night when the kid who claimed to be McKee visited; lying little bastard. Admittedly the entire scenario was enough to make my head spin in several stupefying directions, but I maintained control.

“Take it easy, Lewis, you're a time traveling genius. You've just got to keep it together. Keep it cool, man. Ice cool.”

I felt better, I was on the open road, going to work, and ready to sham my way through eight hours of needless bullshit all so that I had a job when I returned from my trip to 1979. I felt good. The night air blew through my hair and so far everything was going planned.

“FUCK! If I only knew what time it was!” I shouted.

Everything was going to be okay. It was just a little outburst brought about by some minor stress. A mere agitation that something as *fucking* simple as finding out the *fucking* time was so *fucking* hard that I could barely *fucking* see straight. I took several deep breaths and coasted into the parking lot of the Drive 'N' Save. I parked on the other side of the building as to

avoid any questions about my new wheels. They would take one look at my Dodge Challenger and its outfitted wiring and heavily insulated interior and instantly start making assumptions.

“What the hell’s that? Did you refit a Dodge Challenger into some kind of time traveling machine?” Todd would most likely ask. I was unlucky like that sometimes. It was a discussion I wanted to avoid. As far as those assholes knew I drove a ‘97 Geo Metro and I couldn’t risk raising unnecessary suspicion. Todd’s prized Beamer was already parked near the entrance, so I took relief in knowing that he was there. I just hoped I was on time. A bearded man filling up his gray Nissan Tundra at pump four caught my eye in no time. I watched him in my rear-view mirror, narrowing my eyes at his slouched and seemingly apathetic stance. It was a ruse. He was watching me, observing my car trying to figure out what in the hell I had done to the once beautiful piece of American machinery parked before him. I couldn’t worry about that prick any more than I could worry about the world warming or cooling or whatever the hell it was supposed to be doing, so I got out of my car and made my way into the brightly lit convenience store as the enormous overhead sign radiated into the solemn night air.

“You’re here early,” Todd said rising up from behind the counter.

“Am I?” I asked in return.

I tried to play it cool and look around for the time so that I could verify it myself. I knew there was a digital clock hanging by the cigarettes so I took a quick glance to read its red glowing digits. It was 11:45 P.M. and my shift started in fifteen minutes.

“Looks like I’m right on time,” I said back. I couldn’t help but spar with him a little bit.

“You see, Lewis,” he said to me as counted bills from the register, “I consider anytime you don’t show up late as being early. So congratulations.”

Oh boy, we were starting already. It was going to be a long night. Fortunately it looked like Todd was leaving. His generally upbeat demeanor intrigued me so I pressed the issue.

“Did you work day shift today?” I asked.

“That’s right,” he said while shuffling through some twenties. “You’ll have the place to yourself tonight, just make sure keep everything on the up and up. Kevin will be back from Denver next week.”

I didn’t even know that Kevin, the day manager, had been gone. “What’s he doing in Denver?” I asked.

Todd looked up from the cash register. “Don’t you remember anything? He has a child support hearing. That ex-wife of his is trying to get him on back pay, but don’t go announcing it to everyone.”

“Child support hearing?” I thought to myself. “What a loser.” The problem was that I really didn’t remember hearing anything about Kevin being gone. I recalled that he had gone out there a couple of months ago, but I thought he had gotten it all worked out. I also recalled that in situations where Todd worked days I would try to avoid seeing him all together. His earlier smug comment about coming in late wasn’t too far off the mark. Five minutes here, ten minutes there. Kevin had told me that Todd wasn’t very happy with my tardiness, but I’d shrug it off.

“I’ll make up the time at the end of the shift. What’s the big deal?” I’d say.

Kevin would just shake his head. I knew that since formulating my time travel ambitions, my work ethic had been slipping. Though at that point my entire life had been slipping so I couldn’t really tell the difference.

“Well gotta get home and watch the Finals on the DVR,” Todd said snapping me out of my perpetual mind wandering with the slam of the cash register door.

“Finals?” I asked. I was confused.

Todd looked at me in a perplexed daze. “The NBA Finals? You been living under a rock?”

Perhaps Todd was just behind in his recorded programming. The Finals had been months ago. The Cleveland Cavaliers took the title against the San Antonio Spurs. I remembered as much because back then I was at a bar trying to watch the game and feel the excitement of the cheering drunks around me so as to take my mind off of my own miserable existence for two hours. It had done the trick nicely.

“Yeah, but that was months ago. The Cavaliers crushed it. I can remember it clear as day.”

Todd walked around the counter, swinging a jacket over his shoulder. “Maybe your memory is a little cloudy, the Finals haven’t ended yet. They’re on game three. Thanks for the spoiler though,” Todd said with a laugh. He walked past me towards the door. “Don’t forget to clean the restrooms this time. There’s a little surprise for you. Our old friend, Harold, paid us a visit again.”

Harold was a homeless vagrant who would sometimes slip into the store undetected and defecate all over the men’s bathroom walls in a furious spray of what looked like diarrhea from a fire hose. Normally nothing would enrage me more than having to clean up Harold’s grotesque leavings like some downtrodden bathroom attendant in Central America, but I was more concerned about Todd’s insistence involving the NBA Finals. What in the living hell was he talking about? I had to get to the bottom of his outrageous claim.

“What month is this?” I asked him.

Todd looked at me as if I had just told him that I had some fatal disease.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I asked.

“Have you been drinking?” he fired back. “Are you drunk now?”

“Of course not!” I said.

“Well it wouldn’t be the first time. It’s May. May twelfth. It’s a Tuesday. Would you like to know the year too?”

“May!” I shouted. “No, no that can’t be right. It’s July. July twelfth. July twelfth, two-thousand fifteen.” My body temperature was rising. My hands were shaking. I began to perspire under my work clothes. There was no way I had fucked it up again. It simply wasn’t possible. Todd leaned over a newspaper rack and tossed me the day’s paper. I instinctively caught it even though I was severely distracted with thoughts of dread.

“Take a look at that paper. Tell me what date it says,” he said in a no-nonsense tone.

I gripped the paper tightly and glanced at the headline: *Congress Raises Debt Ceiling Indefinitely; Tells Voters “Not to worry about it.”*

The date in the right-hand corner clearly read: “May 12, 2015.” Todd was right, unless, of course, he was playing some elaborate practical joke. It appeared that I had gone back three *months* instead of three days. I failed to see any purpose to going back that far. The lapse in time had rendered my entire mission pointless, for I was still gainfully employed at that point in history.

“At least you got the year right,” Todd said. I was taken aback as to what exactly he meant as I stared down at the paper in absolute disbelief. He must have noticed my agitated state because he suddenly took a keen interest in my well-being. He tossed his jacket on the counter and approached me. “I hate to do this, Lewis, but it’s necessary. I don’t know if you’re in any condition to work your shift in such a disoriented state, so this is what I’m going to do.” He

paused, took a deep breath, and scratched his chin. “I’m going to get the Breathalyzer from my office and get to the bottom of this. It’s the fairest way I can approach this.”

I dropped the paper on the ground and looked up at him defensively. “How dare you,” I said. “I’m not drunk. You have no right to make such accusations.”

“If you’re not drunk then you should have nothing to worry about. I’m sorry, but it’s company protocol. Any employee showing signs of inebriation must submit to an alcohol test before they are allowed to work. First you show up here earlier than ever, and then you don’t even know what month it is. What am I supposed to gather from that? It’s my responsibility to ensure that you’re not under the influence.”

“Fuck that,” I said, albeit foolishly. “I have rights. You can’t just accuse me of being drunk with no evidence whatsoever to the effect.”

“I’ll put it this way, either take the Breathalyzer, or turn in your uniform,” he remarked.

So we were back to ultimatums. I had in effect created a new dilemma that placed my job at risk. The only way to quell the situation was to submit to the stupid test, no matter how demeaning.

“Just wait here, I’ll be right back,” Todd said as walked to the door marked *employees only*. In all of my time traveling expertise I had no way of figuring out how to get out of it. I wasn’t concerned about failing the test, but giving Todd the satisfaction of administering a Breathalyzer was about as demeaning as things could get. I would be scarred for life. Such a charade would affect my self-confidence as negatively as getting fired, so I was probably better off throwing in the towel right then and there. That was what I was going to do. I would tell Todd to shove the Breathalyzer up his tight asshole. I unbuttoned my work smock as he fiddled around in the office, no doubt reveling in his authority.

Circumstances complicated considerably when, five minutes after the hour, I saw a '97 Geo Metro pull into the parking lot. It was me. The Lewis from three months ago. There was only one thing left to do: get the hell out of dodge. I vaulted out the back door, undetected by Todd, and found myself outside near the dumpsters. The Lewis from three months ago was going to have to deal with Todd now. Granted, I imagined he would find himself in abject confusion once Todd forced the Breathalyzer tube down his throat, but I was sure that in the long run everything would work out. I just needed to get out of that godforsaken time for good.

I ran from behind the store and climbed into the Time Dancer in haste. My nerves were on edge to a heightened extent. My legs shook beyond control. Just the sight of myself from the past presented several disturbing ramifications of which I wasn't yet ready to face. By manipulating time I was playing with fire to some degree and I was sure that irreversible consequences awaited as a result. This became even more evident when I backed up in a panic and struck Lewis from three months ago from behind. I slammed on the brakes and watched myself through the rear-view mirror lie in a stunned heap on the pavement. The Time Dancer idled. Exhaust rose from underneath the car. I waited, hoping that I hadn't killed myself in the process while also pondering the complexities of such an egregious error.

Much to my relief, Lewis from three months ago slowly rose from the ground and knocked the dust from his work clothes. He hadn't yet entirely figured out what had just happened to him. Once he looked at my car, I knew it was time to go, so I floored it without reproach or concern for what else was in my path. In the process I side-swiped a van at one of the gas pumps and chipped off their tailgate light. The driver—a busy man with a mustache and a missing tooth—charged at me in a bewildered rage.

“You son-of-a-bitch!” he yelled.

Unfortunately, I had to leave him in the dust. The exhaust from the Time Dancer sent him into an agonized fetal position as he choked for breath. Miles down the road I realized it was time to stop and get my thoughts together, so I pulled off into an empty plaza and put the Time Dancer in park. “What the hell just happened?” I said to myself. Things were bad and I didn’t know how I was possibly ever going to fix them.

“You could always...”

“What?” I shouted.

“You could always go back twenty minutes in the past and stop all of this from happening in the first place.”

“So what if I do? What if I try to go back twenty minutes in the past? Hell, it might take me back twenty *years*. Twenty *decades*. Who the hell knows?”

Clearly the Time Dancer needed more work. I hadn’t perfected the illustrious art of time travel yet. What did this mean for my mission? What did it mean for McKee? Each hour, each day I stalled he was going to go about his life without a care in the world.

“One day,” I said. “You have one day to get your shit together, then we’re going to 1979 and I don’t give a *fuck* what happens after that.”

I had a point. I would go back to my apartment and sleep it off, ready to start fresh for the new day. Three month Lewis would have to deal with Todd, I needed some space. I drove back to Larroquette Hills ready to re-think my strategy. Of course there was no getting into the storage shed at the current time, so I would have no other recourse but to get some shuteye. As I pulled into the parking lot, I noticed a large commotion near the west-end part of the complex; the very area I had originally transported through a feckless furor of smoke and fire. Several police cars surrounded the perimeter with their lights flashing a million miles per second. I felt as if I had

arrived upon a murder scene of sorts. I soon found out that I wasn't that far off. The incident centralized around the yellow Honda I had hit. There was an ambulance parked nearby with a stoner-looking twenty-something sitting in the back holding a cloth of ice over his face. A short and stocky man with a crew cut sat in back of one of the cop cars. Intuition told me to stay as far away from the incident as possible, but curiosity got the best of me.

"What happened here, Officer?" I asked one of the police men standing by the scene as if on guard duty. He looked my car up-and-down in a stupefied manner.

"Nothing to worry about, sir. Just an incident involving a little fender bender."

"Oh my gosh, is everyone okay? I hope it's no one I know." My tone was the epitome of compassion and concern.

"You live here?" the officer asked.

"Yes, I've lived here for quite some time now."

"Well, do me a favor, sir, and just park elsewhere until we get this situation sorted out."

"Did someone get murdered?" I asked with eyes on the verge of tears. "It just breaks my heart."

"Nothing like that. The owner of the yellow Honda apparently believed that the owner of the red Cherokee struck his car while parking. An altercation followed, and we were called out to handle the situation." The officer then tapped the top of my car with his palm. "Nothing to lose any sleep over, just let us do our job." And with that, he walked away.

One would think that they would feel better after realizing that the damage they had done to an individual's car had been blamed on another. Instead, I felt worse. Traveling three months back in time had proved disastrous. I put the car into reverse and parked on the east-side of the parking lot, as far away as I could get from the carnage. I turned the car off and thought deeply to

myself for about five minutes. An avalanche of thoughts and memories rushed into my consciousness like a tsunami of volcanic acid. I suddenly remembered some guy backing over me in the parking lot of the Drive 'N' Save like it was yesterday. I could remember it vividly. I rushed into the store and told Todd to call the police. He was holding a Breathalyzer and dismissed my injuries as nothing more than self-absorbed grandstanding.

“Nice try, Lewis, but you’re not getting out of this,” he said. Then he stuck the tube down my throat. What had I done to myself? What had I done to history? I was on dangerous ground. Here I was, trying to destroy McKee, and, in the process, escalating my own demise. There would be no more games. Thus far, I’d wasted enough time instigating my own fallacies while McKee continued to thrive. I would abridge my time traveling journal, and thus, my own fate, and get to the year 1979 before it was too late.

Chapter Six: Trouble in Yuma

I decided to spend the night in the Time Dancer. The large and unexpected three month lapse in time had made me tired and groggy. I couldn't very well just go barging into 1979 like I owned the place; I needed to approach the mission with finesse. There were clearly some internal circuitry issues still remaining that had caused inconsistencies in time travel. Ideally, for example, if you wanted to go back to November 22, 1963 and try to prevent the Kennedy assassination there should be no reason that you'd arrive two months before or three weeks after the fact. That's simply unacceptable. This was something I was going to have to fix, but I'll be damned if I knew the source of the issue.

As much as I wanted to relax a bit in the apartment, the risk of running into three month Lewis was too high. He'd most likely come home and find me sleeping in his bed like some deranged version of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. I hoped that I hadn't injured him too badly. Accidents happen, but the thought of inadvertently killing myself in such a convoluted manner put my nerves on edge. This mission was getting dangerous and I would have to play it safe if I hoped to succeed. I put the driver's seat back and rested my eyes for about four hours until early morning. After my power nap, I decided it was time to find a place where I could work on the Time Dancer without drawing any attention to myself. The storage shed wasn't an option. I had to avoid any places where three month Lewis would most likely frequent. The public library, Arby's, and the liquor store were off limits as far as I was concerned. I got out of the car and stretched my legs while taking in the brisk morning air which subsequently threw me into a coughing fit after inhaling its excessive pollutants. I had a terrible crick in my neck from sleeping in the car, though it wasn't the first time, and most definitely wouldn't be the last.

After a cup of coffee from the Circle K on the other side of town, I was behind the wheel actively searching for a place where I could conduct a little preventative maintenance. I found the perfect spot under a particular bridge known for its appeal to San Diego's most endearing homeless drunks. I was counting on them to be asleep until noon or later, hence the reason they were unemployed. I pulled the car off the highway and onto a bumpy dirt road towards the spot where I was sure I could get some work done around people who normally didn't work. If I sound, at this point, like I was insensitive to the plight of the homeless, it's not intentional, I was merely considering the logic of the situation.

I came upon a mushy spot under the bridge and parked the Time Dancer. It was at this point that I noticed the fuel gauge reading at a quarter tank. I would have to fuel up before my next time expenditure, but I wanted so much to get out of the strange and pointless time period I had mistakenly traveled to so that I could arrive at the junction wherein McKee's parents were putty in my hands. I exited the car with my bag of tools, dreading the confusing work in electronic circuitry that awaited me. There wasn't a soul around. The San Diego River rippled quietly, seemingly unaware of my presence. There were several shopping carts full of newspapers, blankets, and aluminum cans littered about the soiled ground. I even noticed some tattered makeshift tents laying in the distance. I must have missed the party. It was quite possible that the bridge dwellers had awoken and moved on earlier than I had given them credit for. No bother, I had an important task at hand: I needed to fix the stupid time machine so I could go to the stupid year to convince McKee's parents to abort their stupid kid.

I was bitter about the entire scenario; disappointed in myself most of all that things weren't going as planned. I popped the hood open and was engulfed in an invisible blanket of

heat that emanated from the engine and the small nuclear fusion reactor attached within. “Oh boy,” I thought. “This is going to take a while. Damn car’s too hot to even touch right now.”

Suddenly a light-bulb flashed in my head. I walked to the trunk and popped it open. In the corner near the tail light panel sat a fire extinguisher in the event of the car blowing up on me. I discounted the prospect of catching on fire—at least in this time period—and promptly took the extinguisher from the trunk and walked back to the simmering engine to give it a nice cooling. I squeezed the handle on the extinguisher, covering everything in a thick, cool foam. I gave it a few minutes, grabbed a plastic bucket halfway buried in the sand, filled it up with river water, then poured it all over the engine as to wash away the foam. The engine sizzled like the busy grill of a truck stop diner. A thick sheet of steam billowed in the air. I had effectively washed away the foam from the fire extinguisher and cooled the engine in the process. Now I was ready to work.

Unfortunately, my improvised “engine coolant” had soaked into the already moist dirt below the car, making it even muddier. I had to squirm and crawl underneath the car in what felt like quicksand to reach the complex wiring that I had *thought* was rigged impeccably through the car’s internal housing. I think it was safe to admit that I had little idea what I was doing. I’d always been a “big picture” kind of guy, and found myself frustrated with the details of things like quantum mechanics. My relative inexperience in electronics and computer programming had gotten me this far, so I simply moved the wires around sporadically like one of those phone operators connecting calls in the 1920s. All the while I found myself sinking below the ground in a vat of quicksand created from the water runoff from the San Diego River. I had to move fast before I found myself immersed in a suffocating tomb. In a way I felt like Indiana Jones racing against the clock to beat impending doom. I couldn’t recall if the world-famous archeologist,

Jones, otherwise known as “Indy” by his friends, had ever battled quicksand, but I was sure there was a scene in there somewhere.

I reconnected the wiring below the car, and pulled myself up from impending death. I then fiddled with the wiring near the nuclear fusion reactor and considered the task complete. Of course there was only one way to find out if I had made the proper adjustments. I climbed into the car upon feeling a rush of excitement and entered in the corresponding digits of my next time period. Then I remembered that I had to get gas before leaving. Rather than throw a fit in my customary fashion whilst punching the dashboard in frustration, I simply smiled and told myself that 1979 would have to wait.

“No big deal, Lewis, just go to the gas station and fill up the tank. No need to rush things when you’re driving a time machine,” I said to myself. In response to my own words I simply laughed.

Finding the humor in things which naturally filled me with rage was a new method I’d been employing as of late in an attempt to reach some semblance of anger management. The results of this approach were hit-or-miss depending on what kind of mood I was in, but it served an understandable purpose. I soon arrived at the Circle K, dripping with mud and whatever filth oozed within the depths of the San Diego coastline. My credit card was declined, much to my surprise, because three month Lewis hadn’t paid it off during the time period I was in. I wanted to go back to the Drive ‘N’ Save and run the bastard over again just for the inconvenience. There was no sense in explaining to the attendant that my credit card was good three months from then, so I fished out a handful of cash I had brought for emergencies. I eventually fueled up the Time Dancer and drove it to an abandoned parking lot to, at last, reach self-fulfilling nirvana.

My destination: **May 2, 1979: Yuma, Arizona**. It was a random month selected through basic intuition, similar to the notion of aiming a gun slightly off-target if you knew the sight alignment to be off. I couldn't guarantee the Time Dancer would get me exactly where I needed to go so I figured that I could still accomplish my mission if I arrived three months before or after the selected time period. Any length of time longer than that and I would have to rethink my strategy. I revved the Challenger's powerful 300 Horse Powered engine and pressed the large red button marked "GO" on the center console, preparing myself for a flurry of intense force. It was at that moment I realized that I had forgotten to wear my goggles and helmet. In a panic, I unbuckled my seatbelt and attempted to grab the two items in question from the back seat. With one hand on the wheel, my arm desperately outstretched in an attempt to retrieve the protective gear, but there was no turning back. The car had initiated its time travel sequence.

A predictable flurry of cosmic vibrancy ensued—and before I knew it—I was traveling through another "worm hole" at a crushingly exceeding rate that pushed and immobilized me against the driver's seat like a flatbread sub. My entire life flashed before my eyes, or at least the parts I remembered. I was five years old and sitting on the swing of a swing set my father had installed in the backyard for my birthday. I called out for someone to "give me a push," but my parents were inside watching television. There I was in high school climbing a rope in gym class. The gym coach, Mr. Hoffman, was yelling at me to climb higher, but I miscalculated my upper-body strength and ended up on the floor of the basketball court. Then I was swinging a golf club at McKee in his office whilst being tackled by a legion of security guards. Next I was eating a bag of stolen Doritos in the employee's lounge of the Drive 'N' Save. And that was pretty much it. Was this the extent of my life as I remembered it? Surely there had to be more to my existence.

As I pondered the troubling lack of significant memories that comprised my life, I was thrust into a new time period and location without warning. The Challenger flew across an open desert and then crashed upon a barren surface, sending me flying up into the ceiling in a blunt thud. I was traveling at a rate of 120 miles per hour, unable to gain control of the shuttling capsule. I pressed my foot against the brake pedal and gripped the steering wheel in a futile attempt to avoid impending disaster, though there was nothing but open desert ahead. The Time Dancer was unstoppable, any attempt to veer her off course too suddenly would most likely end in a deadly jettison into the beyond. The probability that I would soon be disintegrated into ash following a fiery explosion became more likely by the nanosecond. I pressed harder on the brake and screeched the car to a wild fishtailing that left a thick trail of sand dust in our wake. Panic hit me at near terrifying rate as I lost control of the car completely and flew out the windshield. Then everything went black.

Actually, it started out white, then went black. Being thrown through a windshield is nothing to take lightly and I would have probably died had not a family got lost on Yuma's Route 95 and witnessed the grand spectacle of the Time Dancer's desert rollover tossing me through the windshield and into a nearby cactus. Hours later I was awoken in a formaldehyde-smelling hospital room where I discovered several bandages over my face and an IV connected to my arm. It felt like a dream. There was simply nothing in my memory after the car accident beyond waking up in a hospital room with a concerned doctor, nurse, and police officer standing over me. I could barely speak, my throat was as dry as the acrid desert from which I arrived. I hadn't a clue, at the time, what had happened, and with all my various travels from one time period to the next, it was hard to decipher where and *when* I was.

"Mr. Lewington, can you hear me?" the doctor asked.

I simply nodded, noticing that there were several more wires connected to me, monitoring my statuses. One of those machines that always do the flatline sound effect in movies was positioned nearby. At that point I could hear its steady beeping so I knew that I was still in good shape. I nodded back to the doctor and gave him a “thumbs up” in the process. He looked at me and smiled. The nurse and police officer remained stoic and emotionless. I still wasn’t altogether there because of the uncertainty of the circumstance, and the fact that I had no conception of how I had ended up in a hospital room. I attempted to rise from the bed, but was met with the rushing pain from my various injuries.

“Whoa there, Mr. Lewington. You’re going to need to take it easy for a while. You’ve been in quite the car accident.”

“Where...where am I?” I managed to muster.

“You’re at the Yuma Regional Medical Center,” the doctor responded.

I tried again to get up, but only felt the crippling weakness return. I flopped back down on the bed before the nurse could restrain me. She had made a sudden movement, only to be held back by the doctor. There was no doubt about it, I was in a complete daze. It could have been the drugs they had pumped into my system or all around time travel fatigue, but I was hardly in control of my faculties. As conscious awareness crept in, I attempted to introduce more questions through my raspy and barely audible vocal cords.

“What year is this?” I asked.

The three people in the room looked at each other with concerned expressions. No one wanted to speak initially, but then the good doctor stepped forward.

“The year is 1979. May 2, 1979. It’s a Wednesday,” he said.

Joyous euphoria flowed through my veins. It could have very well been the morphine, but I'd like to think it was the astonishing revelation that I had ended up in the right time period after all. Better yet, I was in the very hospital that I had planned to travel to. Things couldn't have worked out more perfectly. There was, of course, the question of the whereabouts of the Time Dancer. I grew concerned about the growing predicament and the unusual presence of the police officer as my consciousness became more and more aware of the situation I was in, piece-by-fractured-piece. As if offering a cherry on top of the cake of accomplishment, the doctor, a round balding man with a light grey beard and horn-rimmed glasses, then told me his name.

"I'm Dr. Olin, and to my left is Nurse Gannon." The nurse—a tall, thin woman with dark red hair tied in a bun, dressed all in white—nodded and smiled at me. Her eyes were the deepest shade of blue I had seen in this time period or any other. She was very striking; perhaps someday I would make her my wife. A sharp ping struck my head and I immediately held my hand to the gauze that covered my skull.

"Are you okay, Mr. Lewington?" Dr. Olin asked.

I struggled to come to my senses. "Yeah, just a slight headache," I responded, resting my arm back down. But it wasn't just a headache. It was my brain's defense mechanism whenever I thought of something outrageously stupefying, such as believing I would someday marry a nurse that I just met. For some reason, the mechanism never worked beyond romantic desires. I took the next moment to confirm that I really was in the time period the doctor had claimed. I wanted to be sure of the date so that I wouldn't face tremendous disappointment when discovering that the entire thing had been a ruse devised by McKee. He was always watching me, trying to deter my mission—that I was sure of.

“Dr. Olin, I just want to make sure that we’re both on the same page here. Did you say that it was Wednesday, May 2, 1979?”

“Correct, that’s what I said,” Dr. Olin said nodding.

I looked around the room. “Do you have a newspaper or anything to confirm that?”

Dr. Olin and Nurse Gannon glanced at each other then back at me.

“If…” Dr. Olin hesitated. “If you’re unsure of the date, why not turn on the television and see for yourself?”

He had a point. The surroundings of hospital room did look considerably old-fashioned. The floor was tiled in small green squares. The walls were covered from halfway down with wood paneling. The upper half of the wall was painted an off-shade purple-green pattern. The other side of room was concealed behind a thin curtain and I could hear the faint sounds of a breathing machine assisting the sleeping patient in the next bed over. And the attached to the high corner of the room definitely looked like something out of the late 1970s.

It was a twenty-inch vacuum tube Zenith with round knobs on one side. I assumed those knobs were how people either changed the channels or fiddled with the volume before we defeated communism in Eastern Europe. And get this, there used to be a thing called a UHF and VHF knob for separate frequency signals. I am not making this shit up. Anyway, I clutched the remote control in my hand, the size of a shoebox, and switched the television on. A blur of wavy lines commenced followed by a show in progress that looked like the 1970s television drama, *MASH*. Hawkeye was in the middle of one of his ridiculous diatribes and then it went to commercial. I switched off the television and thought it over.

“Many things could explain this. Perhaps this is an elaborate Hollywood set with *MASH* episodes streaming into vacuum-tubed televisions?”

“Pardon?” Dr. Olin said.

I was thinking out loud again. I quickly regained my composure and decided to give Dr. Olin the benefit of the doubt. “Don’t mind me, doctor, just trying to pull myself together.”

“Don’t worry, it’s quite understandable. You’ve been through a very serious trauma.”

“So what’s wrong with me, Doc? When can I get out of here?”

The directness of my question gained the attention of the silent police officer standing in the corner. He slowly walked closer as his leather shoes clicked on the green tile surface.

“What the hell does he want?” I thought—this time quietly.

“This is Officer Lasagna, he’s here to ask you a few questions, but first I’d like to go over your stats now that you’re awake—”

“Lasagna?” I asked. “You mean, like the food? Doc, you’re making me hungry just talking about this guy. What’s his partner’s name, Lieutenant Spaghetti?” I said, and laughed at my own feeble joke.

Officer Lasagna stared back at me, unamused. He pulled a small notepad from his pocket and flipped it open, ignoring my lighthearted jabs.

“Very clever, Mr. Lewington,” he said. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard such biting wit in all my time on the force. There are some questions I need to ask of you involving the circumstances of your car accident.”

Suddenly Dr. Olin cut the officer off, putting his hand in the air, signaling him to back off.

“We’ll get to that in a minute, Office Lasagna. Please allow me to inform the patient of his condition first.”

“Very well,” Officer Lasagna said, taking a step back. “But I do need to conduct an interview with him as soon as possible.”

“That’s fine. He’s all yours as soon as we’re done here,” Dr. Olin responded.

I looked around the room for any points of escape. The mere presence of law enforcement was making me nervous, so much so that I was visibly sweating. Everything started to come back to me. The wild arrival into the desert tundra, the uncontrollable Dodge Challenger, and my unfortunate trip through the windshield and the blackness that followed. I supposed I was lucky to be alive. My survival instincts kicked in like an electric current. I knew exactly what I had to do. First, I had to get out of there, second, I needed to find the Time Dancer, and third, I needed to enact my brilliant scheme to change history forever by eliminating McKee from existence through the denial of his very birth. I was already at the hospital, which turned out to be a great stroke of fortune despite my crippling injuries. I had clearly identified Dr. Olin, now I just needed to find McKee’s parents.

“Mr. Lewington, you’re very lucky that you survived the vehicle accident with no permanent injuries, although you have multiple fractures in your legs, arms, and collarbone. Your ribs are bruised as well. We did our best to contain the swelling and control any bleeding. My greatest concern, as of now, is that you may have suffered a serious concussion upon being ejected from your car. We’d like to keep you here for the next week to monitor your signs and make sure the recovery process goes smoothly.”

“A week?” I shouted abruptly. “No. I can’t do a week. Work with me here, Doc. I’ve got to be somewhere. I don’t have time to lie around in a hospital bed.”

Dr. Olin studied me with surprised confusion.

“Look, I’m getting better already,” I said. I attempted to get out of bed, but was met with the full and intense pain of my injuries, and fell back on the bed in writhing agony.

“Bed rest, Mr. Lewington, and lots of it. You’re not getting out of here anytime soon. Trust me, it’s for the best,” Dr. Olin said with a slight hint of pity. I was unresponsive as a thousand knives prodded me from all ends. I guess Dr. Olin wasn’t bluffing after all. I was a fucking wreck.

“If there’s anything you need, just let us know. Nurse Gannon will check in with you soon,” he said taking a step towards the exit. “Take care, Lewis. Get some rest,” he added. Then he was gone. Nurse Gannon nodded at me, and smiled, then followed the doctor out of the room, leaving me alone with Officer Lasagna. As they left, he walked slowly to the door and closed it shut. He swiveled around quite satisfied with himself, and proceeded to pull a small pencil from his pocket. His puffy jowls moved inward as he swallowed. He pulled on the collar of his police uniform as if trying to get comfortable. He had dirty-blond hair under his hat that looked as bleached as his face was red, most likely from the merciless Arizona sun on any given day. He approached the foot of my bed.

“Mr. Lewington,” he said in a loud baritone voice.

“Yes?” I asked.

He shook his head and smiled. I had figured an interrogation of sorts was about to commence. The less I said the better. The sooner I shook the tail of the law off me the better. And the quicker I could climb out the window to my side the better as well. I couldn’t imagine where our conversation was going.

“I have to hand it to you, we’re kind of at a loss at the station with this one.”

“Whatever do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean that we have no idea who in the hell you really are,” he answered.

“I refer to my earlier question,” I said, hoping he’d just get to the point.

“I mean that your license says you were born in 1974 which, at this point, would make you five years old. You hardly have the appearance of a five-year-old child. Your car, the Dodge we recovered, is a model that doesn’t even exist. The VIN number isn’t located anywhere in our system.”

“How is any of this my problem?” I asked.

He gripped my hospital bedpost in veiled frustration. “You can start by telling me who you really are, what you’re doing driving an unregistered vehicle, and how you ended up off Route 95 after flipping your car and crashing through the windshield.”

He was asking questions that had no answers. There was little I could do to explain the significance of my arrival. Officer Lasagna might as well have just called it a night and grabbed some breadsticks to go with his stupid name. But it wouldn’t be that easy. He was too damn persistent. Honestly, what in the hell was I going to say to this guy? Unfortunately for me, he had many of the pieces already figured out.

“We uncovered some documents from your vehicle; a file of sorts. In the file you have plans detailing a pinpointed operation involving one Raymond S. McKee, another person who, like you, doesn’t appear to have any record. In your notes you claim that he is going to be born this very year and your plan is to prevent his birth from happening. Does any of this sound familiar? Am I ringing any bells?”

“Officer...” I began.

“Yes?” he asked.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I’m really in no condition to be answering these wild conspiracies of yours, so if you’ll excuse me.”

Officer Lasagna held up his hand in a defensive posture. “By all means, Mr. Lewington, or whomever you are, get some sleep. I want you nice and rested by tomorrow so I can come back and get to the bottom of all of this. I would hate to see you have to explain this convoluted plan of yours in such a weary condition.”

“Thank you, I appreciate your concern,” I said and pretended to go to sleep.

“No, the pleasure is all mine, good sir,” he shot back.

“I bid you a goodnight,” I said, trying to match his exaggerated tone.

He took the hat off his head and bowed to me in an even more sarcastic manner than before. “And a goodnight to you, sweet prince. May all your dreams be wonderfully realized by the evening’s end.”

I couldn’t take it anymore. “Listen, Officer Spaghetti, why don’t you get the fuck off my back?”

He zeroed in on me with absolute resolve, knowing that he had gotten underneath my skin. I supposed that dry sarcasm was his own unique interrogation method. “I’m sorry, Mr. Lewwwington,” he said dragging out my name. “I didn’t mean to get you upset.”

“You want to know the truth?” I asked. “Well, you can’t handle the truth!” At that point, the movie from which I quoted hadn’t been made yet, so I thought the line clever. Nonetheless, it was a true and appropriate comment. Lasagna just looked at me and smiled. Silence—save for the breathing machine in the next bed over—crept into the room. We stared at each other for a moment, when Nurse Gannon entered the room unexpectedly carrying a tray with a small bowl

of Jell-O. I believed it for me, but she merely smiled at us and went over to the dying man in the next bed over. "Where's my goddamn Jell-O?" I thought.

Officer Lasagna watched her walk over behind the curtain, then turned to me. "I'll be here bright and early tomorrow to ask you some more questions. Make sure to get some rest."

"Whatever you say, Officer," I said. I was done sparring with him. I had to admit, his interrogation method had worn me out. He exited the room slowly with a pompous stroll that irritated me to no end. To my good fortune, the beautiful Nurse Gannon peeked around from the curtain next to me and asked me if I needed anything.

"I need you to keep that guy away from me," I said. I got a laugh out of her before she made her way out of the room. "Seriously though, I'm fine for now."

"Just buzz for me if you change your mind," she said with another smile.

After she left I struggled to understand the context of her comment. "Do you think she likes me?" I asked the man behind the curtain next to me. I assumed it was a man, don't ask me why. He didn't respond. All I heard was the sucking of tubes and the methodical pumping of air into his lungs. The sound delivered me into a trance to where it became patently clear that my only chance of avoiding any further exposure was to escape the hospital that very night. It wasn't going to be easy. Hell, I could barely move, but that didn't stop me. I rose from the bed with every bone in my body aching beyond belief, and looked out the window. It was getting dark out and I had no clue where to go if I did leave the hospital.

Where was the Time Dancer? I didn't know. It was most likely in some type of police impound yard, but where was the impound yard? I didn't know that either. Would it still run? How badly damaged was it? How was I going to convince the cops to give it back to me? Most important of all, how in the hell was I going to pay for my hospital bills? The man in the bed

next to mine had no answers. I think he was ignoring me, pretending to be in some kind of coma. The oxygen mask covered his wrinkled face preventing him from speaking and I was getting nowhere fast. I limped away from him, pulling the IV bag along, and sat on my hospital bed to compose a solid strategy.

Technically, thirty-nine-year-old Lewis Lewington didn't even exist. As Officer Lasagna said, I was only five years old in 1979. That was my advantage. I was a ghost—a phantom of sorts, and you know what they say—phantoms don't pay hospital bills. If I slipped away undetected and retrieved the Time Dancer I could ensure, first in foremost, that I wasn't stuck in 1979 for good. Escape seemed imminent. It was my only option. After retrieving the Time Dancer I would slip back into my bed by morning without alerting a soul. I would search the hospital for Mckee's parents, daily if I had to. I had a Polaroid of the young couple: the father, short and skinny with short wavy dark hair, blue eyes and thick eyebrows. The mother, tall and lanky; a young Geena Davis with brown eyes and a nice smile. They looked like a happy couple. They also looked like dupes. If our paths hadn't crossed by now, I assumed they soon would. I'd confront Dr. Olin, considering he already knew me, put him in a sleeper hold, pump him full of sedatives, and lock him in a closet while I dressed up as Dr. Manuel Delgado, resident physician from Arizona. The rest would write itself. And what a beautiful symphony it would be.

Thus far, I had successfully yanked the suction cups of the monitor cables from my bruised and battered body, plus the morphine tube which was the hardest to part with, but there was still the troubling matter of the IV needle lodged into my wrist. They had bandaged it tightly and I hadn't a clue about how big or long the needle was. The last thing I wanted to do was to yank it out like a thorn and spray blood all over the room in a panicked frenzy. I also had to contend with the downside of my lack of identity. With Officer Lasagna's persistence, the

hospital would soon find out that I was not who I claimed I was, or at least who they thought me to be. The more they dug, the more I risked complete and absolute exposure. Everything would implode into an irreversible fury of awkward half-truths and deflections and I didn't have many yarns left in me to spin.

We're often asked whether we see the glass half empty or half full. Through this paradigm, I devised a way to dislodge the IV needle from my wrist, free of pain. I would pump myself half full of morphine to the point of numbness then yank out the needle without feeling a thing. If I kept the right amount of pressure over my IV wrist, it would undoubtedly limit any blood flow. I sat upright on my hospital bed and inserted the morphine needle back into the top of my free wrist then pressed the release valve over the clear plastic tube and discharged the wondrous flow of liquid opium into my veins. Upon a satisfactory level of numbness, I unwrapped the bandage around the IV tube and yanked the needle out in one quick thrust. I held a cloth in its place and switched to my morphine wrist as I pulled the needle out on that end. I placed a separate cloth over the new area and was good to go. My IV wrist held the cloth over the morphine wrist while my chin held the cloth to my IV wrist. I sat for a couple of minutes pondering my alarming freedom and the extent to which I still had a conscious awareness of my surroundings.

I stumbled out the window without feeling a thing. Luckily for me, I was on the first floor. The outside bushes broke the fall of my five-foot plunge. I was still wearing my hospital gown, which proved to be a tremendous oversight on my part. A new wardrobe was in order, but my options were limited. I could roll around in the sand that was squishing between my toes as I walked, ultimately using it as camouflage, or I could ask the bushes what they thought about it.

They were, after all, trying to communicate with me through plant telepathy. Their bristled arms were waving in multiple directions trying to guide me to a higher plain.

“What is it?” I asked the first bush. “Where can I find El Dorado?”

I realized that the morphine dosage I had generously administered may have been too excessive as I crawled on the ground drooling towards the bright lights of the hospital parking lot. Even in my heavily altered state, I could identify something that resembled a taxi-cab parked at the drop-off ramp. In a journey that seemed like hours across rocks, dust, and sand, I finally made it to the yellow cab and pulled the door open with my last ounce of energy.

“You want to go somewhere, buddy?” the giant lizard cab driver asked me.

“Police station,” I sputtered. “Need to get to the police station.”

He looked me up and down with his suspicious reptile eyes, not entirely knowing what to do with me.

“Look, if you need help we’re at a hospital in case you didn’t know—”

“They kicked me out!” I yelled.

“Huh?” he asked.

“Couldn’t pay the bill, and they threw me to the curb,” I said climbing into the back seat.

“Well, it cost money to ride in this cab too, and if you can’t pay, you can’t ride,” he stated.

“Damn lizard logic,” I thought.

“So what’s it gonna be?” he asked.

“I got money, just drive!” I demanded.

“Where to?” he asked, annoyed.

“Just take me where I can get a change of clothes, I’ll make it worth your while,” I said holding a dollar bill I had found on the ground during my low-crawling journey through hell. The driver put the meter on and said no more. I rolled down the window to take in the desert air and allow it to blow through my graying tuft of receding hair. The air was refreshing though thick with heat, almost like a hairdryer to my face at the highest setting. As the taxi ventured on I realized that fatigue and drowsiness were washing over me at an overwhelming rate. My eye lids were weights which I could no longer hold through my own will, and I promptly slumped over and passed out as the taxi motored down the darkened road in search of a clothing store I would never arrive at.

I awoke some hours later—or probably even longer—lying on a street corner in broad daylight. Still in my hospital gown, I assumed that I never had made it to the clothing store as planned. The cab driver probably noticed me unresponsive and penniless and took it upon himself to eject me to the nearest side of the road he could find. Initially, I struggled with understanding the awareness of my surroundings, even more so than when I woke in the hospital. I could see that it was early morning, simply because it wasn’t a thousand degrees yet, and some residual cloud movement had managed to block the angry yellow orb above which hadn’t fully awakened. I was on a sidewalk leaned against the brick wall of a building. Cars passed by without care or notice as random, busy people stepped over me as if I were a small hurdle on their way to work. I looked down to my side and noticed a sizeable amount of piled cash. I snatched the money up in a gluttonous fury, paranoid of any onlookers who might try to squeeze in on the action. There must have been close to forty dollars in my trembling hands.

Suddenly another busy-body walked over me and tossed some change on the ground. Then another followed and threw me a buck. I was racking up the scratch quicker than I could

count it. “Only in Jimmy Carter’s America,” I thought. He was the president back then, and frankly I would have said the same thing using the name of whomever was the president during that time. I just couldn’t believe how easy it was to get a couple of bucks. Here I was, only moments ago unconscious and I had made forty dollars. I needed to step up my game some to bring in a big haul. Then I could buy some clothes and possibly recover my beloved Time Dancer from whatever cruel fate awaited her.

“Ladies and gentleman, if you please,” I said pushing myself off the ground. “Allow me to introduce myself, my name is Sir Isaac Dubstep: Lord of the Dance. I don’t have much but the hospital gown on my back, and if you would feel so generous as to help me buy some clothes I’ll perform a mystifying dance for your enjoyment.”

I hadn’t any real takers yet. Camaros, Jeeps, and VW Bugs continued to pass by, some honking while others paid me no mind. I had managed to get the attention of a few pedestrians who struggled in their attempts to avoid eye contact. I wondered how I must have looked, because if I looked as bad as I felt then my appearance could only have been that of a leaky garbage bag or compost heap. Take your pick. My body still ached excruciatingly, but I did my best to stay balanced and perform some moves for the adoring crowd that hadn’t yet gathered around me.

“I call this dance, ‘The Luck of the Irish.’ I hope you enjoy it!” I hadn’t a clue where my mind was at before, during, or after the number, but I just went with the flow. I jumped in the air and flailed my arms in the spirit of traditional Irish dance then collapsed on the ground in a defeated lump once my legs gave out and body altogether failed. My cries of pain were too much for the few people who had gathered around in morbid curiosity, and I was soon on my back again with little recourse. At this point, a new abundance of people passing by seemed to take

pity on my debilitated state as they tossed their hard earned cash to the sad creature below them. Hey, business was business, and it worked for me. By the time I had built up enough strength to rise again, I had close to a hundred dollars. I called out to the many generous souls who had assisted me in my time of need. "I want to offer thanks for your tremendous outpouring of support. I will never forget any of you for you have blessed me with your kind-hearted generosity!"

The street went quiet as I wrapped up my speech. The show was over so I limped away, proudly holding my earnings. "Enough foolishness," I thought, making my way down the busy side street. "Let's get back on track here." Several shops indicated that I was still in Yuma, with their flashy signs advertising "Yuma's Best Iced Lemonade" or "Yuma's #1 Vasectomy Center," so I had that much figured out. I needed clothes, but oddly enough, I couldn't find a single retailer in sight.

"Excuse me, Miss, do you know where I can find the nearest clothing store?" I asked a random woman on the street.

"Please don't hurt me," she said, gripping her purse

I laughed. "No, I think you have the wrong idea, I'm just looking for a place to buy clothes."

"Help!" she shouted, running away and gaining the attention of several other people from down the street. Odd, thought I, that my harmless question had such an adverse effect. A group of strapping young men marched towards me in her defense, and I knew that I didn't want to wait and see what would happen. I quick-limped in the opposite direction searching desperately for a clothing outlet, retail store, or just a place that sold socks, when finally I came across a store that sold tacky tie-die T-shirts called, "Trippy T's." Just what I needed, to look like some

godforsaken hippie, but it would be a big improvement over my tattered hospital gown. I ducked into the store, effectively evading the vigilant mob hot on my trail. A bell sounded as I rushed inside and I watched as they scurried past the store window, stopping for a moment in confusion. My heart beat like a jackhammer while they circled the area outside, dumbfounded to find me nowhere in sight.

“What can I help you with?” the disheveled store clerk asked me as he walked from behind the counter. He looked to be in his twenties, wearing a backwards hat with blond hair underneath that went down to his shoulders.

“Yes, my good man,” I said. “I’m in need of some clothes. A pair of pants and a T-shirt would do just nicely.”

He examined me intently, trying to figure out if I was serious or not.

“Listen, I don’t have a lot of time here. I’ve got money, I need to purchase some clothes. I don’t care how tacky or stupid they look, just anything so I can get out of this damn hospital gown.”

The clerk scratched his chin, thinking to himself. These fucking hippies were always slow to the draw. Did I have to write him a diagram? Perhaps I offended him with my comment pertaining to an indifference of “tacky” clothing, but in my line of experience if someone is waving a handful of cash in front of your face generally it doesn’t matter whether they’re “down for the struggle” or not. His brain cells eventually aligned to assess the situation and he showed me around the store and its various types of shitty tie-die apparel. I grabbed a couple of medium T-shirts and a pair of bell-bottoms and made my way to the cash register. As the clerk, “Derrick,” rang up my order, I decided to probe him about the possible whereabouts of an impounded vehicle without offering any context of my inquiry.

“Oh, well, if your car is impounded usually the tow truck place takes it and locks it up in the yard.”

“What tow truck place are we talking about here?” I asked.

“Um. Big Al and Sons and Daughter,” he answered.

“Big Al and Sons and Daughter? What the hell kind of name is that?”

“It’s like this, man. Big Al has two sons working for him, Thomas and Dylan. His daughter, Samantha, does the books, so he had to fit her in there somewhere.”

“Stupidest name I’ve ever heard for a business,” I replied. “Anyway, can you take me there? I’ll make it worth your while,” I said, holding roughly fifty bucks in my hand.

Derrick stood motionless for a moment pondering my abrupt offer. There was no real indication of which direction he would go. His glazed confusion told me that he probably hadn’t expected to be doing much that morning beyond scraping the marijuana residue from his blown glass bong.

“Yeah, I can do that, no problem,” he said, much to my satisfaction.

“Great. Let’s hit the road,” I said. The pieces were finally falling into place.

Sometime later we pulled up to Big Al’s in Derrick’s silver ‘72 AMC Gremlin. I couldn’t remember the last time I had even seen one of those cars, anomalies that they were, but Derrick spoke highly of it.

“They’re great on fuel, and I think they’re pretty cool looking. I mean, with the way gas prices are now and the bullshit with the Iranians, a man has to save, even though money is, like, how they control you. You know what I mean? It’s like, we’re free to be poor in this country which is like the only freedom we really have.” And on he went for about five minutes. I had to

suck it up and listen to his rambling self-righteous platitudes so that I could retrieve the Time Dancer in time.

It was hard to sympathize with Derrick, because where I came from, in 2015, a gallon of gas cost close to four bucks. Here it was eighty-eight cents a gallon. You weren't exactly breaking the bank with those prices. And yes, adjusted for inflation, I'm sure it evened out, but it was hard to look past the fact that, to me, gas was pretty damn cheap back then.

Big Al's consisted of a long office trailer and a large fenced-in dirt lot behind it, full of vehicles of all different makes and models. Many of them, with their front or rear smashed in, looked as if they had been in car accidents while others were perfectly intact. I had no doubt that those particular cars had probably been confiscated from parking in a tow-away zone. Tow truck drivers were a heartless bunch who reveled in the opportunity to snatch a person's vehicle under cover of darkness, leaving them scared and confused as to the explanation behind their car's sudden disappearance. I'd probably enjoy it, so I projected that feeling onto the entire profession. This was standard operating procedure in my line of thinking. "People are all the same," I'd always say. "They're just like me." Then I thought of Derrick and decided to make an exception to the rule. He was something else all entirely.

We parked in front of the trailer and I asked Derrick if he would come in with me considering that he seemed to be acquainted with Big Al. "You see, I'm kind of not from around here. I don't know anyone. I got in a little fender bender and they took my car. I'm not certain that it's here, but from what you said, it's pretty likely."

"I hear you, man. Yeah, I'll come in there with you put in a good word for ya' if you want." Derrick paused. "You're not, like, a pederast or anything are you?"

I balked at the outright nerve of his question. “Of course not. Where in the hell would you get an idea like that?”

Derrick held his hands up in defense. “Just checking, man, nothing personal. I didn’t know if the hospital gown look was like a sexual thing or something. You gotta be sure about these things nowadays.”

He may have had a point, but at that time, I didn’t see it. I had long since changed out of my gown and into a blue tie-die shirt, bell-bottoms, and a pair of moccasins. The fact that I looked more “normal” than I had earlier deeply depressed me. We exited the Gremlin and walked up the wooden ramp into Big Al’s trailer. I let Derrick lead the way, hoping that his rapport with Al’s gang would assist me in my time of crisis. I looked up at the sign hanging above the door; sure enough it read: *Big Al & Son’s & Daughter*. The “Daughter” title looked recently added as the lettering didn’t quite match the other words.

Derrick opened the screen door, then the badly chipped blue wood door with a window, sounding a hanging bell above. A large man with long hair, sideburns, and a handlebar mustache stood behind the counter with a phone receiver wedged between his ear and shoulder. His hands shuffled through paperwork as he talked quietly on the phone. He was wearing some sort of blue and white-striped mechanic’s shirt sporting a nametag that read, *Big Al*. He looked up and signaled at us to give him a minute. It was him, the head honcho, Big Al of Big Al’s standing right before us. If there was any question to the whereabouts of the Time Dancer, I’m sure he would know.

After some mindless chatter, he set the phone down and looked up at us.

“Can I help you?” he said.

I looked at Derrick to do the talking, as I didn’t even know where to start.

“Big Al! Yeah, my friend here—” Derrick suddenly looked at me realizing that I never told him my name.

“Lewis,” I whispered.

“My friend, Lewis and I are looking for his car.” He turned to me again. “What kind of car was it?” At this point, I decided to take over and try to explain things the best I could.

“It’s a Dodge Challenger. I had a wreck off of Route 95 the other day, and went to the hospital. I wanted to see if you guys picked it up.”

“Oh yeah? What year?” Big Al said flipping through a car magazine in an apparent lack of interest.

“It’s, uh. It’s a later model. Real new. Probably like nothing you’ve ever seen before,” I said.

I had gained his attention. Big Al set the magazine down and stared at me as if he knew exactly what I was talking about. “Yeah, I remember that car. We picked it up the other day. I got a friend of mine who’s coming by to look at later today. I can’t figure out for the life of me where it came from. It don’t look like no Dodge I ever seen.”

“You’re exactly right, good sir,” I said. “Much of that car was of my own design. I was test driving it in the desert and had an unfortunate accident. I woke up in the hospital a day later.”

“Who the hell are you, anyway?” he asked me. “I’ve never seen your face before and I know everyone in town, even your friend, Derrick, there.”

I didn’t like where our conversation was going. Big Al was asking too many questions. If I wanted an interrogation I could have just gone to see Officer Lasagna. I walked to the counter

that divided us and threw down the rest of the cash that I had; payment to Derrick notwithstanding.

“What’s that?” Big Al asked.

“That’s over fifty dollars there, my friend. Let me get my car back, no questions asked, and it’s all yours.” I wasn’t really sure if fifty dollars of crumbled bills was that big of a deal back then, but I was hoping that Big Al would take the bait. He glanced down at the money with a raised brow. He seemed interested. What did he have to lose?

“I don’t know. Normally that’s not how we do things around here. Our impound rates are one hundred and twenty dollars a day. Plus my friend wants to check it out later like I said. Come up with two hundred and forty and the car’s yours.” Then he went back to his magazine. I felt lost and defeated. Surprisingly Derrick cut in, offering some much needed assistance.

“Big Al, come on, give the guy his car back. Can’t you see that he’s broke as shit?”

Big Al looked up from his magazine examining me. I must have looked like a man experiencing some type of mid-life crisis on account of my generic hippie apparel.

“Just this morning he was wearing nothing but a hospital gown. They kicked him out because he couldn’t pay his bill. Have a heart, man. Not everything’s about the almighty dollar.”

“Not my problem,” Big Al said looking down.

Derrick persisted. “Hey, if I remember correctly, your son, Dylan, owes me for that pound of weed I scored.”

Big Al became noticeably uncomfortable at the mere mention of his son and the money owed for illegal narcotics.

“I’ve been pretty tight-lipped about it, but now you’re backing me into a corner. If I’m not mistaken I would say he owes me, like, two hundred dollars. Now I know for a fact you got high on that shit too, so maybe we can work something out after all.”

Big Al backed up from the counter and scratched his head in frustration. It was clear that Derrick had struck a nerve.

“Damn you, Derrick. You got no business bringing that shit up right now.”

“Just give the man his car back so we can get out of here,” Derrick said.

Big Al leaned back on the counter and folded his arms. My head swiveled from Derrick to Big Al in complete uncertainty and anticipation of what the final verdict would be.

“You vouch for this guy?” Big Al asked, pointing at me.

“Of course I vouch for him, give him the damn keys,” Derrick answered. Who would have thought that this loopy pot-head would turn out to be my ace in the hole? It was an amazing stroke of fortune on my part and I watched excitedly as Big Al walked to a key box hanging on the wall and searched through the many tagged keys hanging on hooks. He grabbed one set from the box and closed it. Attached to a marked yellow tag was the recognizable key to the Time Dancer. He held it in the air for me to take. “Here you go, just make sure you sign that weird fucking car out in the book.” Big Al spun a large green book on the countertop and opened it for me to sign. I dutifully signed the ledger and relinquished the keys from his possession.

“And I don’t want to hear anymore shit about the matter,” Big Al said, sounding defeated. “You got a lot of nerve coming into my place of business and bringing it up in the first place.”

“Don’t worry about a thing, Big Al. You guys are good with me,” Derrick answered.

“Now you might want to unlock the gates so Lewis can get his car.”

Big Al stammered, grabbed his ball cap from the counter then walked out the back door to the car lot, slamming the door. Derrick and I walked out the front, sounding the bell one last time. As we walked down the ramp outside I found myself in awe of Derrick's handling of the situation. Granted I had assured him that I wasn't a pederast, but beyond that, he didn't even know me. Regardless, he had still gone out of his way to assist me, even if it looked as if he wasn't going to get his two hundred dollars back from Big Al's loser son, Dylan. When we got to the bottom of the ramp, Derrick offered a handshake and a goodbye. I held my hand out and he gave it a slap, startling me.

"Take care, man," he said. "Best of luck to you." He walked off towards his Gremlin.

"Derrick," I said. He stopped and turned around. "Why did you do that for me?"

"Because, man. It's like, you needed help, you know? You needed help, and I helped you. Simple as that."

"But the money," I said.

Derrick waved his hand in the air, disregarding me. "Ah, who cares about the money. It's like I said, we shouldn't be slaves to the dollar. I mean that. It's not just some idealistic bullshit. I just like to help people."

"I don't know how to thank you. When I get my feet back on the ground, I'll come by the store and pay you everything—"

"Don't worry about it," he said, cutting me off. He looked at his watch. "I gotta get back to the store now. Good luck with everything."

"Thank you, Derrick," I said. "You're a good guy."

He laughed as he climbed into his Gremlin. The engine started and he drove off leaving a trail of dust in his wake. I stood there in awe contemplating how such a simple-minded looking

slacker would go out of his way to help a complete stranger like me. He was a good person; a selfless person. He was something that I wasn't: a genuine soul.

Chapter Seven: The Early Years

The Time Dancer was in rough condition, but still manageable. The windshield had been smashed out, the sides were dented in, the timing belt was messed up, the muffler was hanging by a thread, the signal lights were out, but it still ran, thus subsiding my greatest concern. This was a phenomenal piece of American machinery we're talking about here. The car must have flipped over four or five times in the open desert and she still ran like a beast, aside from the awful squeaking of the timing belt. Her time traveling abilities, however, were deeply in question. I drove her out of the gate of Big Al's as she heaved and rattled, and hoped that I could at least find a mechanic who could repair whatever damage existed. That would undoubtedly be expensive though. I needed more cash and fast, but first—*first* I would go back to the hospital and enact my plan before the law got wind of my newfound freedom. I was sure that Officer Lasagna was already actively pursuing me in his typically annoying fashion.

The engine was smoking badly, but I trekked on, hoping that the already unusual appearance of my future car would not draw any unneeded attention. The Yuma Regional Medical Center was roughly ten miles away, and after filling up the tank with astonishingly cheap gas, I was soon on my way to make history. I arrived to the hospital during what seemed like mid-day, after infuriating the many other drivers on the road with a thick blanket of smoke that emitted from underneath my car like something out of James Bond movie. "They'll get over it," I thought.

Some guy in a BMW passed me while giving me finger. It's funny how bold people can be in the comfort of their own vehicles, for when we ended up at a red light, with the BMW on my side, the driver just looked down as I stared ahead, not wanting to escalate the matter.

There's nothing quite like that level of heightened awkwardness when you're sitting in your car at a red light across from someone who has just given you the finger. In this case, both parties stare at the light in desperation, counting down the seconds until it changes. The time drags on exponentially to where each second seems like an eternity. It's like some uncomfortable region of mathematical psychosis that has been never fully explored: awkwardness to the highest power.

I pulled into the hospital parking lot—smoking car and all—and found a space near the back, out of sight. Though the police had confiscated my notes and files, I'd hope that my doctor's costume had remained untouched. I dug under the passenger seat and felt a brown paper bag wedged underneath. "Eureka!" I said. An odd word to say in any circumstance, but it felt appropriate at the time. I pulled the bag from under the seat and tore it open to marvel at its contents. There in my lap rested a full doctor's gown complete with black slacks, tie, dress shirt, loafers, glasses, and stethoscope. Dr. Manuel Delgado was about to pay the Yuma Medical Center a special visit. The costume would also help conceal my identity as I prowled the floors of the hospital in search of my prey.

I suspected that Officer Lasagna would be lurking about, but I assumed he had only a fleeting picture of the man he had interrogated the night before. He wouldn't recognize me anymore than he would recognize his own pride as it evaporated through his inept pursuit of a mysterious being from the future. I was quite confident at this point, obviously, but I still tried to maintain a sense of modesty, as no part of my plan was guaranteed.

I strolled into the hospital ready for action, for if I showed a glimpse of hesitation I would be exposed as the fraud I most certainly was. Role playing, to some extent, is about appearing comfortable in one's role, and I, a specialized physician in the area of neonatal care, would play my part to the best of my deceptive abilities. There were doctors, patients, and personnel

everywhere. The hospital was busy and no one noticed my presence for the most part, and that's exactly how I wanted it. I would have to avoid the general area of my hospital room for the time being. I knew that Dr. Olin's office had to be close, so I stopped at the end of a white and illuminated hallway juncture and read a sign on the wall. It appeared that the maternity ward was to my left. To my right was radiology, prosthetics, emergency, and a whole slew of other crap.

If I remembered correctly, my hospital room was somewhere close and I didn't want to alert further suspicion by prematurely running into Nurse Gannon, Dr. Olin, or—God forbid—Officer Lasagna. My identity was partly concealed by my disguise as a doctor, but if they were to examine me too closely, they would probably recognize me as the patient who had—the evening before—escaped, never to return. The fools. Well, Nurse Gannon was pretty cool, so I quickly excluded her from any such criticism. Maybe I still had a chance with her.

My head pounded as a result of the thought, again, to remind me of such an absurd notion. I leaned against the wall with my hand over my forehead when another female nurse approached me and placed her hand on my back.

“Are you okay, Doctor?” she asked.

I turned around to face her as the pain subsided. She was a tall attractive black woman who looked to be in her thirties wearing a nametag that said: *Jacqueline Peters*.

“Yes, I'm okay, thank you. Just a little headache,” I responded.

“Is there anything I can help you with?” she asked.

Then it hit me. “Why yes, Ms. Peters. Would you know where I can find Dr. Olin? I traveled all the way from St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Facility in Phoenix. It's very important that I meet with him.”

She looked at me with a hint of uncertainty. It was my first official attempt at declaring myself as an expert in the medical profession. Before our chance encounter I had snuck into the men's restroom and glanced in the mirror, just to see how convincing I looked. Aside from some cuts and bruises on my face, my white gown and stethoscope exuded authority. Plus the large, black framed glasses helped conceal my real identity for the most part. She would be none the wiser.

"Dr. Olin's office is on the second floor," she said and directed me down the hall where I could take the elevator. I thanked her for her assistance and walked down the hall opposite the maternity ward to where I could find the elevator and approach my relatively new nemesis. He was the only thing standing between me and my plan to rid the earth of McKee's existence. Unfortunately I was in the red zone, meaning that I was foolishly nearing the recovery ward where I had been a patient only a day before.

I had to play it cool, like Harrison Ford in *The Fugitive*. Ford, as Dr. Richard Kimble, seemed to make all the right moves when it mattered; gallivanting through the hospital at his leisure to prove his innocence at all costs. That movie always confused me because I was pretty certain that his claim that a one-armed man murdered his wife was bullshit. I was on the side of the cops with that one. I thought that he had made up the story about the one-armed man to get away with it, and all the flashback scenes that portrayed the murder, as he saw it, were just elaborate explorations of his own denial involving his very real culpability in the crime. That was my take on it. I found it disturbing—to say the least—that the movie expected its audience to root for a cold blooded murderer. I mean, if *I* were to murder my ex-wife in the heat of passion, I'd use the one-armed man defense like nobody's business. Then again, perhaps it was just another example of my typical projection onto people.

“Doctor, can you help us out here!” a paramedic shouted in my ear.

“What now?” I thought. I turned around and saw a man with an oxygen mask over his face, twitching on a stretcher, covered in blood. He was an apparent stabbing victim and I was about to discover the downside of impersonating a doctor. I looked over the injured patient in my most meditative and concerned demeanor.

“What seems to be the problem here?” I said with a voice of authority.

“This patient is suffering from multiple stab wounds to his abdomen, we’re taking him to the ER now. You have to treat him!” the paramedic said.

My mind raced in a hundred different directions while my flight instincts kicked in through my overwhelming desire to find a hole to crawl in and die. Three other paramedics overlooking the victim stared at me eagerly awaiting my next move.

“He doesn’t have much time!” another one shouted.

I had to think hard. The situation was not what I bargained for when I decided to travel back in time. This was, in effect, a really shitty hand I was being dealt. I wasn’t going to sentence a man to death through my own incompetence, so I did what came naturally: I downplayed my abilities to an uncomfortable extent.

“This really isn’t...” I began.

“What? What is it?” the main paramedic demanded.

“I’m actually more of a foot specialist. What are they called? Yes, I’m a Podiatrist. I wouldn’t know the first thing about stab wounds to the abdomen.”

The four paramedics frowned at me in disappointment then pushed past me to the ER without saying a word.

“That was a close one,” I thought. Once that unpleasantness was out of the picture, I proceeded to the nearest elevator and took it to the second floor. There was no more time to risk another encounter with the actual hospital personnel. I had to find Dr. Olin before my plan fell apart like the Harrison Ford’s misguided attempt to murder his wife in *The Fugitive*. I rode the elevator with a sad-looking middle-aged woman holding a tote-bag full of books and one bottle of Chardonnay. I stared at the ground and said nothing even as her constant sniffing made me uncomfortable. Perhaps she was there to visit her dying husband, or maybe her mother was on her last throes of dementia. If I didn’t know any better, I could assume that she was visiting her teenage son after he had veered into the wrong lane of oncoming traffic soon after getting his learner’s permit. One could only speculate.

The elevator finally arrived at the second floor and I watched the mysterious woman scurry off down the hall into a hospital room, distraught in her movements and unconcerned of her surroundings or what anyone else thought of her. “Hospitals sure are depressing places,” I thought. On the other hand, the maternity ward, one floor below, bustled with joy and happiness upon each newborn arrival, effectively counteracting the bleak inevitability of lives coming to an end on the second floor. It was a fair trade depending on how you look at things. The hallway ahead extended far beyond initial expectations and I found myself overwhelmed by the many rooms to choose from on both sides. I passed a small green carpeted waiting area and absorbed the blank, tired stares of those seated while looking for any resemblance of McKee’s parents. Nobody fit the bill, but I had a sneaking suspicion that Dr. Olin’s office wasn’t too far off. I strolled passed the reception desk without catching the attention of the woman at the counter.

What I had planned to do prior to finding the good doctor’s office was to sneak into a medical supply room—if such a thing existed on the floor I was on—and grab some sedatives to

use during our encounter. Originally I envisioned employing some type of elaborate sleeper-hold, but I was in no condition for such physical excursions. Best to go with the sedatives; that was my general thinking. Halfway down the hall, past a rattling water fountain, I came to a closed door marked: *Orderly Room*. “What in the hell is an orderly?” I thought. I almost had forgotten that it was the 1970s when such a term—or occupation, for that matter—was more commonplace.

I snuck up to the door with careful precision and slowly turned the knob. It opened to reveal a room the size of a broom closet with several stocked shelves of bedpans, empty water containers, enema bags and other humiliating hospital vessels. I slipped into the room undetected and closed the door with upmost secrecy. Once inside, I was free to examine the shelves, looking for anything that resembled a hypodermic needle filled with sedatives or tranquilizers. The shelves were heavily stocked with soaps, cleaners, and several other items inconsequential to my mission, but I continued to search in haste, tossing aside all that were useless to me. I nearly gave up, when, on the bottom shelf, I came across a box of packaged hypodermic needles labeled *Intravenous Sedative*. “Sounds pretty damn close to me,” I said, clutching a handful. I probably only needed a few, but as the old saying goes: it’s better to have more of what you need than to have less of...what you need as well. Maybe that’s not how the saying went, but I *had* been diagnosed with multiple concussions as a result of my trip through the windshield, so cut me some slack.

I stuffed the syringes in the pocket of my doctor’s coat and cheerfully left the room ready to make Dr. Olin’s acquaintance. Farther down the hall, a nurse was exiting one of the patient rooms. I raised my hand towards her, real professional like, and asked her where I could find Dr. Olin’s office.

“Down the hall and to your left,” she answered, smiling.

“Thank you,” I replied, walking past her. I was close. My heart fluttered with competing emotions of panic and elation. “Fucking butterflies? Are you serious?” I asked myself, feeling the unsettling in my stomach. I stopped for a moment to get it together. “Listen, Lewis,” I said under my breath. “You can do this. You can do anything. You built a time machine out of *nothing!* You are *determined*. No one can stop you from fulfilling this quest. Not a damn soul. Don’t start falling apart on me now. You’re Dr. Manuel Delgado, and no one knows any better. Now get in there and get the job done!”

After my pep talk I built up my nerves and proceeded down the hall to a half-way shut door on my right with Dr. Olin’s title across its oak surface. I stopped, took a deep breath, ran my hands through my hair, adjusted my glasses, straightened my doctor’s coat, patted the needles in my pocket, took a few more breaths, told myself to stay cool, cleared my throat quietly, tugged at the sleeves on my coat, shifted my legs, pulled the socks up under my slacks, straightened my belt, examined my shoes, pulled down on the stethoscope around my neck, and gave my tie one last downward thrust. I squinted through the crack in the door and could see Dr. Olin, clear as day, sitting at his desk filling out some paperwork.

The moment was beyond opportune. It was destiny. If I wasn’t ready to go through with the plan at that moment then I wasn’t ready to look myself in the mirror from then on out. There was no choice in the matter any longer. I had to jam the needle, or needles—I’m no medical expert—into the girth of his leathery neck before his next appointment with McKee’s parents. I began with a polite knock on his door that quickly gained his attention.

“Yes?” the doctor said with one arched brow looking beyond the door of his prestigious office.

I creaked the door open with a light push. “Dr. Olin, I presume?” I said.

He rested his pen down on the desk and looked up at me in a curious manner. When our faces met, I could see that he didn’t recognize me. This was indicated by his blank and disinterested stare in my direction. I had passed the first test. He made no connections between the man standing before him and the belligerent patient he had spoken to the previous morning.

“I’ve heard many great things about you. Allow me to introduce myself,” I said walking into his office, slowly shutting the door behind me. “My name is Dr. Manuel Delgado. I hail from the St. Joseph’s Hospital and Medical Facility in Phoenix, and would just like to make your acquaintance.” I moved towards his desk and outstretched my arm offering a friendly handshake. He stood up, quite befuddled, and reciprocated the greeting with a firm grip of my hand.

“It’s a pleasure. And what do we owe the honor of your unexpected arrival?” he asked.

It appeared that he was a tad busy and in no mood to entertain visiting physicians. After exchanging common pleasantries I proceeded further with my elaborate story. “I’m actually conducting a professional tour, of sorts, of several different maternity wards in the state of Arizona, for you see, this hospital ranks as one of the best in the region.”

He fell back into his leather swivel chair and suddenly seemed to warm to my company. “Please, have a seat,” he said, holding a hand out in the direction of one of the two chairs seated from across his desk.

“Certainly,” I replied. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything, I really just wanted to have a brief chat.”

Dr. Olin leaned forward and waved me off, as if my unannounced visit were no burden. “No problem at all. I just wish I had known in advance that you would be visiting us.”

“For that, I apologize. I’ve been moving around so much on account of my research that such common courtesies become a regrettable oversight. I promise, however, to not take too much of your time.”

“It’s no problem at all,” Dr. Olin said, waving me off again. “I understand the lapses that can occur with frequent travel. I spent five years at St. Joseph’s in the early sixties as part of my residency. I have fond memories of the place.”

“Personally, I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else,” I said. “And thank you for allowing me a couple of minutes of your time.”

“How long have you been practicing medicine there?” he asked me point blank.

“I originally hail from the New Hampshire Hospital in Concord.” I replied. I simply plucked the name out of thin air because that was the hospital I was born at. “And I’ve been at St. Joseph’s for—let’s see now—ten years or so. Hell of a place.”

“Is Dr. Edmonston still there?”

“Dr. Edmonston? No, I, uh, I don’t think so. Not sure I ran into him.”

“Really? Well, *she* became the Chief MD just as I was leaving. Had quite the aspirations. I’d be quite surprised to hear of her leaving St. Joseph’s anytime soon.”

“Of course. She may have moved on shortly after you did.”

“I don’t think so. I ran into her at a convention only six months ago and she was still working there. Moved up to VP in no time.”

“Ah, yes, Dr. Edmonston. I remember her now,” I laughed. “I rarely associate with the bigwigs at the top. It’s funny to admit, but when I first met her, I thought her to be a man on account of her short hair. That’s, of course, why I initially said ‘him’ instead of ‘her,’ you see.” I felt the very hole I had dug growing deeper and resorted to a friendly smile to, at best, move on

from the confusing topic at hand. Dr. Olin, however, remained unwavering in his pursuit of my inconsistencies.

“Really?” he said. “Short hair? I’ve never known her to have short hair. I don’t know how you could possibly ever have mistook *that* woman for being a man,” he said.

“Well, I—”

“Don’t worry about it. I know she can be a real ballbuster at times. But that’s what it takes to move up in the medical field these days.”

I must have mistaken the context of the word “ballbuster” as my response rightly indicated. “Yeah, I think she slept with everyone on staff to my knowledge, and I’m not just talking about *playing doctor*, if you know what *I* mean.” I followed the comment with my own patented juvenile nudge in Dr. Olin’s direction.

He stared at me stone-faced. “I *don’t* know what you mean. The woman was a fine colleague of mine for several years. Her integrity was unmatched in the field.”

“Agreed!” I said with a laugh. “Just a little bit of medical humor, that’s all.”

“Very well,” Dr. Olin responded. “Sometimes we need to joke a little nowadays, there’s no overlooking that.” A slight pause came over our conversation and I wasn’t sure where to take things from there. We seemed both satisfied with ourselves and with each other. Dr. Olin took the lead, pushing his paperwork away then offering me his undivided attention.

“So what can I help you with, Dr. Delgado?” he asked.

I took a quick look behind me then pushed my chair slightly closer to his desk. “It’s a bit of an odd request, but I was wondering if I could speak to some of your maternity ward patients. You know, those with pregnancies at the very least in the third trimester. Someone who is, let’s say, three to four months from their due date here for an appointment or check-up.”

Dr. Olin looked at me, unresponsive, with his hand folded on the desk as if waiting for an explanation. It seemed as if he suspected me of engaging in some type of bureaucratic inspection of his facilities. “I can assure you that I’m not with the board of health or anything of the sort. This is purely a professional visit, doctor-to-doctor.”

Dr. Olin didn’t say a word. His expression remained guarded and unreadable. He stared back in anticipation of a sensible explanation to my ramblings. I grew nervous at his lack of response and continued on, determined to make my case. “It’s purely a matter of trying to gage different methods in the field of maternal research. I’d like to speak to a couple of these patients of yours and perhaps ascertain the level of care involved in their experience with this particular hospital. I’m not looking for just any, uh, patient off the street. I’m conducting specific research on couples. By that I mean married couples who are anticipating their second child. I think this is a key point in discovering the growth and progress inherent in the successful planning stages so that we can improve our own facilities to provide these hopeful young couples the best quality service possible.”

Dr. Olin took his glasses off and placed them quietly on the desk then rested his chin in the cusp of his free hand. It seemed as he was studying me more intently without the aid of glasses, which I found odd. I could only presume that the man was nearsighted.

“So if you have anyone who fits the bill I’d love to speak with them for a few minutes as part of my research. Young couple in their early twenties. Caucasian, preferably. If they had the same hair color, brown, for instance, that would be even better. Maybe the husband has one of those run-of-the-mill names like, “Bill,” or something. Like the kind of guy you see at a backyard barbecue and say, ‘Hey, Bill, pass me one of those dogs!’ And his wife, on the other

hand, who just had a child, let's say, two years ago, maybe a daughter, has no time to join in their festivities because, before she knew it, it was time for another round of child bearing.”

Dr. Olin put his hands up, clearly stunned. “I honestly have no idea where you're going with this,” he said.

“It's a euphemism for the modern condition. I'm trying to empathize with the concept of maternity,” I responded.

“I must say,” Dr. Olin said as his eyes narrowed, “you look strangely familiar to me. Did we not meet just a short time ago? I never forget a face.”

I didn't care for the way he was looking at me with those dark, serious eyes. He was looking for a recognizable trait beyond my picturesque authority made possible by a pair of large framed glasses and a dangling stethoscope. I felt a strange sensation of heat alerting me to a peculiar growing nervousness from within. My sudden and relentless perspiration was fortunately concealed under my doctor's coat. If he discovered who, in fact, I was, there would be little time to use the situation to my benefit. I decided to offer a healthy balance of deflection as a result.

“This is a really nice office,” I said, looking around. “Reminds me a bit of my lair at St. Joseph's, though I have to wonder where a doctor as busy as yourself gets time to read all of these books.” I attempted to move my face from his deep stare, hoping to confuse, and yes, even entice him at the same time. He was hanging on my every word, or just looking for the opportune moment to identify me as the fraudulent miscreant I was. “I can't say we've met before, Dr. Olin. If so, I'm sorry to say that I have no recollection of moment. A man of such prestige and reputation as yourself is not so easily forgotten. That, I can assure you.”

Dr. Olin shook his head from side-to-side, not convinced. “No, that wasn’t it. This was recent. You seem *very* familiar. Maybe you can remove those glasses for me.”

“Damn,” I thought. “The stubborn-son-of-a-bitch won’t stop.” I declined his suggestion attesting to my supposed near blindness without my glasses. “Can’t see without them,” I said. I then attempted again to get us back on track. “So how about that couple?” I asked. “Not too specific is it? I’m looking for your average American couple who are working to maintain the nuclear family tradition. What do you think, Doc?” I suddenly clamped up, realizing the foolishness of referring to the confused man before me as “Doc” as I had done repeatedly from my hospital bed only a day ago. As a result, he took a direct and curious interest in me. I could control the charade I had put forth no longer.

“A couple you say?” Dr. Olin said, placing his glasses back on. He rose from his desk with new vigor and beckoned me towards the door. “I have a young married couple coming in at 2:00 that fits your strangely specific descriptions. I’m sure we could arrange something.”

I was suspicious, but quietly elated. “You do?” I asked rising from my seat. “What are their names, if you don’t mind me asking?” I walked passed him and peaked out the door. Far down the hall a young pregnant woman slowly walked towards the waiting room in the arms of a skinny short man beside her. My heart stopped. I don’t think a nerve in my body was functioning. It was them. It had to be them. They had a striking resemblance to McKee’s parents, Bill and Cindy. The man was even wearing a red USMC T-shirt, and I knew McKee’s father to be in the Marines. Everything was happening so fast, I wasn’t sure what to do. I ventured back into Dr. Olin’s office and observed him standing by his desk holding a phone receiver in his hand. He had yet to notice that I was watching him. The light from between the blinds shined onto his face as he spoke with quiet urgency into the phone.

“I need security here, now. I don’t care who you have to send, but get them to the second floor immediately.”

The deceptive bastard. From inside, I placed my hands against the door and gently pushed it shut. He set the phone down and took notice. “What are you doing, Dr. Olin?” I asked.

“Who are you really?” he asked, scowling. He stood frozen, with flushes of incredulity swimming though him like a school of fish in a frenzied swarm.

“I really wouldn’t expect you to understand,” I said, pulling one of the syringes from my coat pocket and revealing it. “Now we can do this the hard way or we can do it the easy way.”

“You’re the patient from yesterday,” he said. “The car accident victim. What are you doing dressed as a doctor? In fact, why are you pretending to be a doctor? You shouldn’t have left your room. I told you before that you had multiple concussions among various other injuries.”

He stood defiantly against his desk studying my every move. I inched closer to him slowly with syringe in hand as my black loafers swished across his plush green carpet. I knew time was limited as security personnel were on their way to apprehend me, but in our silence I couldn’t help revealing details of my elaborate plan before the increasingly catatonic doctor before me. “Let’s make a deal, give me five minutes with McKee’s parents and you’ll never see me again. How’s that for a bargaining tool?”

He stared at me, perplexed, though I was certain that the name rang a bell.

“Are you referring to Mr. & Mrs. McKee? They’re my two o’clock. What on earth do you have to discuss with them?”

I stopped at his desk inches from him. “You see, doctor, I have important business with the McKee’s. I have to see to it that their baby never sees the light of day.”

“You’re completely out of your mind,” Dr. Olin said, taking a careful step backwards towards his towering bookcase.

“Maybe so, but I’ve traveled too far to let you or anyone else stand in my way at this point,” I responded.

Suddenly, and most confusing to me, Dr. Olin took an immediate fighter’s stance, a Bruce Lee pose. He spread his legs and held his arms in the air with his hands curled towards him. “I’m warning you not to take another step further,” he said.

“Mere theatrics,” I thought while casually taking one forewarned step towards him. In an instant I was met with several roundhouse kicks to my side which caused an intense rush of pain and shock to my sensibilities. As I hunched forward, gripping my knees, my gasps for air were returned with a striking blow to the face. My glasses flew across the room. My trusty stethoscope fell to the ground, and I stumbled backwards in a dazed spasm only to fall into the choke hold of a police officer who clenched my neck like a walnut in a pair of vice grips.

“You bastard!” I shouted. “You broke my nose!”

Dr. Olin walked towards me carefully while maintaining his unique fighter’s stance.

“It’s not broken,” he said, breathing heavily. “I just gave you a quick jolt to the face.” He looked to the police officer who still had me locked in the throes of his bulging arm. “He’s a patient. Somehow he escaped his room and tried to attack me. I want him taken back and put under supervision.”

“Escaped?” I asked between short, chocking breaths. “What am I, a PRISONER?”

The officer began to drag me away as I fought against his brute force with every ounce of rage I had left in me.

“See to it that Officer Lasagna is contacted as well. He had a special interest in this one,” Dr. Olin said.

The officer continued to pull me away, then muttered a few asides that piqued my interest.

“I’m guessing this dolt wasn’t aware that you’re a two-time national kick boxing champion,” he said, laughing.

“I’m sure it was the last thing on his mind,” Dr. Olin said, straightening his coat. “Make sure he gets back to his room with no fuss. I have my two o’clock waiting outside.”

“Kick boxer?” I asked in an exacerbated tone. “What the hell is he talking about?”

“Enough out of you, let’s go,” the officer replied, jerking me towards the door.

I managed to catch a real glimpse of Dr. Olin’s bookshelf and saw that a shelf full of books I had presumed to be medical journals were actually books on the ancient art of kick boxing. His wall to my right, littered with what I thought were medical certifications and licenses, was actually dominated by a series of kick boxing awards, including regional, state, and national championships. Before I could examine the certificates any further, the burly officer yanked me out of the room and pulled me down the hall. I tried to fight him off, even managing to squirm out of his chokehold, but was reduced to a common criminal as he held my arms behind my back in a humiliating fashion.

“I’ll get you, Olin,” I said. “If it’s the last thing I do!”

In the midst of my taunts I noticed the young couple from before, who I had presumed to be the McKees, walk nervously past me, looking at the ground. In an amazing feat of strength I released myself from the Officer’s grasp and flew to the ground on my knees, directly in front of the mother. She gasped and took a step back as her husband held her protectively. The officer

fumbled against the wall, shocked to see that I had escaped him. His heels clicked along the tile floor in haste as he charged at me like a Spanish bull. I pulled on the mother's flower-patterned dress and looked deep into her hazel eyes.

“Don't have that child!” I pleaded, tears welling. “You'll come to regret it in the end, trust me. Please—please listen to me. You're making a big mistake. You have to listen to me!”

And before I knew it, I felt the weight of a two hundred and fifty pound bull upon me, crushing my frail body into the uncompromising hospital wall.

Hours later, I woke finding my right arm handcuffed to the railing of a hospital bed in a room that was no longer familiar to me. They had switched my room without as much as a notice. “What is this bullshit?” I asked in a haggard voice, tugging at the bed railing. “Where's Nurse Gannon?”

“I don't think you'll be seeing much of her,” an eerily recognizable voice responded.

It was hard to see, or move for that matter. I felt drunk, intoxicated in a half-way state of paralysis. My face felt worse than before, as I'm sure it had been ravaged and bruised by the merciless and unexpected beating I received at the hands of Dr. Olin's unmatched kickboxing skills. They had confiscated my doctor's costume and placed me back in another demeaning hospital robe. This time, however, there was no IV, heart monitor cables, or morphine tubes. It was just me in a bed handcuffed to the railing. I pulled at the cuffs instinctively, trying to get them loose, or at least to determine if what I was seeing was real.

The familiar voice drew closer in the dimly lit hospital room. “Whoa, easy there, fella,” he said.

I looked up and saw the figure shift into focus once he entered the light. “Lasagna,” I said, lowering my hand-cuffed arm in defeat.

“Nice to see you again, Mr. Lewington,” he said, smiling. “We must have missed you the other morning. Strangest thing. You know, I visited your hospital room to continue my report, and oddly enough, you weren’t there. Yes, but I’ll tell you what I did see. I saw an unoccupied bed. I saw an IV bag emptied onto the floor. I saw several wires dangling about, and no one, not a soul, had any idea of your whereabouts.”

“Does this little story of yours have a point?” I asked. “I’m tired and would like to get some sleep.”

Offended, he stepped forward holding back his anger with a sneering grin. “It seems as though we’ve been down this road before. I’m sure there’s nothing you’d like more than to get some rest once again. We’ve determined, however, that you’re quite the little somnambulist, hence the handcuffs. For you see, we can’t very well have you sleepwalking out the window again. Nobody here wants that. You could get hurt out there in such a vulnerable state.” He began to grow teary-eyed as he cleared his throat. “Nothing would break the hearts of the entire Yuma Police Department more than to hear that you suffered any further misfortunes.” Officer Lasagna paused and wiped the feigned tears his eyes. I could see that we were already deep into the sarcasm at this point.

I couldn’t help but take the bait and counteract his words. “I’m very touched by the tremendous outpouring of support from all of your brethren on the force. It really does mean a lot to me. My heart, it feels twice—no—three times its normal size. When I get out of here the first thing I’m going to do is buy the largest and most expensive fruit basket I can find and throw it into the nearest dumpster adjacent to the police station, right where it belongs.”

Lasagna stared at me emotionless, taken aback from my comments. I was surprised to have broken him so easily. The sarcastic mastermind had no retort so I continued. “And after you

toil in the dumpster like some starved raccoon, feel free to keep whatever you can find that's still fresh. I hear mangos last a while, and I just know how much you *love* mangos. You know what they say, a mango a day keeps the heterosexuality away."

"That's some good material," Lasagna said with a laugh. "I think it would have been funnier had you said it wearing blackface. You know any good Asian jokes?"

"Yeah, I do as I matter of fact," I said.

"Oh yeah?" he said.

"Yeah," I said.

"Well go ahead and tell me one before you have me in stiches with jokes about the handicap," he said.

"Once upon a time, an Asian man went into a bar and ordered a drink. When the bartender asked him his name, the Asian man said that it was unpronounceable in the English tongue, so the bartender just nodded along and went about his business. An hour later a tall American man with sandy blonde hair walked into the bar and ordered a drink. The bartender asked him his name and the man said that it was too stupid to pronounce in the English tongue. The bartender said, 'try me.' The man said. 'Well, if you must know, my name is Officer Lasagna.' The bartender winced and went about his business. The Asian man looked at Officer Lasagna in awe, and when pressed to why he was staring, the Asian man replied, 'My surname may be hard to pronounce, but at least I have my dignity.'"

"That's the joke?" Lasagna said, unamused.

"No the real joke is, how many Lasagnas does it take to screw in a light bulb?"

"The same amount it takes to screw your mother?" he snapped back.

I could see that we were getting a bit off track here, so I steered the conversation back to the nature at hand. “Just get to the point, Lasagna. What the hell do you want from me?”

He began to pace around my hospital bed like a detective. Perhaps he thought he was a detective. Perhaps he always wanted to be a detective, but lacked the skill to pursue his dreams. Or maybe he was content to live his life as a police officer who pointlessly hounded men from the future.

“Being a beat cop for ten years has its advantages. Sometimes I notice things unseen by the casual eye. In your case, I didn’t have to utilize a single ounce of perceptibility gained through my experience to figure out your grand escape from the hospital room earlier. In fact, a blind elderly woman wandering into the room high on LSD could have followed the streak left on the floor from your bed directly out the open window. The very man in the coma from your old room could have easily traced your path from the bushes, across the dirt, and all the way to the parking lot. What I’m trying to say, Mr. Lewington is that you might as well have left us a road map.”

“So?” I stammered. “So what. Have I committed any crimes here?”

“Multiple,” Lasagna answered.

How much did he know? I wondered.

He stopped at the foot of my bed, placed his hands on the railing and leaned down in confidence. “Where’s the car, Lewis?” he asked.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said.

“You better start talking and you better start fast. Why were you impersonating a doctor, and why did you try to attack Dr. Olin?”

I gave no response. The room went silent save for the air conditioner reverberating through overhead aluminum vents. I cleared my throat after rubbing my swollen face. At times, it even hurt to breath. Had I found Officer Lasagna more amusing in his desperation, my ribs would have most certainly been in trouble.

“It’s like you said, Officer, I must have been sleepwalking. It’s all a blur. Can’t remember a thing.”

Lasagna laughed. Either he was done with me, or we were back to the drawing board. Unfortunately, neither one of us could draw very well. “We’re going to get to the bottom of this whether you want to or not. My report has garnered the interest of two of the department’s finest detectives. They’ll be here shortly to do a quick follow-up, but don’t worry about them, they’ve got all day—all night if possible. I’m going to talk with Dr. Olin now about transporting you to the station, and also find out if he wants to press any charges. In the meantime, get some rest because it’s going to be a very, *very* long day for you.”

I tugged again on the handcuffs, feeling like a trapped animal. My sudden panic amused Lasagna beyond his wildest dreams, for he tilted his head back and laughed manically, followed by a heavy sigh. “You might want to save some of that energy for later,” he said. “We want you alert and rested at the station.”

“What is this about, Lasagna, money? You want money? Yeah, a crooked cop like you is always ready to have their palms greased. You want to know who I am? It’s there on my driver’s license, clear as day. Take these cuffs off me and let me go before I get my lawyer down here in two fucking shakes of a lamb’s tail.”

“Lawyer?” Lasagna asked, intrigued. “What’s your lawyer’s name?”

“Doug Newman, attorney at large,” I responded. It was another name provided out of thin air.

“Hmmm, never heard of him,” Lasagna said.

I pulled again at the handcuffs in anger. “I have rights, dammit! Either arrest me or get the hell out this room!”

He left without saying a word, leaving me to the mercy of the impenetrable handcuffs that conjoined me to the bed railing. Escape was imminent, though I wondered the length of time I had before Lasagna came back ready to transport me to the police station.

“If I were you,” I said to myself, “I’d pull at those cuffs until they broke.”

“Well, you are me, so fucking do it,” I fired back.

I called my own bluff and jerked the cuffs violently in all directions. The bed railing rattled and shook. The short chain linking the cuffs swung with each frenzied pause and I soon realized that in the match between man and modern day restraint devices, escape was an impossibility. Unless, of course, I sawed my right hand off. The thought of Lasagna reentering the room with his precious detective squad only to find a single hand dangling at the end of a pair of handcuffs amused me. “That would show him,” I said. I looked around the room for a hacksaw or something that would do the trick, but nothing of the sort seemed to be in reach. I would have to improvise. Footsteps from outside the room and down the hall grew near. I pulled the covers over myself, hoping the footsteps would pass, and they did. It was a close call. The clock was ticking, or at least I thought it was. I looked in the corner of the room to observe a standard hanging wall clock and saw that its hands weren’t moving. They must have forgotten to replace the batteries. “Does anything work in this dump?” I thought.

I began to bite at the cuffs when it dawned on me that my teeth could possibly be used as incisors between my wrist and arm. The average force of the human bite can be quite remarkable. If I'm not mistaken it's something like two hundred pounds of pressure, which I'm sure would separate bone from flesh without too much hassle.

"You gonna do something, or are you just gonna lie around here all day staring at your feet?" I asked myself.

"What's wrong with my feet?" I asked.

"Nothing, but if you don't get to chomping we're both gonna be in the slammer before the day's end."

"All right, you pushy bastard, I'm on it."

I closed my eyes, and proceeded to bite down on my wrist directly below the hinge of the cuffs. I hesitated at my own rubbery skin and wondered if I truly possessed the fortitude to finish the job. Something was preventing me from utilizing the full force of my jaw pressure, again, something which felt like another natural defense mechanism.

"It's okay," I told my body. "I want to do this. Call down your defenses. The hand has got to go."

I began feverishly gnawing when a nurse—*the* nurse—walked into the room carrying a tray of medications in tiny Dixie cups. I looked up and instantly recognized her as the lovely Nurse Gannon. She had returned, despite Lasagna's promise

"Mr. Lewington?" she said, stopping at the foot of my bed

I released my wrist and quickly wiped it free of slobber. I hadn't made much headway. "Nurse Gannon, I—I, it's a pleasure to see you again. How did you find me?"

She examined me suspiciously. Her blue eyes widened between plains of curiosity and revulsion. In the end, I believed I saw compassion in her face. She wheeled a nearby table stand closer and placed the tray on its surface. “Dr. Olin wanted me to check on your status. He said you could probably use some Ibuprofen.”

“Dr. Olin?” I said, disgusted. “What the hell does that hack care?”

“He cares for all of his patients. Trust me, I’ve worked with him for five years now.”

“You must be very proud,” I said, turning my head away from her. The sky outside the window was the lightest shade of blue. Below, the barren ground of dirt and weeds radiated with an orange glow. It looked peaceful, out there in the real world. It was where my freedom lay. From my keen observation I estimated it to be late afternoon. Crippling anxiety struck me as I pondered where I was, and in what circumstances, while the eventuality of my goal was so remote and distant, it had become no more realistic to obtain than the prospect of gnawing one’s own hand off.

“Are you okay?” Nurse Gannon asked, noticing my pale and despondent state.

“What time is it?” I asked.

She glanced at her thin-strapped wrist watch over her pale, freckly arm. “It’s 3:45,” she said while taking a small cup of pills from her tray and handing it to me. “Now please, take two of these and you’ll feel much better.”

I took the cup with my free hand and examined the two white tablets inside. They could have been sedatives for all I knew. Dr. Olin, in concert with Officer Lasagna, had probably planned to drug me as to eliminate any chance of resistance when it came time to be transported to the police station. Once there, I would receive no lawyer, no phone call, not even a courtesy hug or coffee. I might as well been under the iron fist of the Soviet Union. Nurse Gannon

crossed her arms like a mother figure and waited for me to take the pills. I held the cup in trembling hand not knowing if, after taking them, I'd ever see the light of day again.

"I'm, uh, allergic," I said.

"To Ibuprofen?" she asked.

"Yes. Just one pill could kill me," I answered.

"But you put 'no allergies' on your medical questionnaire," she said.

"I meant to put 'all allergies,'" I said.

"So you're allergic to everything?"

"Yes."

"Even morphine?"

"Everything except for morphine. That's also what I meant to write."

She moved her soft-shoed feet closer to the bed and took the cup from my hand. Her inquisitive expression showed that she wasn't buying it. Her thin eyebrows arched downward as her lips morphed into a sullen frown.

"Hold out your hand," she said.

"But—"

"Just do it."

I complied and opened my palm as she dumped the two white tablets in my hand.

"If you're not going to show any concern for your own wellbeing at least allow me to."

I had no real argument, so I tilted my head back and tossed the pills down the hatch.

"Here," she said, holding a small cup of water.

I took the cup and washed down the pills. Her tricks—if they were indeed tricks—had worked on me. I would be as good as dead by the end of the day. All my life's work—well, six

month's work—had vanquished under the heavy lids of my eyes brought upon by Dr. Olin's sedatives. After a couple of minutes, however, I noticed that I wasn't really that tired after all, plus my headache went away. Nurse Gannon had administered some type of wonder drug: a non-drowsy sedative that cured headaches. She took notice of my wide-ranging display of nervous ticks and surprisingly placed a hand on my shoulder.

“Just relax, Mr. Lewington, it's only Ibuprofen.”

I looked into her eyes for the truth, and wasn't met with the cold, indifferent stare of a calculating mastermind, but that of a concerned woman. At that moment, I felt as if I could have told her everything. My emotions got the best of me, and I noticed an overwhelming weakness take hold; like that of sadness. I did my best to fight it, but couldn't hold back the welling of tears in my strained pupils. It was at that moment I began to pathetically sob.

“My entire mission. It—it's going down the tubes and there's nothing I can do about it. Everything I do, everything I've ever done has ended in failure. And I've blamed everyone but myself for so long that I don't know how to reverse it. I wish I could, but it's something I have to do. If I don't do it, than my life has no purpose. *I have no purpose...*”

She placed her hand my shoulder as I raised my free hand and held her arm. Rather than recoil away in horror, she remained at my side, if only to provide a few fleeting moments of comfort.

“It's going to be okay, Lewis. Don't worry, everything is going to be okay.”

I had nothing more to say, no more emotions to reveal as she gently moved away from me and adjusted her white nurse's cap. I wiped the tears from my eyes quickly, and tried to regain my composure. She stood over my bed, quiet, but not reserved.

“You are a strange man, Mr. Lewington,” she said. “But I *do* hope everything works out for you in the end. I think you’re just struggling with a lot of issues right now. Maybe that’s why you tried to escape the hospital yesterday. But now you’re back, and I’ll do my best to help you while you’re still here.”

Suddenly, an idea entered my head like a flash of lightning striking a twenty-thousand watt transformer. “Nurse Gannon, if you could...” I paused.

“What is it?” she asked in a genuinely helpful tone.

“You’ve been so nice to me, and I really appreciate it. You seem like the only person in this town I can trust.”

From her blank expression, I could tell she was waiting for me to get to the point. I tugged at the handcuffs, and looked up at her with a helpless frown. “I need to use the restroom, but, as you can see, they handcuffed me to the bed simply because I suffer from bouts of sleepwalking. That is what caused me to leave the hospital last night. I can’t help it!”

She was a hard woman to lie to, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t going to try.

“Dr. Olin said the cuffs were for your own good,” she said.

“What else did he tell you?” I asked, suspiciously.

“Nothing” she answered. “He said that you needed help. That you were a very confused individual.”

“Please,” I said with my left arm outstretched, “help me get these cuffs off so I can go to the restroom and clean myself up. I feel like a human train wreck right now.”

Nurse Gannon’s eyes shifted downward to the bedpan resting near my feet.

“You have got to be kidding me,” I said. “You really expect me to use that thing?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Lewington, I don’t have the keys to those handcuffs, nor the authority to remove them.”

“Nurse Gannon, please! This entire charade is demeaning. All I ask is that I be allowed to use the restroom like a normal human being. There has to be some way that you can remove these cuffs.”

She thought to herself for a brief moment while tapping her red polished fingernails on the table stand next to her. She seemed to be considering my plea. I saw no wedding ring on either finger and wondered if she had a significant other. A man, probably a doctor. Someone who made her happy and content with the world. Or maybe she was like me, where swimming through the ocean of loneliness was as normal and routine as brushing your teeth. Her face shifted from sententious thought to sudden excitement with a satisfied closed-lipped smile across her cheeks.

“I can detach the railing from the bed for a moment. Yes, if you slide your cuffs to the end of the pole, I can pull up the railing and you can slip right through.”

It was the perfect idea. I was amazed at her practical problem solving abilities, something so inherently attractive in a woman.

“You really think that will work?” I asked, while knowing that it would. I didn’t want to seem too eager.

“Let’s give it a shot,” she said, leaning forward. She halted abruptly, displaying an intuitive apprehension.

“What is it?” I asked. The anticipation was killing me.

She rested her hands on the smooth railing and studied me, this man lying handcuffed to a hospital bed as helpless as a child in a foster home with no one to guide him through life.

“If I do this, you have to promise me that you’re only going to use the washroom, then you’ll come back to your bed just like I found you.”

“Come on, Nurse—”

“Just do it!” she said forcefully. “Say, Eleanor, I promise to return directly to my bed after I’m done in the washroom.”

“Your name is Eleanor?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said with slight embarrassment.

“Wow, I never met a single Eleanor in my entire life. I didn’t know people still used that name anymore.” Suddenly, I could sense her displeasure through impatient eyes that told me everything. “It’s a beautiful name, don’t get me wrong,” I continued.

She raised her milky white hand in the air as if swearing me in. “Just promise me.”

I stopped yammering and did as told. “Eleanor,” I said, raising up my cuffed right hand as high as it would go. “I promise to return directly to my bed after I’m done in the bath—er, washroom.”

“That’s better,” she said.

We gave each other an understanding nod as she proceeded to push inward the circular bumps that protruded out of tiny notches, connecting the railing to its base. With a few snaps, the railing came loose and she lifted it up just enough for me to pull the handcuffs free. She lowered the long railing to the ground and stood over me as I dangled the cuffs in the air with a sense of euphoria, complimenting my newfound freedom.

“Thank you, Eleanor,” I said, and shifted to the side of the bed. My feet hung inches above the cool tile of the white floor.

She pointed to the vacant restroom in the corner of the room. “Hurry up and get in there. I’ll give you a couple of minutes, then you have to get back in bed before someone sees you. I could get into a lot of trouble for this.” Though she did it anyway, which, to me, was a testament of our strange bond, whatever, indeed, it was.

“Don’t worry, I’ll only be a couple of minutes,” I said. My feet touched the ground causing immediate alarm. “Damn that’s cold!” I shouted.

She raised a finger to her lips and *shushed* me. “Be quiet!” she said in a loud whisper.

“Sorry,” I replied, hobbling with each step. It had been some hours since I had last walked, and I was by no means a track star at the moment. I walked to the small restroom and flicked on the light. Nurse Gannon shifted the other Dixie cups on her tray as her left foot nervously tapped the ground. The poor woman was in a fit of worry. It was sad to say, but at that moment, I knew the sooner I was out of her life the better. I took a step inside the constricting walls of the bathroom—no bigger than that on an airplane—and looked at her through the crack in the door. “Thank you,” I said.

“Just hurry up,” she replied.

I shut the door and turned directly to the mirror. The bright light emitting from the bulbs above were a little too much, as I have never really liked seeing myself in *that* much light. My face was marked and bruised. My hair, graying from its brown roots, was a tussled mess. I guess, like any man nearing his forties, I was lucky to even have hair. My gown hung over my body like an enlarged potato sack. The hospital staff clearly hadn’t been concerned about finding me the proper fit. I turned on the sink and threw some water onto my face. From there, I began plotting. There were no points of exit in the bathroom. There was only a sink and toilet, nothing else. Outside my momentary refuge of privacy stood Nurse Gannon, eagerly awaiting my return.

I turned to the thick, porcelain toilet behind me. Miraculously a set of clothes sat folded neatly on the toilet seat as if they had been placed there for me to find. A black leather wallet rested atop the clothes like a cherry on a mound of rocky road ice cream.

I opened the wallet and discovered that it was mine as were the black slacks, white dress shirt, and loafers underneath. Some gracious orderly must have placed my personal belongings in the restroom for me after they stripped me bare and placed me in the oversized hospital gown. I'd thought for sure that Lasagna had confiscated my belongings, but I saw that it wasn't so. I quickly tossed the gown off my battered, frail body and got into my fake doctor's clothes in the blink of an eye. Actually about twenty blinks of an eye, but who was counting? The doctor's coat, however, was nowhere to be found

I tucked my shirt in and straightened my collar. After tossing some water in my hair, I matted it back the best I could, and slipped on my loafers while sitting on the cover of the toilet seat. It, like the tile floor, was icy cold. Strange to think that a searing desert awaited me outside. I took one final look in the mirror while slipping my wallet into my right pocket. My few minutes were up. Nurse Gannon called to me in case I had forgotten. What I was about to do, I wasn't proud of, but, like many of the steps in my mission, it had to be done.

"About time," she said, as I turned off the light and opened the door. Once she saw me in black slacks and a long-sleeved dress shirt, her face took a contorted turn for the worst. At first she seemed surprised; looking at me as if I were a different person. But she knew, as did I, that there was no way I was getting back in that hospital bed.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm leaving," I said. "Don't worry about a thing. Just leave the railing on the ground, and they'll never know you had anything to do with my escape."

She frowned. Her once vibrant eyes glazed over with a distinct notion of betrayal.

“You lied to me,” she said.

I raised my arms defensively and inched towards the door. “I have to leave, and there’s nothing I can say that would make you understand.”

“I could lose my job for this. I trusted you.” Her voice became coarse. “I can’t believe I trusted you.”

“It’s not like that, Eleanor, you’ve helped me more than you know. I’ll always be indebted to you.”

“Don’t call me Eleanor,” she said.

I didn’t like to see her upset, but with the time left, there was not much more to say. She was too stunned to take quick action or report me. Instead she stood motionless against her tray of pills, gripping its surface. I had hoped, if anything, that in those last moments she didn’t fear me. I was almost out the door when I turned around to tell her how I felt.

“Just so you know, I’ve liked you since the day I met you.”

“We met two days ago,” she said.

“Exactly,” I replied.

I hurried out the door and down the hall leaving the beautiful Nurse Gannon perplexed as trauma victim after an inciting incident. Though she would soon get over it, I had used her, and she had allowed herself to be used. In a perfect world I would have told her the truth about everything, but I knew she wouldn’t have believed a word in the same sense that I wouldn’t expect anyone to believe a single word written in this journal. But it’s all true. Unfortunately, in the same way Nurse Gannon taught me to trust some people again during our brief encounter, I had most likely caused her to be more distrusting of other patients from that point on. I had to

remind myself that our paths were never meant to cross, lest I run back into the hospital room and beg for her forgiveness. When I again thought of pursuing a relationship with her, I wasn't met with the usual head pounding defense mechanism as before. Instead, I just felt numb.

The hospital hallways were busy and cluttered: perfect for of a quick escape. I did my best to navigate the halls while looking down at the ground, and not run too fast, which would draw unneeded attention. I felt a slight panic when searching my pockets for keys to the Time Dancer, but then remembered that I had placed the key under the rear tire, just in case I ran into any trouble with Dr. Olin or law enforcement. Amazing foresight on my part; however, I had a premonition that at any minute Officer Lasagna would walk by me, flanked by his goons. Just enough time had passed for him to rally the troops, and I was walking on the thinnest sheet of ice that existed in all of Arizona.

A few unknowing turns around the hospital and I realized that even though I was on the first floor, I had been walking in circles. I would eventually have to look up from the ground of smooth green and white patterned squares, and look for the nearest exit. Orderlies, nurses, patients, and doctors passed by me as if I were invisible. Nothing made me feel more at ease. Fifty feet ahead I saw two double doors leading to the outside world, and I was able to slip out and abscond to the parking lot without alerting a soul.

Chapter Eight: Escape

The Time Dancer was right where I had left it: in the far corner of the parking lot, next to a large saguaro cactus. Past the town, in the distance, I could see the imperial dunes of the Arizona desert stretching as far as the eye could see. It must have been one-thousand degrees that day, for I was already drenched in sweat by the time I reached my untouched car from the future.

“Who in their right mind would live out here?” I asked while crawling across the simmering pavement on all fours. It was a question that had no answer. I mean, why were people living in Kazakhstan or Montana? Such inquiries simply boggled the mind.

“Hot, hot, hot,” I repeated with each scurried movement around my car. I knew the key to be somewhere—rear tire, I believed, but I was having trouble locating it. It was quite likely that the key could have very well melted into the pavement leaving behind no trace. I had failed to consider this possibility. I lay down on my stomach and pulled myself under the car to get a closer look. The Challenger’s hanging muffler promptly struck me in the head, providing a greeting. A redundant string of vulgarities flowed out of me like steam erupting from Old Faithful, the most reliable geyser in all of Yellowstone, and I found that even the shade under the car was hot. I flailed on the ground wildly in my limited space trying to maneuver around the car’s low-hanging pipes when I struck the back of my head on one of the rear axles. I reflexively moved my arm back to ease the throbbing pain when my shirt sleeve got caught between a drive shaft next to the rear left tire. I found myself stuck, unable to navigate underneath the car’s limited circumference.

“Dr. Olin! Nurse Gannon! Anyone!” I shouted. Sudden panic had clouded my judgment. “Officer Lasagna...” I said in a much quieter voice. I was at the mercy of those I had recently

attacked and/or fled, and the feeling couldn't have been more miserable. I kicked back my left leg when I heard the sound of a key flying across the pavement in front of the car. "Of course!" I said. "It must have been under the left *front* tire." The discovery of what I believed to be the key jolted me with a wave of solid confidence. Being pinned under a car wasn't going to stop me. It was going to take a lot more than that. I gently pried the sleeve of my shirt from the drive shaft near the rear left tire and carefully pushed myself from under the car. I emerged a much dirtier person than before. My tattered shirt was covered in black soot, and my pants were torn open at the knees. No matter, I would find a change of clothes as soon as I got away from the hospital for good. I knelt down and retrieved the glimmering piece of hope lying on the cracked pavement. It was my key all right, the only key of its kind that existed in 1979.

I entered the car wanting to kiss the dashboard, but instead looked around to see if anyone had noticed my cries for help only a few moments prior. The people bustling in the parking lot seemed not to care about my presence any more than that of the lone brown-speckled sparrow flying above. "Show me the way, little sparrow," I said. Sometimes I just talk to birds for no particular reason. I wasn't expecting it to show me anything of real significance, but hoped that maybe, just maybe, one day they would hear me. My next dilemma concerned the overall condition of the Time Dancer. I could either:

- a. Forego mechanical repairs and see what time period I could travel to next.
- b. Get some money somehow and get the repairs done in Yuma.
- c. Grab a burrito.

Moments after finding the nearest taco stand in town, I sat in my car contemplating the next *real* step in my journey. I had just spent the last of my money on a giant black bean

burrito—best I'd had in a long time—and pondered ways to make up for my failures thus far. There was no getting close to McKee's parents. Even if I followed them home from the hospital, my entire cover had been blown and there was little sense in pursuing the matter any further. My subterfuge had reached the end of its lifespan in 1979. Then it dawned on me. Yes, it was perfect. I had considered the idea before, and now it seemed all the more appropriate. I would go back to the time *before* McKee's parents were married. I would go back before they had even met. Even better, I could go back to the time when McKee's father was courting his mother and prevent them from ever getting together. Endless satisfaction awaited in offering McKee's mother my own courtship. I would have to turn up the charm, maybe clean up my face a little bit, but it was close within the realm of possibility.

I had no way of researching the exact month McKee's parents had met as Lasagna had confiscated my files, inducting a detrimental blow to the overall mission. Now I had to work memory, and my mind was in no condition to remember anything of real significance. Between everything that had gone on in the hospital, I just wasn't thinking straight. But I could remember bits and pieces and hoped to unearth those details from what I had previously memorized from the report provided by Hayden, my private investigator, at ridiculous expense.

Coincidentally, down the street from where I was parked, a sign flashed: *Cold Beer* in the window of a shoddy yellow one-story watering hole. It was to be my next destination and refuge, away from the utter emptiness of the surrounding landscape. I careened the Challenger out of the infinite mass of the Yuma Market Plaza parking lot and carefully guided the car down the road towards the inviting run-down bar on the east side of town. The Time Dancer's engine wasn't sounding too good; neither were her shocks, suspensions, brakes, muffler, exhaust, timing belt,

and steering column. I was essentially seated in the midst of a ticking time bomb, and I hadn't a clue as to how much farther she would go.

It dawned on me, as I sputtered into the dirt lot of the modest bar before me, that I hadn't a cent on me. The delicious burrito I had scarfed down had taken the last of my two dollars and thirty-five cents. I parked amid several motorcycles and hatchback Volkswagens, and turned the engine off. People were sometimes generous, I told myself, and perhaps I could ask one of the friendly patrons inside if they would consider giving a man from the future a beer. Being a drunk myself, I understood that drunks could be quite endearing when you got them at the right time. I stood in front of the door and examined the crooked sign above the door that read *Cactus Jack's*. The sun had just sunk below the horizon and a crescent red moon in the distance was coming into view. It was quite remarkable. At night, beyond the city lights, Yuma is a surprisingly dark place at night. The endless southern tundra leading into Mexico miles from where I stood didn't have a single street light as far as I could tell. Go figure. The muffled music from inside the bar was pounding through the jukebox. It sounded like *The Steve Miller Band*. I shuttered to think that I had traveled to a time where Steve Miller was even more popular. I took my twentieth deep breath of the day, and pushed the swinging door open, only to be met by the waft of cigarette smoke, the clanging of pool balls, and the jovial guffawing of rowdy night dwellers. It was most definitely not the place to grab a beer to get one's head together. I was walking into a late-seventies rouge biker convention.

My appearance—dusty dress shirt, and torn slacks—didn't stick out as much as I had worried. The leather-clad, burly, bearded biker men and long-hairs had convened in clusters all over the bar, drinking and conversing over the loud music, and they took little notice of my appearance. I battled my way through a thick haze of cigarette smoke and found an empty stool

at the bar, slightly illuminated by dim red bulbs from above. Endless rows of liquor bottles lined the counter behind the bar, and a long, foggy mirror reflected everything before it in various altered states of appearances, depending on one's own personal level of intoxication. I was shamefully stone-cold sober, and then approached by a tall bartender who looked like an asshole. He resembled an old west cowboy without the hat, and I found his no-nonsense manner instantly off-putting. He had a long, leathery face and gray buzz cut. He wore a bright blue long-sleeved shirt with rhinestones on the back, tucked into his faded blue jeans. I was waiting for him to ask me what I needed, but instead he just stared at me, expecting me to just come out and say it.

“So that's how they do things in Yuma,” I thought. “Not a simple hello, or anything? I'll have to give this place a low rating when I get home—” Suddenly I realized that there was no Internet in the time period I was in. I had to remember to keep my mouth shut about things from my time. The last thing I needed to do was to inadvertently give away the secrets of the future to people who wore leather pants.

“I'd like a beer please,” I said to the asshole bartender.

Naturally he just stared at me as assholes do. I wondered if he was the very Cactus Jack advertised in the sign outside. I felt I had made a mistake even walking into the place, as I just wanted a beer. One beer and I would be on my way.

“What kind?” he asked, distracted.

I had the sneaking premonition that he would be less than sympathetic about my financial quandary.

“You see, Cactus Jack—you don't mind if I call you Cactus Jack, do you?”

“I'm not Cactus Jack, buddy. The name's Carl.”

Oh well, it was worth a shot. “The problem is that I don’t have any money. But I’m good for it, trust me.” I glanced over at the dartboard that was currently in use by a few long-haired stoners and their scantily-clad girlfriends. “I’m really good at darts,” I said. “Regional junior state championships nineteen eighty—I mean nineteen seventy two.”

Carl scrutinized me with utter contempt. “Sorry, that’s not how we do things around here. Drinks don’t come based on prospective game winnings. Come see me when you have a couple of bucks.” And then he walked away without as much as a “get the fuck out of my bar.”

I looked around the bar in desperation. There had to be a solution. I came to the realization that I was in the vortex of some kind of hippie/biker hybrid bar, my own personal hell. Then Derrick reminded me of the notion of not judging a book by its cover. In this case, the cover of the book before me read *The Seven Circles of Hell in Yuma, Arizona*, but I had to make do with the situation I had willfully walked into.

I needed a beer; that much was clear. But how does one enjoy a frosty beer without the monetary transaction providing for such services? I was about to find out. I walked over from the bar to a casual game of darts in progress between two boys in bell bottoms and what I assumed to be their girlfriends in halter tops and Daisy Dukes. “What’s the game tonight, ladies and gents?” I said in my most hip late-1970s slang. It must not have resonated with the group much as they completely ignored me. I watched as some blond long-haired adolescent threw his dart into the 20 double ring, much to his dismay.

“Major fucking bummer, man,” he said while slinking away from the line.

“Allow me to make an offer that none of you can collectively resist,” I said taking a position in front of the group. They looked at me curiously, as if I had no place before them, but I persisted.

“If you want to aimlessly throw darts at a board all night, then suit yourselves,” I said. “But I propose we make things interesting. I say we lay some money on the table.”

“That’s all right, dude. We’re just having some fun,” the blond-haired ring-leader said.

I wasn’t going to give up that easily. “One game,” I said. “One game against your finest player is all I ask.”

The kids looked amongst each other waiting for one of them to tell me to go away; however, no one would step forth.

“Excellent!” I cheered. “I suggest that we wager no less than twenty dollars.” At this point, they must have thought my use of declaratives alluring as no one was sure what to say. They poured another round from their pitcher as the two boys of the group—the blond haired kid and his shaggy brown-haired compatriot—talked amongst themselves trying to reach a solution for my unwanted presence. I knew that I’d wear them down eventually with my cordial twenty-first century persistence. Their late-1970s sensibilities were no match for me. I had turned their typical night at the pub into something unpredictable and interesting, and I knew that kids of any generation—past or present—were susceptible to such methods.

“Okay, man, you got yourself a deal,” blondie remarked. “We’ll play 301. First one to zero wins.”

“How about laying your money on the table first?” his shaggy-haired compatriot remarked.

I stopped between the two young lads and gave them my most sincere offer. As far as I was concerned, I had come this far and it was all or nothing. I tossed the key to the Time Dancer on the small circular table beyond us, directly next to their pitcher of beer.

“I must admit to you gentlemen that I have no cash on me, but I do have a car.”

They stopped and looked at me in frustrated confusion. Their girlfriends took little notice of our haggling as they were too interested in discussing trivial matters of dating and clothing and things that had no pertinence to the matter at hand. Or so I thought.

“Tell that old dude to fuck off,” one of their girls said, a striking long brown-haired vixen seething with attitude. She seemed angry that I was there. It seemed my mere presence was killing her “buzz.” She was right to be suspicious though, I had planned to take those slackers for everything they had.

“Give him a chance, Natalie, he put his car up,” blondie retorted.

“I don’t trust him, and neither should you,” she said, stumbling backward with a glass of beer in hand. It was perfect. Her suspicions would be chalked up to basic inebriation, and the sooner they ignored her the better. For me.

They of course, asked to see the car first, as I led them out into the parking lot to reveal the wondrous glory of a car from the future. They could barely wrap their heads around the fact that such a car existed. “How about it?” I asked, swaying back-and-forth against the Time Dancer.

“It’s a deal, man,” blondie said excitedly.

Twenty minutes later, I won the first game, forty minutes from then, I won the second. I had raked up money in the very increments of time we played. They walked away, stunned as onlookers in the bar decided to challenge me to more games, but I won all of them as well. I could never imagine that all the time I had wasted as a teenager playing darts would somehow pay off. At the end of the night I had over three-hundred dollars, and at last, I felt it appropriate to go to the bar and slap a twenty dollar bill on the counter directly underneath the bartender’s asshole face.

“One Michelob Light, please,” I said.

He gave a pause as if still not wanting to serve me, which I wholeheartedly expected. I had been, after all, just a penniless bum not a few hours before.

“We don’t serve that here,” he said, with pride.

“You serious?” I asked. “It’s a fairly common beer where I come from.”

“Where’s that?” he asked.

“Toronto.”

He gave me an even stranger look upon my answer. I really needed to practice thinking before I spoke. I had no clue where Toronto came from.

“Nobody drinks that swill, not around these parts. Light beers are just a fad and they have no place in this bar. You might as well order a cranberry and Vodka while you’re at it.”

“Very well, how about a Budweiser?” Surely they had Budweiser. I mean, I was in a bar, right? The bartender grunted and nodded, pulled a Budweiser from a cooler under the counter and handed it to me. I chugged the beer and looked around, feeling pretty damn good about myself. I noticed stares from several of the patrons, right in my direction. They weren’t the happy kind of stares either. These people meant business. Perhaps after my slew of dart winnings I had overstayed my welcome. The song on the jukebox ended and I noticed a distinctive grumbling among the bikers and hippies that alerted me to the fact that my money and personal safety were in danger. It didn’t take me long to get the hint. The environment had turned increasingly volatile once the music stopped. I finished my beer in haste, quickly got change from my purchase, and bid my fellow night owls a fair evening. Their beady eyes followed me out the door before I gave a final wave and closed the door behind me. Panic ensued and I knew

that I had only moments to get to the Time Dancer before I was beaten and robbed like some 18th century aristocrat on the streets of Paris during the French Revolution.

“Hey, dart man, where ya’ going?” a shadowy figure called from a line of motorcycles outside. I scrambled in the darkness to find my car amidst the Volkswagen hatchbacks and El Caminos parked on the side lot. As I got to my door, fiddling with the key in my pocket, headlights beamed onto me from afar. I turned and squinted in the light, trying to make out who was watching me. “Who’s there?” I asked. From across the parking lot, not twenty feet away, I could make out a van with four silhouettes standing around it. Two males and two females, other than that I was at a complete loss.

“You going somewhere, man?” one of the figures asked. “How about you let us take that sweet ride of yours for a spin?”

I could recognize the voice from anywhere. It was the blond-haired slacker, my first opponent on the dart board; the one I crushed in humiliating defeat in the presence of his peers. As a result, he probably wasn’t going to get laid that night, and was out for revenge. I said nothing and turned back to the driver’s side door where I nervously jammed in the key and pulled it open with brute force. The figures were upon me. I could hear the crunching of rocks and dirt under the soles of their shoes.

“Hey!” blondie shouted, “Hey, man, I’m talking to you.”

I shut the door, and started the engine. A quick glance in the rear-view mirror and I could see they had baseball bats. So much for peace and love, these kids wanted blood.

“You hustling son-of-a-bitch!” the shaggy brown-haired cretin shouted as he raised the bat in his grip and swung at the trunk of the car. I heard a loud crashing sound that jolted me to the core. In response, I fidgeted with the lever on the steering wheel and tried to put the car in

reverse only to activate the windshield wipers instead. Two large wiper blades scraped against the window, back-and-forth, shifting dirt and dust across the windshield. I heard another large crash, then another. The merciless monsters were taking their wanton aggression on my poor, innocent car. The Time Dancer had had nothing to do with any of it. She was an innocent bystander in the entire fiasco. Frenetic anger rushed through my veins as I shifted her into reverse and floored it backwards. I heard surprised screams and saw all four bat-wielding thugs tumble to the ground in their attempt to avoid five thousand pounds of screeching American machinery. I braked for a moment, rolled down my window, and looked back at my stunned adversaries.

“I just wanted to play darts!” I shouted. “I didn’t want any trouble. What the hell is wrong with you kids?”

They said nothing while scrambling to retrieve their baseball bats. It was time to go. The door to the bar swung open and a line of bikers rushed out swinging chains and brandishing switchblades. Apparently someone had really pissed them off. When I looked around to see who the unfortunate soul could be, I noticed that the perpendicular nature of their advancement moving steadfastly towards my direction. “Is everyone in this town a sore loser?” I asked. There was little time to ponder the baffling anger biker gangs had towards getting hustled, so I threw the car into drive and peeled out of the parking lot, leaving a large trail of dust in my wake. I didn’t know how far I could push the Time Dancer, but for her sake, as well I mine, I had to escape the unruly mob before I ended up in a perpetually undiscovered shallow grave vast miles beyond civilization in the desert.

The dust of my wake had briefly immobilized them, but as I tore down the road, as far away from Cactus Jack’s I could get, I saw a line of motorcycle lights following me. I had them

by a mile or so, but they were quickly gaining. “Shit, shit, shit, shit!” I said, trying to pay attention to the open road ahead. There were no street signs, street lights, or anything that gave the slightest indication where I might be or where I could go. I had entered some kind of no-man’s land, and all that lay beyond the range of my flickering headlights was complete darkness. The motorcycles were drawing in. No matter how fast I pushed the Time Dancer, the light from their circular bulbs remained at a fixed distance. I felt as though they had locked me in, advancing for the kill. No amount of car tricks or wild maneuvering was going to shake them off, so I was left with only one feasible option, that of a quick and unexpected travel to another time period. It was the only surefire way I could escape them.

In a careful, yet dangerous balancing act—similar to texting while driving—I attempted to punch in the digits of the next year to which I wished to travel. I held no false pretenses that the Time Dancer was in any condition to actually transcend one time period to the next. The midnight hour was upon me, and the prospect of becoming a bloodied corpse on the side of the road was imminent. I could hear the 11:00 Local News report in my head:

The remains of an unidentified male were discovered this morning unearthed from a shallow grave three miles off Highway 95 South in the Sonoran Desert by a construction crew clearing a large portion of the desert to build a parking lot for a new mini-mall, the largest in all of Yuma. Investigators have ruled out notions of foul play and have closed the case on the assumption that the unidentified male simply wandered into the desert, fell into a shallow grave, and died of heatstroke. In other news, you won’t believe what this cat has to say about his owner. Meet Wilson, the frank feline who communicates with some of the sassiest meows this reporter has ever heard!

I punched in the first date that came to mind: 1973. The month? I couldn't remember the month. I could only remember that McKee's parents had met around that year. It was best to play it safe, so I typed **January 1, 1973** into the dashboard module, and prepared myself for whatever was to come. The destination: **Rockledge, Florida**, the hometown of McKee's father. The motorcycle lights were directly behind me at this point, and I had one final opportunity to evade them. If it didn't work, I would be mentioned on the eleven o'clock news three or four years later as a pile of bones nobody cared about. I said a quick prayer—because what else do you do when you think your life is about to end?—closed my eyes, and pressed the button marked “GO” below the dashboard. Miraculously, a dizzying flurry of colors sped past at some variable of the speed of light, and I could feel the constricting force of gravity pushing me against the driver's seat. I was losing control of the Time Dancer as she struggled to enter yet another wormhole through which we would leave Yuma, Arizona far behind. I shut my eyes and hoped for the best. I had absolutely nothing else to lose. In a matter of seconds we were going, going, and gone.

Chapter Nine: Young Love

I roared into the past like a screeching adolescent from the 1970s. I had no idea the time or the place, only that I was in Central Florida on account of the palm trees, rail road tracks, and boring un-developed land that surrounded me. It appeared to be early evening, dusk perhaps, and the two-lane road before me had not a car on the road. I passed a flea-market and a church and tried to gradually slow the car without fishtailing or crashing in the stunningly violent manner I had been accustomed to. I coasted into what I thought was the early 1970s in the same vein as Gerald Ford's succession to the White House. But I would have to be careful. Nixon was President back then, and he had a way of weeding out saboteurs—from the past, present, or future. I could remember, from our history books, his relentless pursuit of Alger Hiss, the communist who was indicted in 1950 for perjury. I wasn't a communist, but I had no rightful place in Nixon's America, and if anybody was going to find me out, it would be him. My momentary paranoid delusion caused a slight overcompensation on my part, and I jerked the wheel too far to the left to avoid a head-on collision with a vacant Dairy Queen establishment in my path.

I skidded about a half mile in the opposite lane and crashed into a palm tree at about five miles per hour. I just couldn't stop her in time. Fortunately, no cars had come in my path; it could have been a bloodbath. Once the car came to a halt, I took a moment to get my thoughts together. "What year is this?" I asked the Time Dancer. Naturally, she didn't respond. "Where the hell have you brought me this time? It better be the 1973, or so help me God, I will drive you into the Cape Canaveral bay and live the rest of my life living in the gutters of this shitty anomaly of a town." I didn't mean to lash out at my brilliant invention in such a way, but my

patience was at an end. It was hot out. Not Arizona hot, but the type of uncomfortable humidity that could only be described as uniquely sweltering. This, I guess, was the type of climate the elderly embraced in their decadent lifestyle of shuffleboard and orgies before the reaper paid them a courtesy visit. Front end damage notwithstanding, I lumbered the Time Dancer a few miles down the road into the parking lot of a shopping market plaza and took a moment to get my thoughts together.

I had, indeed, avoided certain death at the hands of vengeful bikers who wished me harm. The plan had worked, and I knew by the flat, sporadically green landscape before me, that I was no longer in Yuma, Arizona. The next step would be verifying the time and date from a newspaper at the local gas station as I couldn't trust the dashboard module. Nothing personal, but the car had been through hell, and I knew better than to take the information displayed before me at face value. For the record, the dashboard module displayed: **January 1, 1973**, and I had no idea whether to believe it or not. I had been in similar situations where I thought I was in the correct place and time, only to be thrust into a state of shock upon realizing that I was in Cuba or at the hands of Todd administering a forced breathalyzer test.

I did suspect, by the sad wheezing of the Time Dancer's engine, that she was on her last leg. I could push her no more, and felt that the services of a mechanic were sorely in need. The market plaza was hopping with what I assumed to be Rockledge locals. The men wore Hawaiian shirts, jean shorts, and flip flops. They had large bottle-cap glasses and thick, wavy hair, and mustaches. The women donned short-sleeve button up shirts of various appalling colors—purple, beige, or orange—and wore plaid skirts and pearls around their necks. My God, these people were dorks. There were plenty of kids around too—wild-eyed, high soccer shorts, knee-length

white socks with colored stripes at the top—roaming in their little gangs probably looking for a place to play hopscotch, Jacks, or whatever kids did back then.

There were elderly couples in their Buicks, and some African Americans wearing bright colors and donning afros and elaborate weaves. The plaza was a moderately bustling hub of retail stores, and food parlors. No one took notice of me in the distance, though I was certain to attract attention with the smoke that was rising from the engine.

I decided to walk across the street to the nearest gas station—a service station with a garage—and search for a local newspaper that would give me the proper insight to the year I had entered. I trailed across and intersection and waited for a few cars to pass—Pintos, Datsun's, pick-up trucks, and such flew by without concern of my presence. I was in a fundamentally perplexing location. Imagine, if you will, a place referred to as the “Space Coast” and within that area lies towns and cities operating as separate pieces of a greater whole. You never know exactly when you're in one town from the next, but they all fall under Brevard County. There's the beaches of Cocoa, the Air Force bases, NASA launch pads, and cruise ship harbors of Cape Canaveral, the downtown pubs and cow fields of Melbourne, the old-fashioned enclave of Rockledge, and the retirement communities of Merritt Island. I couldn't tell heads from tails where I was, but had read, through my extensive research on the Internet, that many places within Central Florida were just as confusing. I had as much chance of finding McKee's parents that I had in becoming *People* magazine's “Sexiest Man Alive,” but I remained hopeful.

I approached the old-fashioned gas stop ready to find out if I could pinpoint the year and place of my malicious plan, determined by sheer grit and determination. Who was this “McKee” family? Where did they come from? McKee was named after his grandfather, Raymond McKee, who moved from California to Florida when McKee's father, William, was only a boy. There

were three other McKee children: Jerry, Judy, and Bonnie, and they would all be teenagers by 1973. I remembered that McKee's father had been introduced to his mother, Cindy, by his younger sister, Bonnie—a curly red-haired firecracker, so I had read in my research. The details were starting to come back to me. Cindy was from Orlando, and she met Bonnie through a church group. The two were good friends, and Cindy was soon introduced to William—Bill or “Billy” as he was known to go by—one time when she was visiting Bonnie in Cocoa. Bill had been stationed in Brunswick, Georgia with the Marine Corps for close to three years. She was eighteen-years-old at the time, and he was twenty-three.

There was the alarming age difference between us, and definitive challenge that I—a thirty-nine-year-old disheveled loner from 2015—would soon embark on to lure a young woman from her betrothed suitor. I knew that I had little time to operate, for Bill proposed to Cindy after only a few months of dating, or “going steady,” as they said back then. It was enough to make your head spin, or simply collapse on the rough pavement of a gas station parking lot, which I, in fact, did upon approaching that gas station before me. Call it nerves, or exhaustion, or maybe even the side-effects of multiple concussions, but I hit the ground like a pound of lead, and was awoken by a man with white hair and a dark blue jump suit.

“You all right there, fella?” the man asked me. I could see the reflection of the gray moon in his thick square-rimmed glasses that looked like something Henry Kissinger would wear. He had a shade of white stubble covering his face, and his crew cut was impeccable. He was a tall man, six feet at the least, and he wore a patch on his jump suit that read: *Ray*. I glanced up at the sign above and saw that I was coincidentally lying on the ground of an establishment called *Ray's*. “Are you, Ray?” I asked.

“That’s me,” he said with a grunt as he put an arm around me and helped me up on my feet.

“You need an ambulance or anything?” he asked with a rough, baritone voice.

“No. Definitely not. No ambulances here. I was actually just trying to purchase a newspaper,” I said.

“Well, we’ve got plenty of those inside if that’s what you need,” he replied.

I followed Ray inside his quaint shop and felt a slight nostalgia when I passed the old-style gas pumps—four in all—equipped with scrolling digits and thin, hose-like pumps. I couldn’t imagine a time where one had to actually go inside and pay cash of all things after filling up their tank. There were two separate lanes by the pumps, one marked, “self-serve,” and the other, “full-serve.” Strange times indeed. We walked into Ray’s shop and I noticed a few shelves with snacks and treats next to a couple of glass freezers of soda and beer. The place looked like something out of a time warp, but that was to be expected. The shelves were littered with Cracker Jacks, potato chips, rock candy, taffy, and a bunch of other shit that gives you cavities. The store was lit with a few overhead long-bulbs amidst some square paneling above. The cash register sat on top on small, green wooden counter where a portable radio played oldies tunes from the 1950s and 60s. Though they weren’t such oldies back then. “Hey, I know that song, it’s ‘House of the Rising Sun’,” I said excitedly.

Ray picked up a newspaper from a nearby rack and handed it to me. “Nothin’ but noise if you ask me. I just play it ‘cos the customers seem to like it.”

“Thank you,” I said, taking the newspaper. He had given me the latest edition of *Florida Today*, a reputable news source for all I knew. The Watergate Scandal consumed the front page, and I searched in massive anticipation for the date. The date was as clear as day, or as stunningly

accurate as the rolling digits affixed to the outside gas pumps. The date was May 23, 1973, a random date if there ever was one. The Time Dancer had overshoot by five months.

“Son of a bitch!” I shouted.

Ray looked up at me from the counter as I placed my hand over my forehead and rubbed it. “You okay there, buddy?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m sorry,” I said.

My only hope was that I had arrived with just enough time to prevent their marriage. I believed it was a summer wedding, which meant that I was cutting it close. I decided to keep the paper, as not to alert suspicion, and shelled out a couple of crumbled bills from my pocket and slapped them on the counter.

“That’ll be twenty-five cents,” Ray said, sitting behind the counter.

“Oh,” I replied, fishing a dollar out from the pile. He gave me my change and bid me a good night, however our business was not done.

“You do car repair here, Roy?” I asked.

“The name’s, Ray, and yes, we do mechanical service.”

“I’m sorry, *Ray*, of course. My car is badly in need of some service, and I would much like to bring her in and get some repairs done.”

“What’s wrong with it?” Ray asked.

“A little front end damage,” I said. “Shocks, suspension, brakes, steering column—you name it.”

Ray looked around his shop, clearly trying to make up his mind. “Well, we close in about ten minutes, but if you want to bring it in, I’ll have my son look at it,” he said.

“Your son?” I asked, intrigued.

“Yeah, Bill, he’s working out back right now.”

Could it be? Could Bill’s father, Ray, actually be standing before me at that very moment? Could his son, the man I thought I would have to trek miles of forsaken land across the Florida coast, be no further than a few yards from where I stood? I didn’t want to expose my adulation outright, but I felt a certain fortune bestowed upon me where time traveling matters were concerned. Only a few days ago I had found myself in the very hospital McKee was born at. Now I was standing at the very gas station that his grandfather owned and worked at with his father. The responsibility was entirely my own to not screw up such opportunity. I would have to play it cool; remain inconspicuous, and above all, not reveal any intriguing specifics of my master plot.

“Is Bill your son?” I asked.

“Yep, he sure is. What of it?” Ray asked.

“Nothing. Nothing at all. I just love these father and son places. You just don’t see much of that today. It’s inspiring.”

“Oh yeah, we’re all about inspiration here,” Ray said, while blowing his nose into a checkered-blue handkerchief from his front pocket. “Why don’t you go talk to him and see if he can fit you in?”

“That’s sounds like a splendid idea, and I promise to make it *worth your while*, if you know what I mean.” I took a twenty and pushed it into Ray’s front pocket just to let him know that I meant business.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asked point-blank.

“Just letting you know how much I appreciate your services,” I remarked slyly. He took the twenty and shoved it into his side pocket nonchalantly. Despite his objections, I knew we were speaking the same language.

“He’s around back, just catch him before he leaves,” Ray said.

I wanted to make some things clear before I pursued further. “If you don’t mind me asking, Ray, what’s the family name?” I asked.

“The what?” he asked, leaning against the counter.

“Your last name. What’s your last name?”

“McKee,” he said.

I could barely contain my outright glee. “The McKee family?” I said. “I’ve heard of you guys. You’re quite the legend where I come from.”

“Where’s that?” he asked.

“Spain. I hail from Spain.” I only confused him with my response and felt it necessary to find Bill before it was too late. “Regardless, my friend, it was nice talking with you. Let me have a chat with your son and see what he can do for me.”

Ray flipped on a twelve-inch black-and-white television nearby and sat on his stool, no longer paying me any undue attention. “Whatever you say, pal,” he remarked. He was deep into an episode of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and I snuck out as he stared at the flashing screen. Bill, the man who fathered my arch nemesis, awaited me. I walked outside the store and made my way to a two-car garage where a young man was working diligently on an ugly aqua-colored Chevrolet Impala under a single bulb hanging from the garage ceiling. He was a short man, no taller than five and half feet, and was deep into his work, taking no notice of my creeping approach. The hood of the car was open and he was buried within the engine, turning a crescent wrench with

methodical precision. As I approached, he rose above the hood and glared at me with primal suspicion.

“Hello, good sir,” I said. “I’m Lewis, and your father, Ray, told me that you might be able to help me out with some car trouble.”

He leaned against the Chevrolet, exhausted, and I noticed all the similarities to the man I had seen a few years in the future when he escorted his wife into the Yuma hospital. He had short, wavy black hair and square-rimmed glasses. He was clean-shaven with thick eyebrows and sharp, blue eyes. He wore a gray Mickey Mouse T-shirt tucked into his faded blue jeans. Around his jeans was a brown leather belt with a striking round belt buckle that shined under the light in the garage. It was most certainly McKee’s father, as I had come to know him, in 1973. He looked no older than a school boy, working in his father’s garage. It was hard to think that he had already been in the Marines for three years up until that point. Perhaps the Marine Corps had usages for cherub-looking short men, but I knew that I had to be careful with whatever I said, for I surmised that he was much more mature than his physical appearance suggested.

“What can I help you with?” he asked.

“Bill, you don’t mind if I call you Bill, do you?” He didn’t answer, so I proceeded. “Ray told me that you might be able to look at my car. It’s a Dodge Challenger, largely improvised by my own workings, but I had a little fender-bender on my travels, and would hope that you could look at it and give me a fair estimate for repair.”

Bill looked at his silver wrist watch and sighed. I knew it was getting close to closing hours, but hoped to entice him with a few flashes of potential earnings within his grasp.

“I’m willing to pay whatever it takes,” I said, brandishing a fistful of bills. “And your services will be generously rewarded.”

Bill stared at me for a moment—I assumed, unsure of how to respond. My abundance of crumpled twenties provided an offer that couldn't be refused.

“Go ahead and bring her in,” he said. “I obviously can't make the repairs tonight, but I can give you an estimate,” he said.

“That's all I ask,” I replied, smiling.

I explained the whereabouts of my car, and he told me he would wait until I brought it in, to at least get a look at it. I was stunned to see how easily I could coax him into looking at my car, and I hoped that the process would be quick and painless—like going to the dentist for a quick cleaning. It's odd to think how high dentists rank on occupational suicide, but I believed that mechanics, back then, hadn't succumbed to such extreme psychological tendencies.

“Give me a few minutes and I'll have the car back here in no time,” I said.

Bill nodded, albeit frustrated, and I danced across US 1 to the parking lot the Time Dancer was patiently waiting, and made my way across the street to *Ray's* mechanic shop. I coasted into the modest lot and parked outside the garage Bill was working in. Rather than just have him look at the car, I knew there were certain things I could discuss with him about that no stranger would know. I could relate to him on a man-to-man level, without him being none the wiser. That was my purpose, aside from garnering actual repairs to my car for future endeavors.

“What the hell is this?” he said as he marveled over the sight of my car. “I've never seen a car like this. What year is it?”

“It's—uh, a European model. 1973,” I said.

“A European model of an American car?” he asked while wiping the dirt off his face with a rag.

“Something like that. I told you that it was an unconventional design of my own doing, but here she is, nonetheless.”

“What are you, some kind of scientist?” he asked.

“No, I sell insurance,” I said. “Cars are a little hobby of mine.”

“What happened to this one?” he asked, examining the car up-and-down with his hands on his hips.

“Well, Bill, I’m taking a little road trip right now across the grand American landscape, and during my travels through the Florida coast, I fell asleep at the wheel and crashed into a tree. I’m okay, as you can see, but the car unfortunately got a little messed up.”

Bill rubbed and scratched his chin, clearly trying to mull the situation over. “I don’t know, sir.”

“Lewis, please, call me Lewis.”

“I don’t know, Lewis. Maybe you should take this to a body shop or something. I don’t have the tools to repair all this damage.”

The damage, as he referred to, consisted of a crushed front end, among other things, a shattered windshield, dangling headlight, pockets of dents in every conceivable location, and glowing nuclear reactor hidden within the engine, but exposed by the fractured opening in the hood.

“I don’t care about body work, I’m just looking to get the engine fixed and running.”

“Maybe you should call your insurance company and get this thing totaled. That’s my advice anyhow.”

“I would, but I’m a long ways from home,” I said.

“Where are you from?” he asked.

“Vermont,” I said, forgetting that I had a California license plate affixed to the back of the car. Remembering this, I attempted to backtrack. “Well, I have a summer house in Vermont. That’s where I’m headed. But I’m actually from California.”

“My parents are from California,” Bill said. “Whereabouts are you from?”

“San Diego,” I replied. It was the first truth I had said my entire journey thus far.

“Wish they could be all California girls, right?” Bill said, smiling.

“You said it. Are you a Beach Boys fan?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m a fan. That’s all I play around here. Drives my dad crazy,” he said.

I delved into my basic knowledge of the band. “There’s nothing quite like the soft, introspective lyrics of Brian Wilson sung over the soothing harmonies of his brothers, Dennis and Carl, and cousin Mike Love. What a sound,” I said. That wasn’t a lie either. I genuinely liked *The Beach Boys*. Perhaps our shared affection for America’s famous pop ensemble would bring me closer to Bill, and ultimately closer to Cindy.

Smoke continued to rise from the engine, much to Bill’s curiosity. He told me to park it in the empty spot in the second garage to the right. I had no idea if he possessed skills advanced enough to get the Time Dancer running properly again. He was, after all, just a twenty-three-year-old kid at the time. After I parked and exited the car, I decided to try to connect with him further, if not just to win him over on my side. He had already displayed a hint of skepticism towards making any significant repairs, but I could possibly reach him with a few well-laid conversation pieces.

“Go ahead and pop the hood,” he said.

I did as instructed, but it made little difference. The hood was jammed on account of being smashed in and Bill had to pry it open with a crowbar.

“I’m about to close up, Bill. Wrap it up!” Ray shouted from outside the shop. His intense growl startled me, and I fretted the few minutes I knew we had left. The important thing, however, was that I had found Bill in all the random suburban sprawl of Cape Canaveral. It was an amazing feat in itself, as if a guiding force, unbeknownst to me, had brought me there. I just had to ensure that I wouldn’t screw it up.

“Don’t worry about him,” Bill said. “He’s always in a rush to get home.”

“How long have you been working here?” I asked.

Bill grabbed a nearby flashlight and shined a light into the engine, trying to make sense of the mess before him.

“I’m actually only visiting,” he answered.

“Visiting?” I asked, intrigued. Though I was pretty sure of the answer.

“I’m in the Marines, stationed at Brunswick, Georgia. Home for leave right now, and just helping my dad around the shop.”

“Oh, well thank you for your service,” I said, sticking my hand out for him to shake. We shook hands and he nodded back, keenly focused on my car. I could tell it presented an enormous task, and I could see he was a man who enjoyed a good challenge. I decided to get right to the point.

“Do you have a sweetheart?” I asked.

He looked up from the car’s simmering engine. I had definitely got his attention. “I do, as a matter of fact,” he said. “Her name is Cindy. We’re engaged to be married.”

“Sounds lovely,” I said. “Does she live with you in Georgia?”

“No, she lives back here. Part of the benefit to visiting.”

“I know what you mean. Well, I don’t want to keep you from a hot date or anything with your fiancé.”

Bill waved me off. “No, it’s all right. She’s taking night classes.”

“Ah. I see. So she’s a college girl?” I asked.

“She just started. We’re getting married in a few months though,” he said while digging through a tool box on a counter near the car. We still hadn’t reached the junction where he could tell me whether or not my car was repairable, but I enjoyed learning more about Cindy, and hoped that I could weasel my way into meeting her somehow. The overhead light provided only limited visibility. Flashlight in-hand, he went back to examining the car with the demeanor of a surgeon examining a patient, and I stood silently by as he plunged deeper into the car’s engine. Hanging above him was the open hood and I thought, rather shamefully I might add, how easy it would be to throw the hood down upon his head, thus eliminating the man responsible for McKee in one fell swoop. But it wasn’t the time. And I had specifically told myself that there would be no murder involved in my journey, beyond convincing his parents to have an abortion. This was to be a mission of diabolical strategy, not needless bloodletting. All the elements were there, I just needed to plan how I could use them to my benefit.

“Your transmission belt is a little messed up,” he said, looming over the engine.

“I knew it!” I exclaimed.

“And your radiator hose is broken. In fact, the entire system looks shot.”

“Typical,” I said. “Just typical.”

“And I’ve never seen a carburetor like that before,” he continued.

“Damn Europeans. Can they do anything right?”

“And your steering column is bent. Your car battery is leaking. I don’t even know what that is,” he said, referring to the small nuclear fusion reactor I had installed.

“Don’t worry about that piece,” I said. “It’s just a device that limits exhaust emissions. You know how strict they are in California with that stuff.”

Bill didn’t respond, he was in deep concentration assessing all the damage. He stood up, and turned the flashlight off.

“So what are we looking at?” I asked.

“You’re going to need a new car,” he said. “I’m surprised you even got this far after the accident.”

We had reached an impossible juncture. The car, it seemed, was too much for him to repair. I had gotten this far, and couldn’t very well accept defeat. That, or my other option was to stay in 1973 permanently, which—after the spoils of the 21st century—would be agonizing. What exactly would I do? Use a *telephone* to make calls? Try to choose between *three* different networks while watching television? Use *cash* from monetary transactions? Read an *actual* encyclopedia as opposed to doing all my research on the Internet? Stand in line at the grocery store like a *regular* person as opposed to having my robot butler do all the work? Well, robot butlers hadn’t been invented in my time yet, but I had heard they were on the horizon. Was I to simply accept all of this as my impending fate? No thank you.

“All I’m asking is the bare minimum here. Just enough to get her back to California,” I said.

“Or Vermont,” he added.

“Yes, exactly, Vermont.”

Bill scratched his head trying to reach a decision. I know that the difficulty of the task enticed him, and that he also wasn't a man to walk away from something easily. He proposed to Cindy only months after dating. By the time he was twenty-six he already had his first child, McKee's older sister, Dawn, and was a Warrant Officer in the Marine Corps stationed in Hawaii. Of course, Hawaii was the original destination I had intended to go, but things hadn't turned out that way. I would have to contend with the Cape Canaveral-Melbourne-Cocoa-Rockledge paradox I found myself in.

"Please, Bill, you're my only hope. Something brought me here. It was fate. You're the best damn mechanic in town. If there's anyone that could do it, I know you could."

"I'm flattered, but—"

I dropped down to my knees on the ground and feigned tears while clutching my hands together like a common beggar. "From one Beach Boys fan to the other, you've got to help me. It's like that line in 'Good Vibrations,' the part where they sing, '*I'm picking up good vibrations, she's giving me something, something,*' you know how it goes. This car is like a good vibration to me, and without it, my vibrations are, well they're bad frankly."

I managed to baffle him with my nonsensical ramblings, but it seemed to have a positive effects overall as he didn't immediately throw me out of his garage.

Bill sighed. "If you want, I can look it over tomorrow with my dad, and we can make minimal repairs with the parts we have. Now please, get off your knees."

"Thank you," I said, wiping away tears. I stood up and offered another firm-gripped handshake.

"It's might be pretty expensive, just warning you," he said.

"Whatever it takes," I said, hoping that whatever it took was under three hundred dollars.

I looked at the ground for a moment, while Bill wiped his oil-stained hands with a cleaning rag. Silence quickly came over us until Bill clapped his hands together and spoke.

“So that’s that. Come by at the end of the day tomorrow, and I’ll let you know exactly what we’re looking at here.”

I was entrusting him to not completely rip me off. He offered no estimate, and only a modest assurance that it could be done. I needed something, however, beyond his vague closure. I handed him the key and decided to probe a little further.

“So if, for instance, you replaced the radiator, how much would that cost me?”

“My dad does the pricing, but we won’t make any repairs without asking first. I head back to Georgia in a few days so whatever I do, it’ll have to be minimal.”

“Promise me that you’ll get in some quality time with your fiancé before you leave, aye?” I said moving my eyebrows up-and-down. My comment didn’t elicit the jovial response I expected—he just stared at me, ready to leave—so I quickly changed the subject.

“I want to show my profound appreciation for your invaluable assistance. Let’s go to the nearest bar in town, and I’ll buy you a drink.”

“No thanks,” he said, looking at his watch. “I don’t drink.”

His response shocked me. “You, what? You don’t drink?” I asked astonished. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-three,” he replied.

“Never touch the stuff, huh?”

“I have, but I’m just not much of a drinker.”

“How about a cup of coffee then?” I asked.

Bill shook his head. "That's all right. Thank you though." He looked towards the shop where Ray had recently shut off the lights. "Do you need to call a taxi or anything?" he asked.

It hadn't dawned on me that I had nowhere to stay that evening. No matter, I would figure something out as long as I knew Bill was going to look at the car tomorrow.

"I'll be fine, thanks. I'm staying at the Holiday Inn up the street," I said pointing.

"Holiday Inn?" he asked. I should have done more investigating of the town's layout before I came to him.

"Whatever it is. Motel 6. They're all the same to me," I said.

Bill turned, went to the garage and pulled down both doors. He put a padlock on each and walked back to me, where I shook his hand for the third or fourth time. I would win the man over eventually; that was my goal.

"Thanks again. You don't know how much you've helped me."

"Not a problem," he said. He walked past me to a blue Pinot, the only car parked in the lot. It looked just like the car I had some years ago, in the future. The one I bought used when I just got out of college and had no money. In 2004, a car like that was a laughable relic, but here one stood before me, and there was nothing strange about owning one at all. Bill turned back to me, and noticed that I was still standing in the parking lot.

"Need a ride?" he said.

"No thanks, think I'll take a little stroll through town," I said.

He waved, then got into his car. I looked around the town and observed its car lots, diners, and shopping plazas. I took in its swaying palm trees under the night sky, its rail-road crossings, and its extensive road construction at all ends. Bill drove away, and I began to immediately plot. He knew me now. He knew me, at the very least, as an eccentric motorist with

car troubles. I tried to get him away from the shop and into a more suiting environment for male bonding, like that of a bar. He had declined the invite, but tomorrow was another day. I had one day to make it happen. One day to destroy any prospect of his union with Cindy, the elusive undergrad. That was the goal I had set. Anything longer would bring the usual risk of exposure and subsequent problems with the law. One day to turn my failures from that point into a raging success story.

I walked happily across the freeway and strolled the shopping plaza for somewhere to hang out for the evening and get some sleep. All the stores were closed so I ventured behind the building where two large green dumpsters sat, away from the street lights, and hidden under darkness. Resting against one of the dumpsters was a mattress someone had thrown out amidst other trash. I flattened the mattress onto the ground and lay on it, giddy with excitement over what the next day would bring. Sleeping under the night stars wasn't such a bad thing, and I took comfort in the fact that I wasn't a "real bum." I was just pretending to be one temporarily until I got my feet back on the ground. I heard a train pass by in the distance. It's clanging and rumbling jettison shook me to sleep as I pondered a future where McKee didn't exist any longer.

The morning sun struck my face like the precious beam from the light of a police officer's flashlight. I awoke to find a man standing over me, in fact holding a flashlight, who had the appearance of law enforcement.

"Mind telling me what you're doing back here, sir?" he asked.

My eyes fluttered open, and I was irritated to be so rudely woken from my soothing slumber. As if not making his point, he kicked the mattress with the tip of his shoe.

"What?" I shouted. "I'm trying to get some sleep. Is there some kind of law against sleeping outside?"

“Yes, as a matter of fact there is. It’s called trespassing,” he said.

I tried to get a better look at him. He was a young guy, and looked to be in his thirties. He wore a blue uniform and hat, but he didn’t look like a cop. His badge on the front of his shirt said *Store Security*. I laughed in relief. He was nothing more than the equivalent of a mall cop, reduced to hassling a good citizen for the mere crime of enjoying the comforts of a free mattress.

“Take a hike, Perry Mason. I’m resting here,” I said.

“Sir, if you don’t leave this area, I’ll be forced to contact the authorities.”

I leapt up from the bed, clearly agitated. “I’m up, okay? You happy now? You’ve solved the case of the sleeping man behind the dumpster.”

The security guard held one hand up and put the other on the walkie-talkie seated in his side pocket. “Why don’t you just calm down, sir? Take a breather.”

“What in the fuck do you think I’m trying to do?” I shouted.

I was promptly ejected from the store premises and forced to wander the streets unsure of what time it was. Traffic shuttled past me on the freeway, and I assumed it was morning time, as all the diners, banks, and schools bustled with life. I was famished and quite thirsty, and I spotted a local Denny’s a half mile up the road. I was still dressed reasonably respectfully enough with what was left of my doctor’s costume, and I felt my pockets for cash. Fortunately no one robbed me while I had been sleeping. I checked my teeth. They were all there. My father had always told me that bums stole your teeth when you slept. Such a horrifying scenario was how they explained my missing teeth as a child. I never heard of the tooth fairy. Perhaps, in the long run, it saved them a few bucks down the road. When I showed him a missing tooth, he jumped up from his chair at the kitchen table, got on the phone, and pretended to call the police. “Hello, this is Richard Lewington. It’s happened again. Someone stole one of my son’s teeth while he slept!” It

may have been a harmless prank to my parents, but I was sure that the psychological scars of such a charade ran deeper than they could have imagined. I had an irrational fear of the homeless throughout much of my life as a result.

I decided to lay a few bucks down at Denny's and get some grub as to combat the excruciating hunger pains in my stomach. The diner was as old-fashioned as they came. Wood-paneled walls and tacky curtains filled the area. There were blue vinyl booths, and oldies music coming over the intercom. The place was decked in green carpet. What was with the 1970s and their infatuation with the color green? I must have arrived around "Senior Special" time, for the place was crawling with elderlies. The alluring aroma of pancakes, grits, bacon, and waffles was in the air. A frumpy waitress named Martha approached my booth with a smile.

"Hello and welcome to Denny's," she said.

"What time do you have, darling?" I asked outright.

"It's 10:30," she said, looking at her wrist watch.

"Perfect time for some breakfast," I replied. It was the perfect time, all right. With any luck, Bill was working on my car, piecing it back together like a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle.

"What can I get you to drink?" she asked. Her southern drawl, curly red hair, and overabundance of makeup led me to believe I was most definitely in Central Florida. Floridians were so rosy, so optimistic. They carried on like nothing from the outside world could harm them. I admired their stance. It wasn't what one would call "naiveté," it was Southern hospitality without the flag-waving Southern aspect to it. A happy medium between the extreme south of Alabama and the schizophrenic make-up of Virginia. I tossed the menu down on the table and looked up with my mind already made.

“Yes, Martha. I’ll talk an orange juice and a cup of coffee, black.”

“Okay,” she said scribbling into her pad.

“And I’ll go ahead and get some pancakes.”

“Sure, that’s no problem.”

“Yes, blueberry pancakes, and a loaded Omelet, and a healthy dose of sausage, bacon, and hash browns. And I’ll also get biscuits and gravy too. And some French Toast while you’re at it.”

“Okay,” she said slowly as she scribbled at a frenzied pace. “Are you expecting someone else?”

“Nope. Just me,” I said.

She looked up from her notepad to address me. “Usually we do the orders how they’re listed on the menu, but I’ll try to get this all in for you.”

“I am not playing around here, Martha,” I said.

“I can see that,” she said, offering a reserved smile.

“Just tell them to bring it all. I’m so hungry I could eat a horse.” I leaned in closer. “You don’t serve horse here, do you?”

“Um. No, we don’t,” she said. It was the 1970s, so I thought I’d check anyway. “I’ll put this in, and bring out your OJ and coffee to you,” she said, walking away.

“Thanks, Martha, you’re a doll,” I said. I hoped I wasn’t sounding too sexist with my flippant banter. I was merely trying to fit into the time I was in, and not raise suspicion among the locals.

After spending a hefty amount at the local Denny’s, I ventured down the street to check on McKee’s father, Bill. I had managed to eat every morsel of food they placed before me. It was

a gorge, if there ever was one, and I felt like it could have possibly sustained me for the next twenty-five years, if necessary. The point was, I had eaten a lot of food, exceeding any reasonable measure of gluttonous binge-eating. I wanted to show the rubes how we did things in the time period where *I* came from. In 2015, eating three-thousand calories or more in a single sitting was fairly commonplace if the price was right. What the hell did these people know? They were still thinking Russia and Iran were going to take over the world back then. Talk about old news.

I came upon Bill's garage and saw that he was underneath my car, working as diligently as expected. A portable radio was cranking out some oldie's tunes, and several customers were arriving and leaving the store in busy intervals. Bill had a hanging clock in his shed. It was 11:15 A.M. I highly doubted he had done extensive work to the car at that point, but thought I'd check-in. "How's it going?" I asked with one hand leaning on the front end of the car.

Bill stopped whatever he was doing. He slid from underneath the car on one of those wheeled mechanic boards that I had in my storage shed when I was working on the *Time Dancer*. Though I possessed pedestrian mechanical skills, her damages were far too great for me to comprehend. That's where Bill came in. I knew my appearance was that of a man who had slept on a mattress next to a dumpster, but I had attempted to clean myself up in the Denny's restroom. I hadn't shaved in days, and a dark stubble had formed as a result. I had never donned a beard before—far too itchy—but didn't really have a choice in the matter as far as my mission was concerned.

"Well, your muffler's a mess," he said, wiping the sweat from his brow.

"Oh no," I said. "Not the muffler too!"

“I’m afraid so. But I think that if I can get the muffler reattached, the radiator fixed, and the transmission repaired, I could possibly fix this all today.” It was the best news I heard all day. Well, the only news, considering they didn’t have the fucking Internet anywhere. “Come back later and I might be done in a few hours.”

“Are you serious?” I asked.

“Yeah. Well, give it a while. I want to finish up with this today. Cindy and I are going to St. Augustine tomorrow.”

“Well, look at you,” I said with a laugh. “Taking your girl out to see the sights?”

Bill grinned slightly. “It should be fun.”

“So how much are we looking at here?” I asked. I hadn’t counted my cash in some time. I figured I had about two hundred dollars on me. Bill thought to himself for a moment, pursed his lips, and rubbed his chin in a sort-of scientific manner.

“Parts and labor will cost you about five hundred bucks,” he said.

A sliver of panic hit my chest. Maybe I shouldn’t have gone to Denny’s. “Five hundred...”

“Dollars,” he answered.

I tried to play it cool whilst formulating a plan to get more cash. “Not a problem, I’ll come back later,” I said.

Bill nodded, resumed his place on the wheel board, and rolled back under the car. I counted my cash. I had one hundred and forty dollars on me. It would be hard to come up with three hundred fifty-five by the day’s end. Then I remembered that I didn’t necessarily have to pay him in the end. After all, I was a visitor from another time. I just had to think of a way to get

the car at the end of the day without inciting a huge fallout. I decided to take a walk around town and consider my options.

By the end of the day, I came back by the shop to check on my car. Bill looked to be finishing up. “You’re lucky we had an old Dodge to pull parts from,” he said. “Without that, you’d be up shit’s creek without a paddle.”

“Ha,” I said. It had been a long weary day of strolling through town, and I had since come up with a surefire plan to get my car back. I appreciated all of his hard work, and I didn’t want to betray his commitment, but I had to remember that he was the father of my greatest enemy, and you know what they say, “the father of my enemy is my enemy as well.” I think I heard that somewhere, Shakespeare perhaps.

I went inside and grabbed a bottled soda. Ray was at the counter again watching his black and white television. “Your son is quite talented,” I said.

Ray looked away from the television and it took him a moment to recognize me. “Oh, you’re the guy with the Dodge. What in the hell did you do to that thing, drive it off a bridge?”

“Close,” I said. “I hit a tree.”

“Well, the repairs ain’t gonna come cheap, I’ll tell you that.”

“I’m willing to shell out some bucks if that’s what it takes. How much for the soda?”

“Twenty-five cents,” he answered. It seemed like everything in his store cost no more than a quarter. He broke my dollar, and went back to his TV.

“Thank you. I’ll be back later to get the car,” I said. He waved a hand up and I walked out of the store into the bright sunlight on a particularly hot Florida day. I was getting sick of the heat at this point. If it wasn’t Yuma, it was Florida. Then I remembered that McKee later joined the army and went to Afghanistan in his twenties. “The hell if I’m going there,” I said. If I was

able to succeed in my plan to woo his mother from his father, then no such further endeavors would be necessary. The problem was that my plan lacked any specifics. I hadn't even met her yet. I knew only two things: one, that she had just started college, and two, that they were going to St. Augustine the next day. I groaned while rubbing my forehead in the middle of Ray's parking lot. It was too much to contend with this scenario or that one. I must admit, I was at the most frustrating moment of my journey yet. Money was always an issue. My car was undergoing repairs, and I was going to have to find a way to meet Cindy *and* steal it back. Was such a thing possible, even for a generally resourceful man like myself?

I came back to the store around closing hours. Ray had left for the evening, but Bill remained in the garage, completely covered in oil and grease. The engine was running as he sat in the driver's seat, revving her up in controlled intervals. I watched from the shadows, out-of-sight from Bill's view. It appeared that the car was operational. I had to think of a plan quick. So far, in walks throughout town, I had come up with the following:

1. Tell him that I would get him a great deal on a life insurance policy for both him and his wife, but insist that I have to talk with both of them in order process the paperwork.
2. Tell him that I wanted to take it for a test drive first, then cut my losses, leave 1973, and go to another time period.
3. Flat out tell him that I'm having an affair with his fiancé, and tell him to call Cindy to the gas station so we can confront her. *a little too risky.

4. Talk Bill into going to the bar for a few drinks to celebrate his hard work. Get him completely trashed then--as designated driver--drive him to Cindy's house, drop him off, tell her he has a terrible drinking problem, has been seeing someone in Georgia, and that he admitted it to me over drinks, and--after she breaks up with him--offer her a rebound relationship.
5. Get a job, earn the money I owe Bill, pay him for his services, and then go back home to 2015 and forget about the entire thing.

I don't know how number five got on my list, maybe my conscious had resurfaced through the lengthy bouts of sobriety I had endured. Nonetheless, it was an unfathomable option. I should have been ashamed for even considering such a scenario. Number four—the “get Bill drunk plan”—seemed the most plausible, and although there was a fair amount of challenge involved, it was by far the most devastating blow I could have dealt. I approached the garage with a large and gracious smile across my face. “Bill, it looks like you've done the impossible!” I said. Bill stepped out of the car as the engine idled. He took his glasses off and wiped them with a cloth.

“It's not perfect, but I think she'll get you to Vermont at least,” he said.

“You're a miracle, and I say that in all sincerity. I don't know what I would have done without you. Like I said earlier, you're the best mechanic in town.”

“I hardly think that’s the case, but thank you,” he said. “I replaced the muffler, and fixed the radiator. The timing belt and transmission are still a little screwed up, but there’s only so much I can do in a day.”

“I completely understand. Thank you. Thank you so much,” I said. The clock on the wall read well past eight. The Rockledge nightlife, or what existed of it, hummed in the distance.

“What day is it?” I asked.

“It’s the twenty-fourth, a Thursday,” he answered.

“So I should make to Vermont in the next day or two, just in time for the weekend. Any big plans in St. Augustine?” I asked.

Bill shut the driver’s side door, and placed his glasses back on. “No, not really. Cindy and I just love the place.”

“Where is this lovely, young fiancé of yours?” I asked. It was just too perfect.

Bill looked at his wrist watch. The dangling bulb from the ceiling turned him into a shadow reflected against the darkness from outside. “We’re supposed to meet up later tonight after she gets home from night classes,” he said.

“Well, you kids have fun. How much do I owe you?” I asked.

“Five hundred bucks,” he said. “Just like I said earlier.”

I walked closer to him, and dug into my pocket for cash. I paused and looked up at him. “I know you said you’re not much of a drinker, but you *have* to let me take you out for a beer. Just one, to show my appreciation for all of your hard work.”

“That’s nice of you, but no thanks. I think I’d just like to get home, take a shower, and relax,” he answered. Damn it. I wasn’t going to quell that easily.

“You have to let me do this for you. Just one drink at the closest bar. Who cares how you look. I’m not looking much like a beauty queen myself.”

Bill waved me off again with a smile. “Nah, that’s OK. Thanks.”

“Bill,” I said, stopping within an inches of him. “I don’t think you understand. Buying you a drink would mean everything to me, and I’m not leaving here until you let me.” I paused. “A quick story, if you will,” I said. “A friend of mine called me one night to chat. It was late, I was tired from working all day, and he asked me if I wanted to grab a drink. There was a tone in his voice, something that indicated hidden desperation and anguish, but I didn’t pick up on it at the time. I declined his offer repeatedly over the phone, and he eventually gave up. It was the last time I ever talked to him for he committed suicide later that night. They found him the next day in the bathtub with a pair of slit wrists and a bottle of Percocets. I don’t know if I could have done anything to prevent the suicide in the long run, but if I had taken him up on the offer, maybe I could have offered him something, an ear, or some means of support so he wouldn’t have made that fatal decision.”

My fictional anecdote was, admittedly, a bit heavy-handed, but I figured its impact would influence Bill to change his mind. He thought to himself for a moment then responded.

“So...what are you trying to say? Are you suicidal?” he asked.

“No,” I said astonished. “You’re missing the point. The point is, never turn down a free drink. *That’s* what I’m trying to say.”

“Again, I appreciate the offer, but no thanks. Five hundred dollars is plenty enough payment for the work,” he said. I realized I was going to have to take things in the *other* direction.

“I didn’t want to admit it, but yes, I am severely depressed. You see, my wife left me not too long ago. It was a very difficult time after our son passed away in a freak hot air balloon accident. She left me on the one-year anniversary of his death. I was supposed to be in the balloon with him. I told him to wait while I went to use the restroom, but he was so excited, he just couldn’t help himself. After the crash, I had to deal with the grief of having survived by utter chance. Naturally, she blamed me, and my life has went downhill ever since.” I stopped and attempted to hold back phony tears, but they trickled down my cheek regardless. Bill scratched his head, and sighed. “I’m very sorry to hear about your son.”

“That’s okay, Bill. It’s just, I’ve been on the road trying to figure out how to get my life back together, and it would just...” My voice cracked, as if the weight of emotional intensity was crushing me. I should have been an actor. “It would just mean the world to me if I could sit down and have a beer with someone, just to feel normal again.” I think I had done pretty well. I squinted as more tears fell. One eye opened and I watched to see how Bill would react. He didn’t want to do it, that much I knew, but if I had to guilt him into it, then that was what it was going to take.

“One beer,” he said. “I’ll have one beer and that’s it.”

“Thank you, Bill. You’re a good man,” I said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Five minutes later we were at a local dive called “Blackies.” Bill had driven us in his Pinto, and I remarked to him how I used to own one as well. “Real piece of crap,” I said, albeit accidentally. I then attempted to backtrack. “I mean, car has plenty of character, but the previous owner must have put it through hell.” We sat on stools at the dimly-lit, smoky bar waiting to get our drinks. There were a few old folks in the corner drinking some beers and chatting among

each other. Other than that, the place was pretty empty. The bar tender, a balding man with long curly hair on his side and a thick black beard approached us. He wore a leather vest and a teal button-up undershirt opened to expose a tuft of chest hair and a gold necklace around his neck. “What can I get you gentlemen?” he asked. I looked up before Bill could respond.

“We’ll have two whisky waters please,” I said, holding up two fingers.

Bill looked confused. “I thought you said one beer,” he remarked.

“You deserve a little more than just a beer, don’t ya’ think?” I said. The bartender walked away before Bill could change his order. If I could pull off the same stunt three or more times, then the plan would go accordingly. “I don’t know,” Bill added. “I’ve got a big day planned tomorrow.”

“And you’ll get everything done. Don’t worry about it. Bill, I don’t want to tell you how to live your life or anything, but you’ve got to lighten up some. It’s just a little harmless whisky.” Our bartender came back and set two pint-sized glasses of whisky waters on the shiny wooden counter before us. I picked my glass and held it in the air. “To the best mechanic this side of Cape Canaveral. To my new friend, Bill. Cheers!”

He reluctantly held his glass up and tapped it against mine. I sipped mine slowly, waiting for Bill to take a drink. He squinted as he gulped one down the hatch. The beauty of whisky and water is that the effect creeps up on you, after so many drinks, and then before you know it, your senses are demolished. I was going for three drinks. That is what it would take to get Bill obliterated.

“So, Bill, tell me a little bit about yourself?” I asked.

He took another sip and made a less sour expression than before. “What do you want to know?” he asked.

“What’s a talented good-looking guy like yourself doing out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“My parents moved here when we were kids. They were both in the Navy, that’s where they met. It was during World War II. I think they just wanted to get away from California, and find a nice, small town in Florida.”

“They certainly found that here,” I said, nursing my drink. I couldn’t very well dump it out in front of him, but I knew he would begin to care less and less about what I was doing the more he drank. He wasn’t a heavy drinker, so it wouldn’t take much for him to be putty in my hands. A big ball of squishy Rockledge putty.

“Went to Rockledge High, and joined the Marine Corps when I got out. Now I’m stationed in Brunswick, Georgia. Been in for three years.”

“Are they going to send you to Vietnam?” I asked.

“I hope not,” he said, taking another sip. “Cindy would be crushed.”

“How did you guys meet?” I asked.

“My sister, Bonnie introduced us. We just hit it off.” He stopped and laughed to himself. “I proposed to her at the Marine Corps ball after dating for two months. Took her completely by surprise. She said she would *think about it*. I didn’t expect that kind of response, let me tell you. I thought that I had scared her away, but the next day she told me, ‘yes’ over the phone.”

“When’s the wedding?” I asked.

“We’re planning it for the fall,” he answered.

“Damn, Bill, you don’t waste much time, do you?” I said, then laughed.

“I knew she was the girl I wanted to marry the moment I saw her.”

“That’s amazing,” I said. “I guess true love does exist.”

Bill was nearly done with his drink. He turned to me with a slight bob in his head. His voice started to slur a little. “Enough about me, what about yourself?” he asked.

“What can I say? I’m a thirty-nine-year-old recently-divorced man on a mission to get my life back together. I’ve traveled far and wide to be here. Someday I’ll be able to go back home and everything will be in its right place.”

“Well, I wish you luck,” he said.

The bartender circled back over to us. “You guys good?” he asked.

“One more drink for me and my friend here,” I said.

Bill’s eyes lit up. “No. No, I can’t. I shouldn’t,” he said, protesting.

“Of course you can,” I said. “One more drink and we’ll wrap it up, I promise.” The bartender looked at us awaiting the decision. “OK, one more,” Bill said. Things were going easier than I had expected. At that rate, I would have Bill doing tequila shots by the end of the night.

“You’re trouble,” Bill slurred.

“Me?” I said with one hand on my chest, feigning outrage. “I’m a simple man just trying to show my appreciation for good mechanical service.”

“And thirty-nine? You’re *so* old,” he said, followed by laughter.

“You’ve got me there, Bill. I can’t argue with that.”

He looked at his wrist watch then back to me. “Oh man, when I get home, I hope my parents aren’t fighting. They always argue. They’re good people though.”

“I’m guessing they’re not the affectionate type. That’s how my parents were. A couple of cold fish, those two.”

“My mom’s great, but my dad...let’s just say he’s not the hugging type,” Bill said.

“Few men of his generation are,” I said. “That’s just the way it is. In some ways, maybe it’s better. Where I come from, kids are fueled by so much coddling and medication that they jump out of windows if anyone ever tells them that they’re wrong.”

“Interesting,” Bill said, while taking a sip of his second whisky water.

We stumbled out of the bar about five minutes to ten, after three drinks. Bill remembered that he was supposed to meet up with Cindy a half hour before, and began to panic.

“I’ll drive,” I said, holding out my hands for the keys.

“No. I’m...” he said, drifting off. His eyes were half shut, and he was stooped over the pavement, ready to fall over.

“You’re what?” I asked.

“I’m...uh, I’m fine,” he said. Then he began laughing. “There’s somewhere I’m supposed to be right now, but I can’t remember.” He stood up straight and pointed at me. His finger shook in the air. “I knew you were trouble. I said it in there, and now look at me. What the hell did they put in those drinks?” He held his car keys out, dangling them in the air, but he wouldn’t relinquish them.

“Just a little bit of water.” I paused. “And a whole lot of whisky!” We both laughed in the empty parking lot as Bill stumbled forward. “I’m serious. Let me see your keys,” I said.

Bill stopped and jerked back around. “All right, you big baby, here,” he said. I took the keys and guided him to the passenger’s seat with a hand on his shoulder. I was a tad tipsy, but nowhere near the level Bill was at. Our difference in size and weight had a lot to do with it. I got in the driver’s seat and scanned the area for cops. The parking lot was a ghost town, not a car or

person in sight. I started the Pinto and it all felt eerily familiar as I had once owned one myself. It was at that point, I had to continue with the rest of my plan.

“So where to?” I asked. “You want me to drop you off at Cindy’s?”

“No, she lives in Winter Park. Take me back home, I’ll call her later.”

“Aren’t you supposed to meet up with her?” I asked.

“Just go to my house,” he said. “I need to lie down.”

“Very well,” I said, shifting the car into drive. “Just tell me how to get there.”

Bill begin to drift off and his head hit the passenger’s side window, startling him awake. “Holy shit. Where are we?” he asked. His eye lids fluttered to stay awake. And here I thought that *I* looked like a mess.

“We’re just leaving Blackies and I’m driving you home,” I said.

Cindy. I needed to find Cindy. My goal was to split them up in one day, and it seemed all the more fleeting with his insistence that I take him home. Then what the hell was I going to do? Was I going to sleep over? I didn’t think his parents would care too much for that option. In the end, I still owed him five hundred dollars. Then it struck me. The keys to the padlocks on the garage housing the Time Dancer were on the very key ring that was in my possession. They swayed back-and-forth from the ignition switch. I could go to Ray’s, leave the Pinto with Bill sleeping inside, and reclaim my car, now in normal operational condition. There was so much to consider. Was I ready to call it quits in 1973, or was McKee’s mother still worth pursuing? There was so much danger and risk involved, I didn’t know what to think. Everything so far had went partly to plan, and there were reasons to believe that I could still go through with it all.

“Turn right here,” Bill said as we neared a side street a few miles down US 1. He was regularly in-and-out of it, but just coherent enough to provide directions. We turned down a road

in a quaint suburban neighborhood of brightly-colored homes, looming palm trees, and freshly cut grass. “Take a left here,” he instructed. The streets were dark all for the Pinto headlights, and it looked like the neighboring residents had turned-in for the evening. It was, after all, a little after ten, and Rockledge was not a night town. “My house is coming up on the right,” he said. I nodded, having not said a word our entire drive. My mind was in overdrive, trying to plot my next move. Funny to think I could have just driven the car into the surrounding ocean, but such a move would have been counterproductive in the grand scheme of things.

Much to my surprise and adulation, I saw a woman standing outside of a driveway, leaning against a blue Ford Focus. “That’s my house,” Bill said. As he looked closer and saw the woman standing outside his eyes projected pure terror. “Oh shit!” he said. “Shit. This is bad. Oh no.”

“What?” I asked. “What is it?”

“It’s Cindy,” he said. “Oh no, I completely forgot. She’s going to be so upset.”

“So that’s the house?” I said, pointing.

“Yeah, go ahead and turn in here.”

There was one other car in the driveway in addition to the Ford Focus. It was a classic red and white Studebaker, Ray’s car, I imagined. A small porch light was on outside the front door, and house itself looked ideally suburban. It had a garage, a flat roof, two windows in the front, and some steps leading to a screened-in patio door. I slowly pulled into the driveway as the woman remained motionless with her arms crossed and a deep frown on her face. Was it her? My heart beat rapidly in anticipation. It looked as close to McKee’s mother than anyone else I had seen around town. She had on white shorts, sandals, a tucked-in gray T-shirt, and long dark

hair down to her shoulder, parted in the front. “I shouldn’t have went to that bar,” Bill said, rubbing his face, trying to snap out of his intoxication.

The woman immediately approached the car, and—noticing that Bill was in the passenger’s seat—went over to his side. He fiddled with the handle as I turned the engine off.

“Is that your fiancé?” I asked.

“Yep,” Bill said, with a look of dread on his face.

“I can explain everything to her, don’t worry.”

Bill erupted. “There’s nothing to explain to her. I screwed up!”

“Now, Bill, don’t be so hard on yourself. You’ve been working very hard all day.”

He pushed the door open with his foot and struggled to get out of the car. “I’ve been waiting for you for hours,” Cindy said. “I was worried sick about you!”

I opened my door and stepped out. I stared at her in awe. I knew her to only be eighteen or something at the time, but I couldn’t believe how naturally attractive she was. She was also very angry.

“Cindy, I’m sorry. It’s just I, uh…” Bill began.

“You what?” she scowled.

Bill leaned against the car with one hand then suddenly doubled over and vomited on the ground, nearly striking his fiancé’s feet. It was an embarrassing spectacle, to say the least. I ran around the car to help him back on his feet. He was on all fours in the grass with a line of drool hanging from his mouth. “Are you drunk?” Cindy asked. “Have you been drinking?”

“Sorry,” Bill said. It was all he could muster before nearly collapsing in a puddle of his own vomit. “Please, Miss, let me help him up,” I said, locking my arms around his chest.

“And just who are you?” she asked.

“I’m an old friend from out of town,” I responded.

“What have you two been doing?” she asked. “We were supposed to meet up tonight and go out to dinner.”

I pulled Bill up and steadied him on his feet. “We lost track of time. He feels horrible about it. Let me get him inside before he smacks his head on the pavement.” I pulled a barely conscious Bill with me towards the front door of the house. Cindy followed and opened the door for us. The house was dark inside and I followed down a long hallway to a room I assumed was his. Cindy flicked the light switch on as bulbs from an overhead fan glowed. Bill’s arm was around my shoulder and I helped lay him in bed.

“Maybe you should get a bucket or something,” I said. She left the room without saying a word. I pulled Bill’s shoes off and turned him over on his side. He was completely knocked out. The plan, so far, had went splendidly, and who could have foreseen my absolute dumb luck in finding Cindy’s presence at the house. I would proceed on with things as planned. She would be mine before the night’s end. Footsteps squished along the hallway, and she entered the room with a large empty salad bowl and a glass of water.

“Ah, water,” I said. “Perfect.”

“So what happened to him?” she said while setting the glass on the nightstand. I took the bowl from her and placed it on the bed near Bill.

“He doesn’t drink much, does he?” I asked.

“He doesn’t drink at all,” she replied. “We’re supposed to go to St. Augustine tomorrow. Now I don’t know what to think.” She had a spark to her, a strength and determination of a woman well beyond her years. Perhaps it could work out between us after all. I awaited the throbbing pain in my head as a result of my body’s self-defense mechanism against such

thoughts. Instead, I felt no pain. Such an encouraging result could only mean one thing: it was meant to be.

“Why don’t we step outside and talk about this?” I suggested. “Bill just needs some rest. I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

“Who are you?” she asked again.

“I told you, I’m an old childhood friend of Bill’s, just visiting in town for the week. I offered to take him out for a few drinks after he did some work on my car. I guess he just overdid it a little.”

“Fine,” she said. “Let’s go outside. I want to know what you did to him.”

It was quite the accusation, but I followed her outside the house prepared to absolve myself from blame while subsequently criminalizing Bill in the process. We walked down the steps and I sat against the hood of the Pinto.

“Cindy, right?” I said holding my hand out. “My name is Lewis. I’m from California. I knew Bill there when we were children.”

“I’ve never heard of you,” she said.

“Funny you say that because up until today, I had never heard of you either.”

She looked down at the ground, and then her sparkling, brown eyes met mine. “We’ve only been dating for a few months.”

“And I hear that you’re getting married now,” I said. In the distance I could hear crickets chirping in unison against the swaying waters of the coast. A cool, comforting breeze filled the air, and for once in my life, I felt like calmly at ease. I felt that my fate, for once, was my own to make. With Cindy at my side anything would be possible.

“That’s right,” she said.

I shifted on the hood of the Pinto as she stood across from me. “That’s why I wanted to take him out for a drink. I said one drink, but once we got there, Bill couldn’t get enough. He completely fell off the wagon.”

“The wagon?” Cindy asked.

I held my hand over my mouth in shock then lowered it. “He didn’t tell you? Bill quit drinking three years ago after years of struggling with alcoholism. I think the Marines shaped him up.”

“All teenagers drink.”

“Yes, they do, but few reach the level he did. He’s always had an addictive personality.”

“It just doesn’t sound right. If you knew he was an alcoholic, why would you take him out for a drink?” she asked.

“Because he assured me he could handle it. That’s why I said we’ll only have one drink. You can ask him yourself in the morning.”

“I don’t know,” she said, looking back at the house. “I should go in now. Thanks for taking him home. I suppose you can bring his car back in the morning.”

“Wait,” I said while putting a hand in the air. “Cindy, there’s more.”

She stopped her movement towards the house and turned around to face me. “What is it?”

“I think you should know on account of only knowing Bill so long.” I stopped and took a deep breath. “This is really hard for me. I mean, it’s none of my business, but I hate to see two people get married with such clear deception in the air.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked impatiently. Her foot tapped against the driveway in anticipation.

“Oh boy. Here we go,” I said. “I’m talking about the affair Bill is having in Georgia. He told me all about it while we were at the bar. Some girl he met out there really did a number on him. It’s shameful. I just think...I just think you should know.”

“I don’t believe you,” she said, taking me completely aback.

“Come again?” I asked.

“I said that I don’t believe you. It doesn’t make any sense. Just like Bill being a former alcoholic doesn’t make any sense.”

“I’m only trying to level with you here. There are things you should consider before marrying him. You’re a college girl now. Do you really want to be settled-down the rest of your life in some two-bit Florida town with four kids? What happens when you realize that it’s just not working? What then, divorce? A string of loser boyfriends? Maybe you’ll remarry, maybe you won’t, but the bottom line is that you’ll miss out on the one opportunity to be with someone who could make you happy for the rest of your life. Someone who deserves you.”

She gave me a look of utter incomprehension. “You’re spouting nonsense. Maybe it’s the alcohol talking,” she said. “Goodnight, and please bring back Bill’s car tomorrow.”

“Don’t you see it, Cindy? Fate has pushed me here. I’ve traveled far and wide to be standing with you tonight. It was meant to be. *We* are meant to be. I know that we just met. I understand that. But I knew from the moment I saw you that you were the one. This marriage that you’re about to go through with, it’s a sham. I would never cheat on you. I wouldn’t go off and live in Georgia either. If I were in the Marines, I’d get the hell out. I’d travel mountains, continents, and oceans just to be near you. Nothing could stop me, until the day you would be mine.”

I paused and took a moment to let it all sink in. She said nothing. I tried to read her face for any indication that I had made an impression, but she only projected a blank stare.

“So what do you say? This is our last chance before you make the greatest mistake of your life,” I said.

She took in a deep breath, and messed with her hair nervously. “I don’t know what to say. You’re a very strange man, and no one has ever talked to me the way you’re talking to me now. I think we better just forget about this entire conversation. It’s flattering, but I’m sorry, what you’re saying could never work.”

“Why not?” I pleaded.

“You look old enough to be my dad, for starters. What are you, like fifty?” she said.

Her words were a knife in the gut. Granted I could have cleaned up a little bit, but *fifty*? “Oh,” I said, pausing. “I see how it is. I’m thirty-nine, for your information. But if such superficialities matter to you then there’s nothing much more I can say.”

“I think you need to leave,” she said.

What more could I do? She had rejected me point-blank. My only hope was that I had planted enough doubt in her mind to reconsider the marriage to Bill, but she would never be mine. She walked back inside without saying a word. She didn’t even turn around. Not even a wave goodbye. “Well,” I thought. “It was worth a shot.” I had to accept the fact that it was time to go back to 2015 and strategize a new plan. I’d been through quite a bit, and had developed time travel fatigue as a result. I needed to step back, and reassess my options. Far too many blunders so far had clouded my judgment. I needed to go home. In order to do so, I had all the tools necessary. I had the keys to Bill’s Pinto that I could use to drive back to the Ray’s. I had the keys to get into the storage shed to get the Time Dancer. Rather than stand outside the McKee

household and wait them to uncover my intricate web of lies, I decided to leave in Bill's Pinto, go back to the gas station, and free my car from its cell.

I pulled into the vacant parking lot of Ray's and parked Bill's car to the side, near the front of the shop where Bill had originally parked it. I thought about the strange conversation Bill and Cindy would have the next morning, and their utter confoundedness as they tried to figure out exactly who I was. All the lies I told Cindy about Bill would no doubt surface, and Bill would, in turn, tell her what had transpired between him and I. Then they would panic as they discovered his Pinto missing, only to later find it parked at the gas station, and the Time Dance mysteriously missing along with the man they would never see again. I'm pretty sure, at the very least, that I ruined their St. Augustine travel plans. Such a pity. As I pondered these developments I felt a strange tinge of guilt for taking advantage of Bill after all the tireless assistance he had provided. My stupid conscience was at it again.

"What the hell are you doing?" I asked myself as my hand reached into my pocket and dispensed my remaining cash on the passenger seat of the Pinto.

"It's the least you can do. You may hate his son, but Bill wronged you in no way. Have some decency."

"Who do you think you're talking to here? Decency? This mission isn't about decency. This is a search and destroy mission. I haven't the luxury to practice decency. Surely you can understand that."

I couldn't win, and was too tired to argue with myself any further. I would leave Bill what remained of my money, one hundred and twenty dollars, for his troubles. In the meantime, I exited the car and made my way to the mechanic garage. I knelt down and unlocked one padlock, and then the other. I couldn't remember exactly which side my car was at. She was waiting for

me in the garage to the right, beautiful as the day I left her there. I had to consider, at this point, with all that I had done, that I had placed a considerable amount of faith in Bill's mechanical skills. If the car didn't work properly, I would have to contend with everything I had done in Rockledge, and answer for all my lies.

If it did work then I wouldn't have to worry about a thing. The key was still in the ignition, a good sign for starters. I drove the car out of the garage, then placed tossed the Bill's keys inside the Pinto. He would figure it out sooner or later. At the most, I shorted him the cost of repairs and told a series of vicious lies to his fiancé. He'd get over it. It felt good to get back behind the wheel of the Time Dancer. Her engine purred, and I could tell that he had made vast improvements. I needed to input a new date on the dashboard module when it hit me; I could try once more to get my job back at the Drive 'N' Save. What did I have to lose? My destination: **San Diego, California: Drive 'N' Save**. The date and time: **Sunday July, 12, 2015: 11:00 P.M.**

I would see if I could arrive at the correct date this time, three days prior to when Todd had fired me. It was a long shot, but at this point, what wasn't? I'd pull my night shift, go home in the morning and sleep for about three days before retooling my strategy and continuing on with the mission. I pulled out onto US 1 and drove for a few miles just to see how she handled. Everything seemed normal. The engine lights above the steering column were no longer flashing like a flurry of Christmas lights. I felt confident I could get back home in one piece. After putting on my helmet and goggles, I closed my eyes and pressed the large red button marked "Go" on the center console, and was, yet again, met with an intense and dizzying array of bright, white lights, and an incredible G-force the pinned me back to my seat. The car rattled violently, and I

didn't think we were going to make it. I could actually feel my brain squishing against my skull, and what seemed as the beginning of a seizure, fortunately, never materialized.

In a flash of bright light, the car shuttled into a new place that looked significantly different from Cape Canaveral, Florida. It looked like my hometown of San Diego, with the open skies, coasts, and palm trees so uniquely Californian—okay, so I'm describing it much like Florida, but there *are* subtle differences between the two. After a tremendous jolt, I attempted to take control of the Time Dancer—something I hadn't perfected yet—and veered off the busy highway, dodging cars along the way, until I found a parking lot suitable for my liking. I careened the car into a closed Arby's lot, and parked for a moment to get my thoughts together. It was hard not to feel a little disoriented after each leap from one time period to the next. The dashboard module flashed the date and time intermittingly: **Sunday July, 12, 2015: 11:00 P.M.** But I knew by now to remain skeptical of what it told me. Fortunately, there was a bank beside the Arby's that had a large digital display under its sign that read, July 12, 11:01 P.M.

"Yes!" I shouted with an elated smack upon the steering wheel. I had finally perfected time travel. For once, the Time Dancer had taken me to the correct date and time without me having to wing it, though I had yet to get confirmation of the year. It looked like Bill's repairs, whatever they were, had improved the very essence of the machine. I checked the fuel gage. I had half a tank of gas left. Plenty to make it back home, change into my work clothes, and make it to work by midnight. Things were going splendidly, oddly enough. I broke out into a rapture of whistling and tapped the steering wheel along to my off-key tune. The past, was now behind me. I had successfully escaped from 1973 without alerting a soul, and it would be soon when I was back at it again, finding a new time period in which to destroy McKee's life.

I had been away from home for far too long, and it felt good to be back. After a brief stint at my apartment, I made it into work with fifteen minutes to spare. This would be round two with Todd. I knew that the Lewis from three days ago was working in the storage shed, and that he could cause me no trouble or interfere with my plans. My present life technically started three days from then, when Todd had originally fired me. Wednesday July, 15, 2015 was the default date I needed to remember whenever I wanted to travel to the present and not run into myself. Lewis from three days before had the Geo Metro, so I had no other choice but to drive the Time Dancer into work. I had showered, shaved, and was confident that, for once, nothing could go wrong. I entered through the automatic sliding doors and saw Todd counting money at the cash register. He didn't look up or acknowledge me in any way, but I wasn't going to let it discourage me.

"How's it going, Todd?" I asked in a cheerful tone. My mood was upbeat and not even Todd was going to change that.

"Looks like you're on time for once," he said, with his eyes on the money.

"Well, you know what they say, early to bed, early to rise," I said. "What's new with you?"

Todd closed the cash register and sighed. It was clear he had a bug up his ass as usual. Thankfully he was leaving for the night, so I thought.

"Lewis, we need to have a talk," he said.

"What is it?" I asked, expressing concern.

He looked at me with near sympathy in his eyes, which filled me with a sense of dread. He was about to say something that he knew would upset me. To save face, he looked as if

whatever he was about to say troubled him. “Nice try, Todd,” I thought. Why was he all of sudden pretending to be human?

“I’ve been talking with management, and we’re going to have to let you go,” he said.

The words made no sense to me. “What? What the hell are you talking about?”

“I mean that as of tonight, you’re no longer employed here. I apologize. I should have called you today before you came into work, but it completely slipped my mind. I take full responsibility for the oversight.”

A silence came over us. The humming of the freezers in the back grew louder as I tried to cope with and understand exactly what had just happened. It sounded like he had just fired me. It sounded like, despite my showing up to work on time, he was firing me anyway.

“Are you fucking serious?” I said, approaching the counter. “Is this some kind of joke? Very funny, Todd. Are we done telling fucking jokes here?”

“I’m sorry to say that this is not a joke,” he said, looking me solemnly in the eye.

“So you’re firing me? Just to get things straight here, you’re actually fucking firing me?”

“Yes,” Todd repeated. “I’m being completely serious here. I’ll give you your last paycheck before you leave tonight. I am sorry. Management is cutting back.”

“Oh, that’s a bunch of bullshit!” I shouted.

Something ignited within Todd, causing him to go off. “Okay, it is bullshit! Are you happy? There are no cutbacks. I’m firing you, Lewis, because you’re a piss-poor worker. You have a rotten attitude, and frankly I’ve had enough of it. It’s was my decision and my decision alone.”

“But why?” I asked, dumbfounded.

“Because of everything I just said.”

“Which is just more bullshit on top of bullshit.”

Todd took a step back and raised his head up at the ceiling with a deep and leisured breath. He looked back at me and continued. “The truth is, Lewis, I just don’t like you.”

“So that’s how it’s going to be?”

“Yep.”

“You’re not going to get away with this,” I said. “You’ll be hearing from my lawyer.”
Though I couldn’t afford a lawyer and he knew it.

“We have nothing more to discuss on the matter. Now if you give me a minute, I’ll go in the back and get your paycheck.”

I leaned over the counter, nearly hyperventilating. “Do...you...have...any idea what I went through to get here tonight?”

“No, and I don’t care,” he said, walking away to the back office. I scanned the bright aisles and ubiquitous potato chip display stands throughout the store. It was hard to believe that it was my last night in the place. I took my work shirt off and threw it on the counter, wearing only a white T-shirt underneath. He reemerged moments later clutching an envelope, which I assumed to be my pay check. I yanked it from his hand and pointed a finger in his face.

“This isn’t the last you’ve heard from me, Todd. We’ll meet again, very soon, and when we do, I can guarantee you that the tables will be turned in my favor,” I said.

“Is that some kind of threat?” he asked.

“Not at all. Just think about it.” I stormed out, not looking back. Had I stayed any longer, Todd would have been found face-first in the deep fryer. I sped back to my apartment and tried to calmly cope with my termination. I felt that no matter what I tried, the results would always be the same. I was destined to have been fired from the job, and there was nothing I could do about

it, no matter how much I manipulated time travel to my benefit. I lay bed that night, mapping out my next move. I could dwell on my termination no longer, and decided to completely dive into my time travel work. The next best step was to travel to McKee's childhood. I had to go to the source of the problem, that being McKee himself. I would go to the year 1989, the very same year the child who visited me many nights ago in my derelict storage shed claimed to have been from. Though I was certain at one time that McKee had hired the kid as an infiltrating saboteur, I now had my doubts. He could very well had been McKee at ten years old for all I knew. I would find out either way. I was determined, and now, with no job to hold me back any longer, I was going to make history, or destroy his in the process.

END OF VOLUME I

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