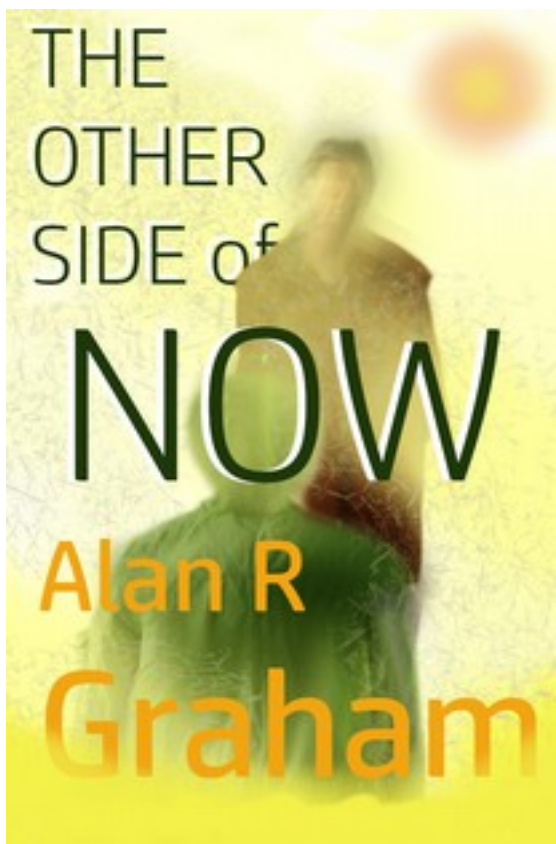


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THE OTHER SIDE OF NOW

WHEN TIME TRAVEL GOES AWRY

A NOVELLA

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Part One

YESTERDAY:

Hot, dry wind whipped at the sleeves of a man in a green parka, yet he persisted... stood, arms stiffly down by his side, leaning into a dust storm which seemed to come at him from all directions. He was waiting. His pale face, framed by a fur-lined hood, panned a short horizon; he could see no more than fifty yards ahead. Heavy eyebrows ached from a constant frown, red cheeks strained in a squint, as he peered out across a Canadian prairie that wasn't there. Unmoved.

Waiting...

A parka wasn't the best thing to be wearing on a searingly hot, summer's day but it was better than nothing against the lashings of dust and debris that would otherwise have penetrated every orifice of clothing and scoured his pallid skin.

Behind him, long since abandoned, stood an old aircraft hangar. A battered maintenance sign hung loose on one side, clattering against the metal structure with rhythmic response to nature's malicious torment that swept towering dust-devils around the perimeter. Nothing further was in sight. There might have been a city sky-line up ahead, mountains to the west rearing from that

prairie floor. None of this was, however, relevant – nor could have been. It was obscured, not just by the dust in his eyes and that incessant rumbling of wind in the eardrums, but equally, by his mind.

He moved abruptly. Raised an arm, pulled the cuff up his thin, right wrist and examined a watch. Then back, staring again into forever.

Nothing predictable... Was anything? Had there ever been a time, he wondered, when things were consistent? His life: had it really happened this way? No longer was time a reliable measure of existence. No... reality could not be trusted anymore.

The man in the green parka stretched his neck. He'd caught himself just in time. Another few seconds and he'd have been on the road to self-pity; followed closely by disparagement and then despair. He was the one – after all – who had messed with the continuum of time, it was not like he could blame anyone else for his predicament, except Bails who had invented the damn thing. So from self-pity he would soon slip into cursing denial and finally, cold, heartless guilt. His mental meanderings were becoming predictable, whilst reality was anything but.

How could he have been so stupid? In one naive and desperate moment at the age of 23 he had ruined the rest of his life. It was not as if he'd had a crystal ball and knew what he was doing, no, he'd acted clueless, like an idiot – not once, but twice more in the space of a little over ten minutes.

He wiped his face with a hand, imagining he was wiping his mind of the madness. Then blinked... *Wait!* Strained to see between the turmoil of dust before him. Had he seen something? Yes – up ahead, a figure. He focused hard, fists clenched in anticipation.

The figure gone! Had it really been there? Perhaps just a clever illusion formed by the driving wind. *No! Yes...* There, he saw it again, coming in then out of sight as it advanced towards him.

The man in the green parka took an awkward step forwards. Concern seemed to show in his hesitant advance. Gone was the

earlier self-assurance, the confidence and control. Why..? After all, he'd been here once before, and now it was clear to him what he was doing and what was supposed to happen next. Yet somehow it all seemed new to him, the ancient script fading before his eyes to leave but a blank sheet. He felt as if he were standing in the middle of a deserted railway station without a train to catch, a frightening thing being all alone and not knowing what was going to happen next.

It wasn't long ago that he'd felt the opposite when confronted with destiny, and remembered feeling horrified at the thought of knowing what would happen to him in the future. He'd shuddered at the thought. Now all he knew was that in the next ten minutes or so he was going to fail at a task in order for something else to possibly succeed. Not much of a consolation... about as normal as the expectations of normal life, except that what he was living was anything but normal.

Really, was his life that different to anyone else's? It didn't matter that he had seen the future, or that he was living a moment he had lived before; like everyone else it still felt just the same, just as thrilling and rewarding as not knowing what would happen next.

He'd had time to reflect. He had spent his whole, short life trying to steer a course, map out routines and plan each step of his life. It was, after all, what humans did in order to feel safe and secure – plan for the future. Nevertheless, knowing the future and not knowing were equally scary. It was a bizarre contradiction. Not knowing if you were going to die tomorrow was just as freaky and upsetting as knowing you were.

He had muddled it down to a human condition he called forward control: Humans played a game with life – albeit, a serious game – whereby they would be given a set of choices. If they chose correctly a positive outcome would be their reward, lighting up a pleasure zone in the brain. Thus, a decision to go fishing gets you a fine supper. Simple game.

It was the lack of control, he felt, that was frightening, not the lack of foresight. It had nothing to do with not knowing and everything to do with playing the game, the enjoyment being in the journey and not in reaching ones destination. No reward meant no

pleasure, which meant emptiness and anxiety, that was the scary thing. Same with destiny; knowing one's own fate before hand was just that: A lack of control. The game was addictive, made humans salivate and want more, the ultimate level to be played being that of cheating death, itself. But when that level was taken out of the game and the ending deemed irrevocable, the horror felt was not fear of death but instead deprivation withdrawal.

The man in the green parka blinked, returning himself to the 'now'. He was standing firm as the figure approached. It grew; it had been but a few inches tall at first sight, had steadily increased in size and detail, and was now clearly that of a tall man with a long garment over the shoulders – a riding coat. Only about 12 paces away, now, slowing up, shuffling uneasily. The man in the green parka could not distinguish the face yet and turned his head slightly to aid his vision. Strands of fair hair lashed at his cheeks. He felt faint, a nausea in the gut building and his knees giving – a teetering on fate's edge – then shivered, though the midday heat was well into a hundred.

It was now...

He swallowed, and even though he knew the answer, he asked:

“Is that you, Nestor?”

“... *that you, Nestor?*”

“... .. *you, Nestor?*” The words echoed in the hollow between his ears.

The figure in the riding coat stopped abruptly. There was horrible recognition in the sound of that voice. “Uh... yes, who's that?” it replied, uneasily.

“You, Nestor..! I'm you.”

Long before any thoughts could surface, the sound of howling wind overtook that woeful mind. The figure in the riding coat drew in a sharp breath, out of resignation rather than surprise and slowly began to consider his counterpart. Though difficult to judge with any degree of certainty, he was tall and of a similar build... yes, they were both bony in complexion, a long chin, though

the fur-lined hood was concealing much of the face. There was that wildness about the eyes, too, which he caught just once when the concealed face looked up. But for a slight hunch of the back, which might simply have been an unconscious manifestation of sadness, he had to agree the man before him was probably his double – the voice a dead giveaway.

However, rather than scream bloody horror or turn pale in disbelief, the figure in the riding coat simply shook his head and blew out a long, frustrated breath.

The man in the green parka understood. He'd set the whole thing up willingly, out of necessity. He watched as the figure in the riding coat stepped back, dropped his head and swore under his breath. He watched the figure grappling with resources, and then, hoping words might offer some comfort, he raised his voice against the fierce wind and said:

“Look, we’ve only got a few more minutes. It was Sandy, she told Bails. But, it wasn’t her fault, it was ours, right... but Bails understands.”

“Yeah, a lot of buts... Doesn't matter now anyway, you're too late,” the figure in the riding coat sneered. “I changed it all around, changed the time... right. I did... didn't I?”

“It’s okay, there’s no danger, if that's what you mean. I’m not here by mistake.”

“Then, what’s happening, why are you here? I've got it all under control...”

“Sure you have, no problem,” the man in the green parka acknowledged, knowing what the figure before him was thinking, having been there in that coat once himself.

For a few seconds, hesitation. Two men, the same men, from different moments of the same life, meeting at one time and in one place. Strange, though they were the same person, within each was a different mind. The man in the green parka showed no outward sign of worry, he was restrained and sympathetic. The man in the riding coat, however, seemed blasé and arrogant in his manner. He was as if the prodigal son having returned from years in absentia now being confronted by the calm reflections and

wisdom of a father, although in this case absence was not being measured in years.

A hand was extended towards the man in the riding coat. He refused it and stepped further back into the swirling atmosphere.

“So, you’re here to fix what – if there's no problem?” the figure shouted through the dust.

“It won’t work, Nestor. You can’t change the future, and you can’t change the past, they are parts of each other, one can’t exist without the other. What’s done is done. Think about it: If the future hasn’t happened yet, how come you can travel here?”

“Oh, Bull! Don’t give me that Bails crap again, he only thinks he knows – nobody can be sure. What if he’s wrong? That’s why I’ve got to try and change things.”

“No, wait. Understand,” the man in the green parka said hurriedly. “There are no surprises in time. Every event already exists... has already occurred. You can’t simply change things by showing up, unannounced. The future knows you’re coming, because you’ve always turned up – even by accident.”

“But I’m going into the past, not the future,” the figure said obtusely, shuffling his feet in clear annoyance.

“Wrong, Nestor. You only think this is the past.”

“It *is* the past because I've been here before!” the figure in the riding coat hollered. *Obviously it's the past, what kind of dumb fool does he think I am?*

“NO!” A frustration was showing. “We only travel forwards, we have both arrived in 'now'. Wherever you find yourself is the present moment.”

The retort was swift: “Hey, buddy. Diamitron doesn't make mistakes... this is the past!”

The man in the green parka shrugged. “Everywhere is the past of somewhere else, that's beside the point. And just like it is for everybody in this world, what happens next is the future and not under our control. There are too many variables.”

“That’s just Bails talking – his usual mind games.” The man

in the riding coat looked up indignantly at his other self from under a mop of fair hair. How many times had he heard Sandy preaching the Bails philosophy in all its shades of gray: *Time does not flow, it is consciousness that flows through time. There is no such thing as motion, we progress in time only and thus motion is perceived. Relatively speaking, therefore, time flows backwards... blah, blah, blah.*

Then, as the memory faded, "It's all just twaddle to impress other bald-brained, head-bangers like himself."

"But it makes sense, see. You can slice a loaf of bread into specific pieces because the loaf has a beginning and an end. But time and space don't start and stop. Don't you see? The only way to get anywhere is if you don't know where you are and there's something beyond it when you get there."

The man in the riding coat laughed. "Ha. Right, it's all so simple. Can't you hear what you're saying? It's crap. I know where I am. I mean... if the future can't be changed then what's the point in living? Like, if what we do makes no difference?"

"Nestor, this Universe is not about us. We don't control anything, and we sure as hell can't do anything about it. We just think we're making progress, so we think we can change things. That's the beauty of life. Not knowing is the reason for life. If we knew everything, there would be no point. So we believe we can make a change, but it's just an illusion."

"Bloody right it's an illusion," quipped the man in the riding coat with some relief. He felt foolish arguing with himself, so jumped at the thought of closing down the discussion with agreement.

"Well, here you are trusting yourself to a machine that lets you trip from time to time even though you don't trust the very theories which allowed Bails to create it in the first place. Why?"

The man in the riding coat stepped up, angrily pointing. "You should know. You should know what I think and how I feel. You're me, aren't you? So, why don't you just let me get on with what I have to do? Like, twenty years ago nobody believed in temporal transference and now it's happened. That's a change, and

we don't know all about it yet so there's room for more change."

Anxiety was again creeping into the voice of the man in the green parka as he responded to the advancing figure. "No – listen! There's no changing anything. We're here arguing, having the same argument we've had over and over, and there's no changing it, believe me, it's exactly the same as ever because it only happened once. I now know. There's no changing the future or the past, or what happens when you go into that hangar – It's already happened, can't you see?"

"Well I have to," the man in the riding coat exclaimed adamantly, coming to a halt just a few paces from his double. "You know what I did, you have to let me go in there. It's not like I meant to do it... kill myself... Us!"

"I know. Sure you didn't," the man in the green parka said with a sympathetic nod. He had strategically placed himself between the figure and his objective, the hangar. He would hold on to this vantage point with his life. "Look, there might be a way out of this, but not the way you plan to do it," he urged. "I know what you're planning to do and I can tell you from experience, it doesn't work. I'm not a past part of us or you would remember doing this, I'm from our future."

"Right, of course. So, you're my future, and hey! you're alive," the man in the riding coat suddenly unloaded, gushing out loud. "Shit... so that means I didn't kill myself, after all."

"Well, it's not as simple as..."

"Sure it is. Nothing to worry about."

"You're not thinking, Nestor. There's more to it than that."

"Look, just stop being so patronizing. I know just as much as you so quit telling me I'm dumb," was the angry response, fists clenched in defiance.

"No – goddamnit – LISTEN. We will die in a few minutes, but Bails has a plan," the man in the green parka said, desperately, squeezing the life out of a fist jammed tightly in his pocket.

"How come we die?" The conversation was suddenly subdued by priorities. The intensity of the last remark had been

shocking, the figure in the riding coat was staring intently. “What do you mean, Bails has a plan? Why didn’t he come out here himself, then?”

“He figured I’d have a better chance of convincing you.”

“Hmm.” A thought passed through a muddled brain, the squint of an eye conceding distrust. “Sure, no wonder you’re so keen for his plan. You’re the one who dies. Not me! That’s why you’re here.”

“That’s an assumption.”

“Well, how can I trust you?”

“What..!” The question sank in with the coldness of a steel blade. It hurt terribly, though when he had last spoken those words cruelty had not been the intention, the man in the green parka remembered the true feeling of abandonment and fear that had gripped him back then. He held a breath before speaking, then let it out slowly to harness his emotions. He wasn’t remembering what he had said from before, he was going to respond as he felt he should, because it was the right thing to say, even though it was as near as he could figure, word-for-word.

“Would a brother ask that of another? Nestor, if you can’t trust your own self, your own flesh and blood, who can you trust?” he challenged, straightening his back and standing tall.

“I don’t know. I don’t know who’s who anymore,” the figure replied, despondently, looking down at a shuffling boot. “You talk to me as if I’m a stranger... a low-life. No, ‘hi buddy, yeah buddy.’ You don’t stick up for me or see my point of view. You’re nothing like me at all... I’m a nice, cheerful guy, and you’re just nasty.”

There it was. In that awful moment the man in the green parka was having to accept what he had tried to deny for so long. However he looked at it now, however he looked at it then, the message was loud and clear: People from different times in their lives were not the same person. They may have had the same memories and adopted similar personalities but their anxieties and motivations, intentions and cravings, were of a moment exclusive to each. That made them individuals. They were no closer than a casual acquaintance; a friendship between them would surely merit

the same level of commitment and time as any regular bond; brotherhood would require a whole lifetime.

He wanted so badly to disagree with his own appalling conclusion because it was preposterous... but could not, because he knew what was coming.

“How do I know you're not going to sacrifice me to save yourself? I'm your past, you've already lived this bit I'm in so you don't need me anymore.”

“For god's sake, Nestor, I'm you. How could I kill my own, younger self? And besides, while I'm alive you can't die... d'you realize?” the man in the green parka affirmed solemnly. Because beyond the paradoxical nonsense, beyond all the theatrics and sibling drama there was a far more serious question he had to ask, the one that had haunted him since he had been right there, on the other side of 'now', the question that would never go away:

“Could *you*? I mean, you were saying it as if it was a possibility, that your own mind – my mind... ours – could actually contemplate such a thing. Could you kill me, on purpose?”

What possessed him to ask when he knew how both felt, did not bear contemplation. It had less to do with actual answers and more to do with redemption. If he didn't ask then he was surely shirking his responsibilities; only in bringing it up would his younger self be forced to consider... and he, then, in time.

“No, of course not,” the figure in the riding coat shot back. “I was just kidding, like, maybe you wanted to take revenge cuz I had killed you by mistake.”

“You can't lie to me, Nestor, so don't even bother... Hey, I may not be the one who gets killed. Had you considered that?”

“Well, it can't be me – like, *this* me!” He stabbed his chest.

“Why not?”

“Cuz... well, because you're from my future, you said so yourself.”

“That's right, I am. And just how much time do you think you have before you end up on my side of this very conversation?”

Two weeks... two hours... two minutes..?”

The arrogant look faded, was replaced by a blank stare.

The man in the green parka stepped up the pressure. “Do you really want to know?”

Did he? It seemed like such an important thing to know, but the more the figure in the riding coat considered its beguiling narrative the more he began to fear it. He could figure out a lot of things if he knew how the future was going to play out. But did he want to spend the last moments of his life in terror? Wouldn't he rather not know when he was going to die? Besides, he didn't want to know; that would just be caving to the assumption that the future could not be changed. He preferred to believe in free will rather than a future cast in stone. He shook his head... then nodded reluctantly. Spoke up:

“Maybe I could slow down... or you could speed up – Bails could figure it out, like, so I don't have to –”

“No,” he lied to his younger self. He didn't want to but he had to. Oddly, the less he knew the better, which was why the man in the green parka was having such a hard time explaining himself.

“OK, so what's this plan Bails has?”

The man in the green parka smiled. It was his way of trying to find courage. He took a step up and said: “Something new. We've never tried it before but it seems to hold. Hear me out, okay?”

A nod... a check of the time in his eye-piece.

“From the moment you transported forwards from yesterday afternoon to today, with the idea of killing Bails, there was no altering what actually occurred. You did get here, arriving in a little over... uh,” a glance at his watch, “Ten minutes. You expected Bails to be in the hangar and so you went in. But it wasn't him in there, it was another you. You had no idea until it was too late, of course, and killed your own self, accidentally... You witnessed our death and that was that. There is now no changing that event – or any other.”

He stopped, looked hard into a dying man's eyes, knowing

that what he'd just said was unequivocal. For there he stood, in an event that had already taken place, speaking words that had been said before. There was no questioning veracity. And it was not that he was repeating those words from memory – all that time ago – no, a fluid manifestation was transpiring, words pouring out from the other side of 'now'.

They were coming to him spontaneously, his own lucid creations, or so it felt. Indeed, he spoke them with the same fervor and assuredness as if he were thinking them up on the spot. He couldn't have changed anything even if he'd wanted to, even though he knew what was coming next. Each new moment was a complete surprise and yet a distant memory all in one thought. He was living as if high on some exotic drug, as if conscious of 'now' from two different, slightly out of sync' PoVs. Every word had an echo, every movement a ghost...

He went on, with renewed confidence: “You would have created an unsinkable alibi for yourself, by killing Bails in the future. But it was the fallibility of order which screwed your perfect crime. You forgot that chaos was the bases for creation. So, there you found yourself, alone and scared. You'd caused your own death and had less than twenty hours to do something about it. Not many people get a chance like that,” he quipped with a smirk.

Unfortunately for the man in the green parka, humour was not going to do their conversation any favors. While he'd had plenty of time to come to terms with their predicament his counterpart had not; he was just minutes into the mayhem and extremely upset.

“That's enough. Go talk to yourself and leave me alone,” was the reply. “I can deal with this problem without any plan... or Bails.” He stepped deftly to one side, was passing his future self when he turned and added: “You should thank me. You're the one I'm going in there to save.”

As the riding coat swept by a hand from a green sleeve reached out to grab it, but the figure pulled away. The thought of contact between them, disturbed him... “Stay back! Don't touch me,” the younger man snarled.

“Hey.” The green sleeve was swept aside but remained poised, its owner trying to assert an invisible bond of fellowship. “I Know how you feel... alone, scared. But you're not alone. I just want you to know I lived through what you are dealing with now. I can help. It's all I want to do... the last thing I can do before I die.”

“Look, I...” the young one, approaching an apology.

“I know,” the man in the green parka nodded. He was glad he'd been given a second chance. “I'm sorry. I've had time to reflect on all of this, while this is relatively new to you.” He turned to face his younger self, though careful to conceal his features. They were now at arms length, so close in a physical sense, yet so far apart in reality they could have been different phases of the moon.

“Hear me out...”

An interruption:

“Is Armstrong in on this?” The figure in the riding coat queried, suspiciously.

“No. But she's part of it.”

“How do you mean?”

“I'm trying to explain – let me finish. Right, so after killing yourself in the hangar you were returned to yesterday by the Diamitron, as normal. Naturally you were in a state, you assumed the only way to solve the dilemma was to go back into the past, and change the original time you had set for arrival at the hangar, without your earlier self knowing. So you transported yourself back, hid in the lab and waited. As your earlier self was putting on that riding coat and walking towards the Diamitron ramp, you sneaked over and turned back his destination time by an hour just before he was transported. Instead of one o'clock, he was going to arrive here at noon. Off he went and you were then thinking you had avoided the catastrophe. But in the back of your mind there was a problem. Something odd... what was it?”

He paused and raised an eyebrow, fearing he might have stepped over the line again... but there was no sign of aggrievance this time, so quickly he continued:

“Okay, your time then up, you were returned by the Diamitron back to where you started from. Sandy tried to warn you, she tried to explain, but you – well, we – wouldn’t listen.”

“Yeah. Then I got it,” the figure in the riding coat shrugged off with a curt refrain. “It wouldn’t have made any difference when I changed the arrival time to, because that’s when I showed up at the hangar. Whatever time it was, was when it was!”

“Exactly. Then you thought you could perhaps convince your earlier self not to go, which lead to a all sorts of confusion and doubt. Better, you convinced yourself, to change his destination and wipe this hangar off his chart,” the man in the green parka said pointing to his right at the clattering monolith.

“No. I couldn’t confront ‘me’ in person. Like, that ‘me’ was obsessed, he wanted to kill Bails and would probably have killed anyone who got in his way. It really was a monumental balls up.”

“Still is,” the man in the green parka muttered with a frown. There was that question again: Might he have killed his own self? Wouldn’t being confronted by your own double be enough to make you sit up and listen? After all, he was working in a time transference lab so such a phenomenon would hardly be peculiar. He remembered thinking that Bails and Sandy could easily have cooked up some scheme to confuse him, like faking his double, and that if he was thinking it then his earlier self would no doubt come to the same conclusion, too. He couldn’t trust anyone.

Then there was the other thing. The police might try to lure him into a confession by putting pressure on his future self to interfere. So it was back to shifting the location. Unfortunately, Sandy explained the futility of that one and it then dawned on him that the only possible solution was to do the one thing he feared most of all.

The man in the green parka shifted his stance... “Having failed to alter the past and avoid your fate, in a panic you decide to transport again... only this time, forwards... and here you are, thinking you can change the future. I’d say, odds are, it’s you who is going to be killed, if you go into the hangar now. You think there’s another one of us stupid enough to be in there, right now?”

“Yeah, I know what I did, all right..?” The figure in the riding coat was waiting for something to make sense, all the while fine sand began to form little drifts around their boots; miniature, mobilized dunes were creeping over the ridges of the soles and rising efficiently over their toe caps. He stamped a foot. “How the hell was I supposed to know?” he muttered.

“You should have trusted Sandy,” the man in the green parka replied, and stuffed bony hands deeper into his pockets. He stared out into beyond, from where his other self had emerged, where he imagined Bails and Sandy to be in some other moment... Waiting. He was wondering about their plan. Would it work? *It had to*, he thought – and then – *of course it will; there is nobody with the insight to consider temporal transference like Bails.*

His meanderings were swept aside.

“So you talked a lot, but I never heard anything about a plan.”

The man in the green parka frowned. “This is it... Us, here... right now. Why would I lie?” he swallowed. “Why would I cause you, my past... myself... any harm?”

“Maybe you wouldn’t. Maybe I *can* trust you. But, heck, why should I trust my life to some stupid theory?”

“But it’s already working. Believe me.”

“You mean, I’m not about to enter that hangar and kill myself?”

“Nestor, it’s not that. You are looking at it!”

“Well, all I see is hesitation,” said the man in the riding coat as he turned to go.

“Okay... fine then. But just think about something... Were you interrupted by anyone when you first went in there and killed yourself?”

“Of course not. Why would I be going through with all of this if my future has already...” The man in the riding coat faltered. It struck him as odd, what he was about to say. It was all too crazy. Too complicated. “Anyway, what I’m going to do now has not

happened,” he said. “I’m going in there, whatever you say.”

“For Christ’s sake! Can’t you see? You’re not thinking any new thoughts here, you’re just acting out your part of the play. You can’t change anything.”

“So why bother trying to persuade me not to go in there?”

“Because I have to.”

“... Well, I have to go in there.”

A pause ...

The man in the green parka watched as his earlier self strode off towards the hangar. And his mind wandered after, into a past he’d almost forgotten; to a conversation he’d had that same morning with Sandy, though it had been in the day before. August 13th, 2048 Seemed so very long ago, but it was only yesterday.

There she lay, as always, in repose on the inclined, implanter bed, imprisoned in a pale, orange bodysuit. She was calm, she could not get up, she was fastened to the implanter by a myriad of blue tubes protruding from either side of her body. She had the look of a centipede about her. Surrounding the head of the implanter, a rainbow of taut, fibre-optic cables fanned up to the low ceiling behind her head, like some scalloped canopy adorning a spoiled princess. Of course, she had no desire to get up. No longer was she the young female she appeared, with a mind of her own to enjoy. Not anymore.

An accident at age nineteen had had her swept off to Biotomy, the place where they took people who were no longer able to offer assistance to society. With all vital organs removed except her brain, Psythmn-4, a miniature, life support system had then been implanted in her abdominal cavity. The spinal cord, tapped in numerous places, was linked to the lab's optical mainframe to produce an inimitable, self profiling, audio-visual, data interface. She was a computing genius, far superior to any current artificial intelligence. It would be years before AI would surpass the complexities of a human brain.

As if a girl in deep thought, she lay in regal repose, eyes blinklessly open and staring, in a laboratory of stark contrast. The

Lab was a lifeless, colourless place, pale gray and strip-lit with low ceilings that appeared to dominate and crush any furnishings that stood taller than a table. And there were many: mostly racks for electronic switching circuits that looked like filing cabinets with their draw fronts removed. They stood like sentinels all around, sturdy, six foot pillars each with a chimney flue type conduit of cables disappearing up into the depressingly low ceiling.

The only other level was table-tops. They ran between pillar racks, all having a designated purpose. Bails had a split section comprising two tables at right angles about six feet behind Sandy, who was centrally located in the lab. His tables were supporting various diagnostics readers hooked up to monitors; no papers, documents, files nor books; nothing but wires, circuit boards and 3d CGA screens. Nestor was remembering the lab layout as if from his own station, tucked away on the back wall. From there he could see passed Sandy and Bails to the shadowy opposite wall where a staircase rose, disappearing into the ceiling; besides which sat – or rather, lay – an unimposing, unlit, black ramp, a foot off the concrete floor and some 20 feet long, that headed into a corner of the Lab as if to nowhere...

The Diamitron.

Nestor's mind was not on that ugly contraption, not yet anyway. He would rather spend time reminiscing about that lovely, biotronic colleague who was to become his lasting companion throughout this horrendous ordeal... Sandy.

She was beautiful; magnificent; arresting. Her pecan complexion shone like a polished scarab, eyes magnetic, alluring, as if whirlpools drawing in whoever gazed. A crown, of sorts, of glass syringes penetrating her skull left none in doubt – she was regal, and omnipotent. Yet, though immensely knowledgeable and competent in the extreme, Sandy still exuded a kind of, childish naivety. Two opposing traits, intelligence and ignorance – *ironic* – crammed into the body as if vulnerability were a necessary function in order to make her more attractive and engaging.

Was it on purpose? he wondered, *or was it an element of oppression in the algorithms to keep her from knowing too much.*

“... Nestor, you cannot override your own existence,” she would say in her soft, firm manner; twitching and wriggling on the implanter, this beguiling, biotronic creature’s own peculiar way of communicating through the 'company' system.

That company was Goreletchy Enterprises, a holding company in possession of many small subsidiaries, one of which became the first to successfully integrate optical switching and biotronics. This field of science became known as Biotomy and Goreletchy was the leader. It was for this giant corporation, and somewhere in the below levels of a sprawling Edmonton City edifice, that Sandy, Nestor and Bails worked. What had once been designated 'VIP' parking, had now been partitioned off.

Bails had been acquired when he was fresh out of university, having completed a marginal doctorate in temporal transference. He postulated the metaphysics of dislocating objects in time; a hypothesis – not the mechanics – of such a concept. It was based on an older model of the Block Universe Theory: whereby all moments/events in time already existed, our interpretation of time's arrow being merely subjective, a necessary function in order to conceive progress. But he wanted to know how. It had lead him to receive an Aristartus Award. It was all a bit of a joke to most senior physicists, and so the offer of employment with Goreletchy came as a surprise to him; even more so when he was given the run of an entire basement laboratory to expand on his ideas.

That was five years ago. Bails, bald from birth, bore a squat frame which he carried about uneasily. He wore a pair of sun glasses which appeared glazed to his forehead, and always wore a white shirt, un-tucked and falling about the hips. Genius he might have been; hard to get on with he was... but even harder to understand.

Sandy, on the other hand, was the complete opposite. She was a gem, would – could – do no harm. A perfect compliment to Bails and his coarse grained character; Sandy was there only to consider and inform... and with the cutest of European accents – which Bails had originally programmed in as a joke – that always floated deliciously about in Nestor's head long after she had finished speaking.

“... Nestor, it is not so necessary to do something just because it is possible. Although universal mechanics suggests that everything will inevitably be, ethics should dictate otherwise, given that in time everything will have its moment. For the demise of a civilization is always due to its own vanity. Do you follow me, Nestor? The logic of progression is motion, but we may just as easily reach a point in time quickly as we may slowly. It is simply the desire to reach that goal which not only hastens the outcome but also affects the quality of the event.”

Yes, he remembered her so well. Half the time he had no idea what she was on about, though he always enjoyed the way she tried so hard to inform, to be a part of the team. Foolishly, perhaps, he would give her more human characteristics than she warranted, but it was hard not to; she did look and seem so... so, human.

Sandy: alive by mainframe intercourse; the laboratory pet.

And here he was revisiting memories of old haunts, past thoughts and events he had tried to ignore but which, in the ‘now’ of it all, had become clearly significant... This was the eclipse, his present moment about to cast its shadow upon what was to come... as he stood watching his dwindling future stepping up to the door of destiny.

Bails, some three years prior to this moment, had completed the first successful time dislocation in history. They'd transported a coffee mug two minutes back in time, to the very lab where they were working. It had materialized before he, Nestor, had initiated the sequence for dislocation of the original mug sitting in front of him. Now there were two mugs, leaving him completely incapable of knowing when to press 'enter'... where the precise, two minute mark was... and if he missed it, what would happen?

He was remembering how he'd broken into a sticky sweat worrying that he was about to blow up the building, the entire city block and kill everyone if he couldn't press the stupid key at the right time. The horrible humming noise from the Diamitron was messing with his head and the intense flickering leds on all the stacks were just cheering on a disaster. He couldn't think, couldn't move. *Would they all get transported into another dimension... universe, even... lost forever?*

After much hesitation Bails had stepped up and pressed it for him. It wasn't about when you press it, Bails had commented, it's just that you do. Time knows, destiny does the rest.

Nestor had always been a bit cautious, from an early age. His desire to study sciences had come from his worries about how things worked. To allay his fears of the unknown and his fortunes he needed to know. He hadn't even been to the moon yet, when all his classmates had. Nestor was not getting onboard one of those cruisers until he knew exactly how the new pulse rocket engines functioned. He liked being in control, he trusted himself more than anyone to see him through the day.

At twenty three years of age, he was young to be holding such a dynamic position in research, realistically that was because no one else had wanted the job. Bails had advertised for a basement facility IT guru who was "Not Afraid of Heights". Nestor was the only one who had applied. Well, because he *was* afraid of heights.

Months later and Bails was having trouble with tolerances within the 'Life Assembly Program'. Teleporting biological entities was in a whole new league. While both animate and inanimate objects were composed of atoms and molecules, material bodies of biological state were in constant redistribution: Life was one big headache. "Rabbits would often turn into rare-bits," as the saying went.

It was then that they acquired Sandy, and with her came stability.

A year later Bails had set foot on the device, gone back himself, to a storage hold in level ~B12. It had been just a quick trip, three hours back in time, nothing outrageous. Bails had trusted Nestor not to say anything, to anyone, at least until he'd had time to address the Diamitron assembly routine and set up mines. He'd been worried about 'Gory', as he called the company, that it might jump on his project prematurely, take it over and screw around with it for whatever reason.

That was when Nestor slipped up...

Perhaps this was retribution. The man in the green parka smiled to himself, as he watched his younger self stride off towards

the hangar. Perhaps the scales of time had him balanced against his treachery, and this suffocation of time loops was the misfortune he would have to endure as punishment for messing with creation.

But should he take all the blame? It was Bails who'd made this possible. He'd invented a machine, the Diamitron, and along with it all the mystery and mayhem of temporal transference. Granted, the thing was crude; it allowed for dislocations in time and place, but only within certain logistics parameters. This was due to the amount of energy required to produce a dislocation, the company grid allocating only so much to each department. So, just because it was presently only able to manage a few hours and a few miles of travel, didn't mean it was a toy.

And then there were certain peculiarities about time, some of which were unknowns, others to be handled with the greatest respect. Such as, things which Bails had incorporated in his doctorate thesis and which his peers had found so ludicrous. For one thing: he'd predicted that time in the past ran at a slower rate. All matter in the universe, he'd said, was contracting, bodies were shrinking in proportion to the speed with which they traveled through the cosmos.

His theory went on to argue that larger masses in the past would experience change at a slower rate just as 'a big pendulum swings slower than a little one'. It was this example he gave to suggest that as we raced into the future we were all accelerating in time as we shrunk towards infinity. And he proved it by dislocating that day to ~B12. He'd been gone twenty minutes by the lab clocks, however, on his return, the watch he was wearing showed only a passing of six minutes.

He was euphoric. Nestor had never seen even the glimmer of a smile from Bails, but he was sure he'd seen a twitch that day. Careful not to assume too much, Bails was at his desk in a flash, eager to run a simulation; for Bails, things were never dry until they cracked.

It was when one of Armstrong's ferrets overheard a conversation in the mess hall, that Nestor was summoned 'up-levels'.

“Nestor. I hear you have something to tell me?”

“Mam..?”

Armstrong lunged at him over the desk. “What do I look like? Are you calling the Managing Director of Goreletchy Enterprises a complete idiot?” A calculated pause. “Nestor... you are pathetic,” a putrid smile following her words.

She receded and reached for a jar on her desk that was labelled 'Nano-skin'. She nimbly unscrewed the cap, dipped a finger in and scooped out a blob of pale goo. She placed the blob on her nose and he watched as the skin on her face rippled out, as would a pebble displace the surface of a pond, from nose to ears. She then swiveled playfully in her chair, placed both elbows on the desk and cocked her wrists to point skinny fingers at the employee sitting before her.

“You amaze me, Nestor,” she gurgled. “How did you ever get a job with us? You are worthless, you’re not even a pawn, and yet you think your little effort may have some significance in the running of events here. How quaint!”

“But, Mam –”

“Oh get on with it, man,” Armstrong said as she stood up and straightened her quilted suit. The chair she’d left behind obligingly raised itself up on a pair of biotronic legs and followed its boss for a couple of paces. “Stay!” it was commanded – and obeyed, relaxing into a squat.

“Things a damn nuisance,” she complained. “Almost tripped over a side table the other day because it was following me about with my drink. They’ll have to come up with something better than that if I’m going to the convention next month.”

Armstrong was strolling up to the immense window behind her desk. She then turned to check herself in the mirror on the door behind Nestor. She was rotund, yet surprisingly agile for a woman in her latter years, and uncomfortably precise about everything she did. How old was she? No one had a clue. Was she all human? Some doubted it. That scruffy, blonde hedgehog on her scalp just had to be a cephalopod wig, he was sure it kept changing shape with her mood. It also seemed to Nestor that she was a little mad,

but that might have been due to his being terrified of the woman.

“Be a hero, not a fucking bore! You can be terminated today, you know, it’s in your contract. Your dwelling can be reallocated, your belongings recycled and that girl you seem to enjoy the company of, well... tee, hee... I believe she is on an implanter at this very moment.”

Nestor sat up. “Mam, it was just a preliminary experiment.”

“Yes, Nestor...”

“Bails. He doesn’t want to make any assumptions. You know, can’t draw conclusions from just one success. Lots more to do. So, he did dislocate... yes, a little thing, really.”

Armstrong lowered herself onto the arm of Nestor’s seat, a hand dropping to his knee. She spoke slowly, almost lovingly, through a facetious grin, “I have a memo here from Biotomy, something about dwindling inventory. And your Latina match, Trisha, is rather, well.... how shall I put it... nice and fresh?”

The CEO then raised herself up and looked out of the window, a waspish voice seeming to buzz about the room. “It’s a super field, don’t you think, Nestor? I marvel at what Biotomy can do with all those defunct body parts. You know, I’ve reserved a space for myself right here, on level ~173, with instructions for each part of my body to be used in precise ways. Even my penis,” her voice breaking into falsetto. “Yes...” a creak, “Bet you were wondering whether I had a joystick or not.”

She peered at him sweetly for a second, then howled with laughter.

“Mam. All I know is...”

And that was that, Nestor gave in, and explained. Not voluntarily, it had been a violation. He felt stripped, naked, dignity torn from him like a towel. And so, in an effort to comfort himself he had thought that perhaps just a little information would do no harm. *Only a little*, he kept telling himself. But with each week more system glitches detected, more configuration updates, more accuracy alignments and reprogramming; yet more information to find its way creeping onto Armstrong’s desk.

The thought of that vile creature brought the man in the green parka back to the event he was standing in. “Wait!” he shouted after the figure in the riding coat.

“WHAT?” came back the cry.

“Armstrong. We double crossed her.” the man in the green parka shouted back.

The implication of this final statement sank in just before the figure in the riding coat reached a pair of huge sliding doors to the front of the hangar. He was a blur within the fierce rage of swirling dust, but the man in the green parka saw him hesitate. Saw him turn. Heard that voice again, rising up to compete with the wind. A scream above the roar:

“SO WHAT!”

There was that... Perhaps not so very important for the man in the green parka, because he had lived beyond death and so it was less of a concern. Perhaps - *perhaps not*, he thought. He reminded himself that his journey had taken him far from Goreletchy Enterprises and the lab where Bails was now. He was in no position to be dictating what was and was not important anymore? *Sandy would know.*

Sandy always knew something. It was she who had paged Bails after that last dislocation in time which found the figure in the riding coat now hesitating at the hangar doors. Of course, she'd been programmed to raise the alarm if ever there was an anomaly, but it seemed to the man in the green parka that she was more than just a bank of programs... there were feelings. *Aren't we all just a bank of programs? And don't we still find a way to express ourselves in some unique way?*

“Anomaly,” he chuckled into the wind.

This was no anomaly... this was a monumental fuck up!

Part Two

TODAY:

Bails had been on Level ~4S in a budget meeting with management most of that afternoon. When the beeper sounded under his right ear lobe, he'd rubbed his bald head, knocked his glasses onto the table and excused himself instantly. He was down to Level~B12 in less than a minute. On arrival, Sandy prepped him. The adroit consideration was that Nestor had just made several unscheduled dislocations beyond the present and into the past, three times in the last hour. He was now seriously distressed – *something about killing himself*, Sandy tried to get across.

For Bails, the first concern was whether Nestor would return from this latest trip. If Sandy's assumptions were correct, the body most likely to die tomorrow was the one which had just stepped back into the Diamitron. However, this would be an unremitting loop whereby the effect was now the cause, something Bails was not happy with. No, it was more likely that Nestor's demise would be as a result of an established order of time. *Yes*, he thought, *much more satisfactory*: tomorrow Nestor would head out to the hangar for some reason and enter the place, unawares. The odd thing was, he would have to be aware. The death had already occurred in Nestor's mind and he would clearly carry that memory with him into tomorrow. Bails made an obvious but necessary hypothesis:

The dying on Nestor's time-line would have to be at a point beyond now, it couldn't be at an earlier point otherwise Nestor would be dead and be unable to do all this messing around. Some future point – some future Nestor – would be aware that he was going to die.

A one-sided smile curled up into the cheek of a round-faced physicist. He never smiled, at least, not that anyone had ever seen, he made absolutely sure of that. Smiling was reserved for technical achievements, beautiful arithmetic formulas, tangible contradictions to the standard order of chaos. He had never really understood why smiles and frowns were worn for any other purpose; why emotions were displayed on account of someone acting stupidly or out of character. Which is why he hadn't given Nestor's predicament much thought from a human perspective. What was the point...

“Sandy?” Bails said inquiringly, as he stood up and approached that reposed shell of a past life. For some unknown reason he had felt a need to communicate his thoughts. He looked down into her eyes; beautiful, topaz orbs glistening iridescently from within a pool of pink, competing with the fall of colorful, weaving wires descending from her skull to the optical processor beneath. *Grotesque*, he thought: *friggin' medical profession's turned itself into a religion. Look at her: Nobody dies anymore... We're suppose to die... You're suppose to be dead, Sandy!*

She responded, as of a shiver running down her spine, and then tilted her head ever so slightly towards him. The sudden movement startled him. He looked away hurriedly and said...

“I see it like this: we wait for him to come back, if he's DOA then there isn't much we can do but bury him. If he's alive we have to send him back there, to warn himself not to fool around. His returning alive this time around may only be as a result of us interfering – sort of.”

“Bails, you are consistently correct,” she spoke sotto voce, articulating slowly and sympathetically, as she always did. It would irritate him, Biotomy had such a crude sense of humor.

She went on; “He has terminated himself in the future and as we have no way of knowing which segment of his time-line will

suffer the consequences, it can only be summarized that due to our efforts a new path may emerge which exonerates the former.”

“Good, then we wait. How long before TTR?”

“Bails. Trans-temporal dislocation was 16:21 hours, with an optimum attainment of 24 minutes and seven seconds. Calculations permit an absentia account of three minutes 12 seconds in real-time dictate, and trans-temporal relocation will therefore commence in exactly 35 seconds... 34... 33...”

“Yes, fine,” he cut in with frustration. “Now, we may be able to hold off the moment of death for a while, but not indefinitely. Any ideas, Sandy?”

“Bails, one can not override one's own existence.”

“Oh, never mind,” he turned to one of the four monitors above the Diamitron console and examined a grid... muttering to himself, “Should've binned her vox file long ago.” Then raised his voice.

“Have you forgotten how to interface with the rest of the system? Your combined maturity modes are 10 quantum layers above everything else in this lab, your quartz memory far in excess of seventh generation base – you're supposed to come up with answers, not wallow about in self-satisfaction.”

“Bails, you have a way with words,” she said, sweetly, trying to emulate speech threads she had heard from Nestor..

“What are you talking about?” he groaned. “Don't forget, I programmed your dialogue algorithms.”

“... Bails,” she quickly continued. “I will realize a rational, pattern procedure for sequential dislocation.”

“Oh, good. Nice of you to try –” He went silent.

It was Sandy! She began to gyrate rhythmically on the implanter bed. “Bails, I must interrupt. Trans-temporal relocation in five seconds... now four... three... two...”

Bails moved quickly. Stepped to the side of a concrete pillar and dropped two switches on a junction box. Above, in the low, foam ceiling, lights were dimmed and the large sprawling

laboratory became silent. He needn't have installed light switches, most all manual functions could be handled by T-Scan software controlled by thought. But Bails disliked modern automation, he had a pet-hate for all things which had a talent for screwing up – and also, there was the off chance that someone else within the system might be monitoring his thoughts. So he went manual were ever possible.

Bails stood watching his creation with paternal affection, saw the glow from the Diamitron ramp in the far corner reflected off the shiny duct work and reaching cablery running in bundles throughout the place. It was more like a metro service duct than a lab.

Nothing unusual transpired on TTR. Nestor was just there, as he'd always been, now walking towards Bails across the concrete floor – there he was.

“Figured you'd be here,” he said, a little exasperated. “Guess I messed up big, this time.”

“I'd say.” Bails raised the lights. Leaned against the pillar arms crossed, watching as Nestor approached.

“Listen, Bails. This wasn't my idea, really, I didn't mean to do any –”

“Hey. I don't give a shit, all right.”

“Great! We're talking my life here,” Nestor grumbled. “If you don't mind I'd like to feel a little sorry for myself before I die, so hear me out.” He walked passed Bails and over to Sandy. “Everything run smoothly?” he asked her.

“Nestor, relocation procedure reads a precise, zero-variance configuration. Body mass correctly ascertained, molecular assortment synchronized effectively in life assembly program, alien artifacts discarded as compliant with reentry grade six. You are feeling fine.”

“That's great,” he seemed relieved. Shook off his long riding coat, though not a trace of sand fell free. He was clean, felt refreshed, returning as he had left; TTR always had that effect on those who went through with the experience. He turned to a hook

on one of the pillars and hung up his coat, then over to Bails.

“Now listen, Bails. I'm sorry about all this, see, it wasn't suppose to happen, I mean, I didn't want to do it, but Armstrong had me pinned, right.”

“Ah! So you've been leaking all my research to that pigshit chairwoman. Now I get the picture.” He picked at his nails.

“No... no. You don't get it at all.” Nestor dropped his gaze to the floor. “Sure, she wanted control of your work, told me she'd have it on the market in less than a year, but she knew you... Knew you wouldn't hand it over. So she got to me – Jeez!” He moved over to where Bails was aslant the concrete pillar, whispering now, as he approached.

“She showed me a simulation a couple of days ago... of my own goddamn match, man... my girl, Trisha. Had her in Biotomy, know what I mean... laid out on one of those implanter beds.” He was hissing at Bails, did not want Sandy to hear. “I guess she was in for her quarterly check up and Armstrong had been waiting with goons. They must have drugged her during the routine and then... I... shit, I suppose she never even knew – doesn't remember a thing.”

“Was she...?”

“Jeez – Yes, man.” Nestor snarled out loud. Then, eyes wide-staring. “Said if I didn't take care of you, she'd end up in someone's sleazy, downtown office, hitched up... like Sandy here. Worse. She could end up in a brothel – you know – one of *those* places..?”

Bails bit his lip. Stepped back to the console, pretending to be deep in thought. Listened to his engineer, raving still.

“She wanted me to get you out of the way – you know – pop you off. So I figured you'd be out at the hangar as usual on Wednesdays after lunch, doing more experiments, and all I'd have to do was go in and make some adjustments to baby sister... Diamitress. Then you'd be lost in time between this transporter,” he pointed over to the bare looking ramp in the corner, “And the one in the hangar.”

Bails looked up. “Does 'pigshit' know about the hangar – about Diamitress?”

“No, I never told her.”

“Oh, good.”

Nestor again. “Look, I'm sorry. It was either you or my match, there was nothing I could do – man, you've got to believe me.”

Turning back to the console Bails tapped out a command on the screen. His expression descriptive; Nestor had acted stupidly. He could have done many things, the least he could have done was talk to someone – *confessed to him, even* – would have been two against one, then. So now, on a purely practical bases, Bails saw only one option. It was double pronged: help Nestor to save his research. He looked up.

“Well, lets deal with one thing at a time. First we have to give you back a life, and we don't have much time.”

“Thanks, Bails. But I thought that was all taken care of,” Nestor inquired, head cocked in Sandy's direction.

“You're out of time, Nestor. We have to send you back there,” Bails replied, paying little attention to Nestor's tone of voice.

“Why? Shouldn't I get the hell away from here, away from the hangar, this city – everything? I mean, If I never go back to the hangar I don't die.”

“You will,” Bails said coldly. “You can't mess with destiny. But think of it this way: for the next couple of days you are invincible. If you could throw yourself off the top of this building, which I somehow doubt you have the balls to do, you would actually survive. Cool... Wha!”

Nestor frowned. “I could take sleeping pills or... or..!”

Sandy broke in, trying to help, “Nestor, You cannot override your own –”

“For christ's...*sake*, will you stop that,” Bails screamed at the bed ridden corpse. Swallowed audibly. Then, teeth clenched, he

continued: “You're alive now, Nestor, that's because we sent you back there again, I don't know when or why but we must have.” Bails said, monotone. “Didn't you meet him?”

“You mean, another me? Yeah, but... how did you know?”

“Because you're here, alive. Didn't he explain?”

“Sure... said there was a way –”

“Yes. What way?” Bails focused in. Hoping, but knowing it was futile to out-smart fate.

“Didn't say.”

“Think, man. What way?”

“Jeez, he didn't explain how, just that I was not to go in there – into the hangar.”

Bails breathed out heavily. “Shit, I'd hoped we could borrow our own idea... from the future. I sure as hell don't know what the answer is... Oh, well.”

“Bails... one cannot –”

“Not a word, Sandy. Don't say it, OK!”

“... It was kind of odd, though, you know,” Nestor spoke as words still echoed off the suffocatingly, low ceiling, “That other me you sent, he was wearing a green parka, hood up and all. Must have been hotter than hell out there. I know it was blowin' about a bit, but the way he was dressed you'd think it was a snowstorm.”

A stillness enveloped them. One thought after another crossed the void between moments, hovering a while, then outward to the prairie and beyond. No. Nothing. There seemed no logical reason for that. Bails waved a palm in Sandy's direction.

“Well? Go on then, what is it?” he could see her reflexive thoughts bouncing from one tendon to the next.

“Bails, Nestor. Consider: A parka would suggest a cold weather environment.”

“No shit, Sherlock..!”

Nestor cut him short. “Bails, give it a rest, she has to say it

that way. Let her finish.”

He was over by her side, smiling down at her. Though he did not receive one in return he knew she felt his, and would have smiled could she have. He watched black eyelids flutter, followed by a quick tensing of the neck; made him want to reach down and give her a shoulder rub, tell her not to worry, that everything would turn out okay. He glanced quickly at the VSM display module to her side, she was ticking along just fine, and would do so “indefinitely” as chimed the company's marketing line.

Then she spoke: “Nestor, do you possess a green parka?”

“... No.”

“Nestor, have you ever possessed a green parka?”

“Never.”

“Nestor, we know you will have one.”

“Yes, Sandy. A good assumption.”

“Nestor, I do not make assumptions.”

“OK... So, what are you on about?” Nestor asked, his patience thinning.

Bails stood back from the console, raised his hands in pathetic disbelief... And Sandy went on.

“Nestor, did you watch your self in the green parka, leave?”

“Not exactly. If you mean did he return before I did, no. He went into the hangar. See, he stopped me from going in, said he'd go in my place, that too many of us in one place would cause problems. Then he went inside. So I hung around outside to see what would happen.”

Bails dropped his hands slowly, something was taking shape, had no idea what, just that it felt good; a warmth of knowing – a peculiar clarity that had not surfaced before – and he came forwards eagerly. “OK, you would have seen your first person arrive some time later, the one who did the killing?”

“Yeah,” Nestor looked over his shoulder. “About two... maybe three minutes later, I'd say. He didn't see me, I was hiding

behind an oil drum round to the side. He went straight in.”

“How could you be sure it was him and not some other you from a different time?”

“Uh... well, I...”

“Then what?” Bails chewed at his lip.

“Well, I just sat there – I was frightened. I had no idea what was going to happen.”

Bails insisted. “You must have heard something.”

“Well, it was windy... but sure. I... then I,” Nestor stumbled as a hideous recollection overtook him... “Yeah, OK! Then I heard myself scream!” He turned away from Sandy, walked slowly over to the Diamitron. He was trying to resolve an awful truth. Staring at its depth, as if he were transporting his own mind back to that very moment, he then continued:

“I... I started to run, I was feeling sick, you know, the thought of it, and I just ran, out into the wind... from it all, from the horror, and... and the... Jeez, I thought he was going into the hangar to fix it – you know, my screw up – but he didn't... Oh, shit. Now what?”

Sandy was fluctuating. “Nestor, when you first dislocated to the hangar and executed the plan to terminate Bails, you discovered you were actually terminating yourself... Was your dying-self, at that moment, wearing a green parka?”

“No... Jeez, no he wasn't. Holy shh –”

“Oh... wait a minute,” Bails spluttered, as an idea came within grasping distance.

Nestor looked back from the Diamitron. Said, “Wait. He wasn't there the first time, proving that this is a new scene, something has changed. We can change our future.”

“No,” Bails scoffed. “There were four of you that day at the hangar – three in and one out – possibly more. Wherever they came from must be a later date. The log shows no pending TTRs, so no past dislocations to worry about.”

“But...!” Nestor was moving back from the ramp, a muddle

of unanswered questions swarming about in his hollow skull, when Sandy sucked out his mind.

“Nestor, you have 57 hours, 43 minutes and, now, twelve seconds to live – eleven... ten... nine...”

“Thank you, Sandy. But I don't see what you're getting at.”

“Nestor, the Diamitron has a grid power for only a two day parameter and 12 mile radius. You may trans-temporally dislocate to midday tomorrow anytime within two days of now, being before or after the event of your death – which appears to be an inevitable event, Nestor. So long as you return here, or there, having purchased a green parka, then we can assume that destiny will be satisfied. Which leaves the fourth member unaccounted for.”

Bails interjected. “Yes, but..? And why a green parka?” He looked at Nestor, a bloated lip gripped between the teeth.

Nestor's head suddenly had a vision. “Couldn't we get more power? It would give me a few extra weeks to enjoy the rest of my life, perhaps.”

“Nestor, grid allocations for Goreletchy are locked to bimonthly tender. No unauthorized personnel may effect an upgrade with out approval and clearance.”

“Who's approval, Sandy?”

“Nestor, the Board of Directors.”

Bails spoke: “Pigshit. She could authorize it...” then tapered out, “But why would she?”

Nestor replied rapidly, “I've got an idea. Maybe if I give her some new data and tell her you need more power to dislocate into the future, she might agree.”

“Doubt it.” Bails sniffed the stale air. “If she wants me dead that bad she'd probably just give you a pistol and tell you to get on with it.”

“No, because –” Nestor's consideration was reduced to a thought as Sandy spoke with uncommon eagerness.

“Bails, I have just examined supply grid. Please be advised, we have been allocated a higher grid status, I am determining...”

Yes, as of 4:32.44 post meridian, today. Power source has been greatly magnified, and grid reads incremental adjustment by a factor of 13... Displaying visual matrix on port two. Optimum power output has enhanced Diamitron capabilities... Am revising data respectively.”

“Where? Let me see.” Bails leaped forward. “Be damned, look at that.” He was at the console now, hammering a set of parameters into the system. Sandy confirmed his actions instantly.

Nestor smiled with satisfaction. He felt he'd been a part of the latest developments, though not entirely sure exactly how he'd managed it. He waited. Bails was chattering urgently with Sandy, the conversation jilted; her calm, against his edges, cushioning. Now Bails was facing Nestor, requesting time allocation for a trip to an earlier day; to the time he would usually confer with Armstrong in private – when handing over information...

It became immediately apparent that Bails would send him – not forwards – back through the Diamitron. *But was it necessary? They had all the power they wanted, why bother with how they got it, why not get on with the future?* The question had barely left his mouth before the old story was plaguing his perception of time once again. Bails angrily tore at his brain cells with an applied logic insoluble in Nestor's gray zone. It did not matter how many times he heard the same refrain, as far as he was concerned Bails still made no sense:

“... To think we know how the future turns out is better than not knowing a damn thing; if a solution is affordable it may be the right one, no solution means no chance at all. That's why we live in the mistaken belief that we have free will to create our own destiny.”

Really, thought Nestor. Better not to mess with something that's already a desirable outcome. But, hey, who was *he* in such esteemed company? was the sarcastic thought.

Then Sandy, with something that made a whole lot more sense. “Nestor, Bails is correct. It is possible that the power increment may have been induced without our doing, in which case it may also be removed without our knowing. So, would it not be

more comforting if we knew we were the instigators of this increment, and it was not some repair personnel who inadvertently tripped the wrong switch, and who may discover their mistake in a while and reduce it to correct levels. A reduction in supply would cause serious tissue degeneration during active trans-temporal dislocation.”

“Eww! Yah, makes sense,” he said reluctantly.

She went on, “Nestor, have you no knowledge of meeting up with yourself in or near the Director’s office, over the past few days?”

“Uh... nope.”

“Nestor, any information about Bails which you heard from the Director and which you perceived to be unusual?”

“No..?”

“Nestor, anything at all which has in the past few days made you re-establish memory simulation procedures?”

“Sandy, humans don’t do that kind of thing... What are you getting at?” he asked, curiously.

Bails smiled. “She’s trying to ascertain whether this little trip has made an impact in your life to date. The fact is, it probably has – but obviously nothing that you’ve consciously picked up on. When was the last time you went up there?”

“Last Friday.”

“Then yesterday is fine.”

Nestor, nodding, stepped passed Bails at the console. “OK, so 8:15, in the stair well on level ~6P. I only need a minute or two in the elevator, that's all she ever gives me up there.”

Clearer now, Nestor could accept the need for the next confrontation, could picture the outcome. With clenched fist, he headed for the Diamitron. Then he was stepping up onto the illuminated ramp, walking slowly along its length towards the corner, a vast emptiness before him, nothing at all, just a ramp upon which he strode defiantly, and on... and on... and with each step another him, ahead of him, for him to reach, but never getting there,

an infinite progression into the back of beyond ...

Bails watched him leave, which Nestor never quite did. Unlike earlier efforts to transport through time – earlier devices – Diamitron, the ramp, did not concentrate its attention on the subject to be transported, but on the surroundings; he, then, appeared to become a solid state in time, though he was unaware. Only the time between leaving and arriving was sheered; the subject left unscathed. There it was, Nestor reproducing, his body becoming a continuous length of moments, stretched into the distance where the end of the ramp might have been... his singularity slowing as it shrank towards infinity, until it no longer had motion, no longer had finite shape, was a solid statement of existence peacefully waiting for his return.

A set of lights running either side of the ramp began to dim and within a few seconds that corner of the lab grew dark. The ramp was now barely visible, the frozen body it sustained unable to reflect back light from this moment. In essence it had disappeared.

At 17:38, twelve minutes later, a renewed action, this time light forward-flowing from beyond, a projection of moments becoming divisible, until they flowed into one another and a figure was striding down the ramp as before though now away from the corner, his journey completed... Nestor, dropping to the floor, turning to the console.

“Jeez, we made it happen.”

“What did you say?” Bails was ecstatic.

“Pah, it was easy. I knew she'd fall for it. See, she didn't know you'd made attempts into the future, she thought you'd only visited the past. But I knew from way back she was desperately interested in future travel, in fact, it was her fixation, she had something going on – and now I know what. I told her you'd dislocated a couple of minutes into the future but that's as far as you could get. She jumped on me. Didn't even have to ask her, she just said it right then.”

Nestor approached, smiling broadly.

“Go on, go ON!”

“I think she wants to drive company shares into the ground and then acquire a controlling interest, a majority stock holder with the power to wield ultimate imperialism. See, she wants to take a trip of her own, three or four months ahead, guess she's going to screw with the books, or something. I suppose she trusts me with her ideas because she's got me by the balls. She was mad up there, totally lost her marbles, you should have seen her. She asked me how much grid leverage you'd need to test applications up to one year into the future. Well, I had to guess, so I picked 10, but she threw in an extra three points.”

“Nestor, you did not have to guess, I had already told you the result of the grid increment was 13,” Sandy cut in.

“You had? Oh... right. Jeez, I could've blown it!”

Bails shook his head indifferently while examining his finger nails. “Impossible, you can't fuck with fate.”

Sandy spoke again, “The Diamitron is currently reading a radius of 1,737 miles, with a temporal parameter of two non-leap years, 156 days, four hours, 23 minutes and ... one eighth of a second. If you wish to dislocate for that period into the future you will experience a re-entry time-dilation reduction of 2 months, eight days and 14 hours; while a dislocation into the past, upon return, will render an extended time-dilation of 25 years, two months and 19 hours... with respect, not precisely. If you would like, I can run a Taurus projection to —”

“No, no, no... That's great,” Nestor cried. “Now I can —”

“Sandy, you've missed something,” Bails snapped, but there was more to his tone than intrigue. There was concern.

“Bails, I do not miss things —” They could almost hear the smile in her voice “— I thought it better that you explain the negative to Nestor.”

“Negative? What now?” Nestor shrugged. Looked at his bare-skulled colleague for an answer. It came:

“You can't just go on with your life expecting the Diamitron or its sister to be around in two or three years from now. You realize anything could happen to either of them. If they die you die,

they are your life support in another time. Then there's the grid supply, which may only be around for a few days at current, increment levels. No! If something is to be done to resolve the issue of your death, it must be done today and within the constraints."

"Which are?" Nestor nudged...

"You cannot override your – oh... Bullshit!" Bails had said it before he realized it was coming out. He glanced at Sandy, watched as she turned a dark, expressionless mask in his direction. Nestor was elsewhere. Then smiled knowingly.

"Oh, that," he quipped. "Look I'm getting lost, all this talk of going here and there and then back again. I'm an engineer, I like wires and logic and stuff, I'm not a tempo-frikin'-physicist."

"Sure." Bails exhaled proudly. "So now we know how to give you more time."

"Yeah. I just pick a period in the past and you send me there. Et voila! Like... Gotham City, circa 1930."

"Planning to wear a cape?" Bails mused.

Sandy then, it seemed, eagerly entered the discussion, though her response was characteristically formal. "To live one's future in a past moment relative to one's own, is unethical. It will produce profound mental trauma leading to irreversible depression; knowing the outcome of any given circumstance, debilitates, for nothing can be done about it. In essence, the reversal of causality."

"She's right," Bails muttered.

"What!"

"Sorry..."

Bails chuckled and turned away in thought.

"... Sandy?"

"Nestor? I await."

"Oh, never mind. This whole thing is really upsetting when good news always turns into bad. Getting on my nerves. Gives me a chill," he audibly shivered.

“Nestor, you are hungry. You need a bite.”

Nestor frowned. “Sandy, how unlike you.”

“Nestor, I could have said, you have been in extended dislocation four times today for a combined, biological period of seven hours, 16 minutes and 49 seconds. Your analytic, real-time bio-function indicates that you have surpassed the hour of required intake. Thus, you are doubtless in need of sustenance at this time. However, instead, I thought I would express myself in your terms.”

“Sure, Sandy. Thank you. Oh, and you're probably right. I'll go get a bite up at the cafeteria.” He replied, heading for the stairs, mind in a blur.

Bails was quick to warn him. “Not long, two or three minutes, just a sandwich, OK; this is your life we're dealing with, it can and will end as it pleases. Still, I would like to be able to say we had something to do with it. If we make a concerted effort to extend your life from this moment on, then it may happen, destiny may accept our proposal, but if we just sit around and wait for tomorrow then there is no alternative, Nestor. Because you will die tomorrow... I have a plan, it'll give you a few decades more to live out... and hey, if it works you know you won't die accidentally – like, get run over by a bus or something.”

The disappearing figure stalled by a door at the top of the stairs, and turned. “Well, I think I'd prefer that, to knowing the exact date of my death. But anyway...” He shouted down, unable to see his colleagues. He was reaching for the door pad when he heard Sandy remark,

“Nestor, but I *am* right ...”

The words echoed in his mind as if ping-pong balls searching for the memory they were attached to. Instead, they landed on another thought, one which drew him in like a magnet.

Was being invincible such a big thing? He had killed himself and yet strangely his penance was to be immune from death. The irony. Was he now going to make his fortune as the death defying dare-devil of comic book fame? No, how could he be so selfish having been given a second chance? He should respect the offer, not abuse it. Besides, even though it seemed he was now

invincible he didn't feel any the less afraid of death. How odd?

An elevator took him up to Level 4, deep in thought. His match, Trisha, would not need to know. How could he tell her? Superman never told Louis Lane. But then, it would be so unfair not to tell her, because at the end of it all he knew he was going to die – almost to the day. *Yes, but we all die, that's hardly a revelation.* Then more thoughts: *What would they do? Where would they go?*

The elevator door dissolved and Nestor stepped out into the mess hall. *Wait. I don't need to go back to the hangar. They'll never find me if I go live somewhere miles away. But then I'd have to tell Trisha...* It wasn't long before his wandering mind had come to terms with the absurdity of living out his days in the past, too – how would he explain that away to Trisha? He'd have to explain why there was no electricity, or that planes hadn't been invented yet. It would be madness unless he tried to convince her to step up on a ramp and get swallowed by a machine called Diamitron.

Would she accept? Would anyone be crazy enough to step into a time machine?

Whatever scenario he came up with inevitably ended up with, how to tell Trisha. He loved her more than anything, which meant she had to be a part of his future. No scenario would be complete without her... he would be lost without her, living would be pointless. Where had he heard that before?

* * *

Down in the basement, Bails was deep into a solution: “Listen, Sandy. I'm absolutely certain we are creating the scenario for the one in the green parka. The trick is not to send him back for a two year absence from today, but to send him back for just a few seconds.”

“Bails..?”

“What? Oh! See, Diamitress is there in the past. I'll just go back first and set her up for reception.”

“Bails, I do not follow. On arrival back in the present

moment, his rate of time will justly increase.”

“Not so.” Bails barely looked up. “Prepare my departure for 18:55, that's about forty minutes away. After that, we'll TTD him from Diamitron to Diamitress. Got it?”

“Bails, the analogy is sound. More details please, if I am to formulate an arithmetic sequence.”

“Good. Stay with me. The idea is this kind of slingshot effect, like using planets to accelerate spacecraft: Diamitress will consider that Nestor is arriving in sync' as we often did in those days running trials. She was just a baby back then, but I can fix her up. He will then instantly TTD two years ahead to arrive right here in the middle of the Lab.”

“Bails, Diamitress did not have the current grid increment we enjoy, in 2046.”

“No, but Diamitron *here*, does.” He waved a hand. “Like I said, it's a sling-shot. All Diamitress does is amplify the signal – meanwhile Diamitron is still active and expecting his return. So it's as if he were living two years in the past, right here, relatively speaking. Got it?”

“Bails. An interesting co-operation of incidences...”

“Yes, that's what I thought. Now, just do the calculation.”

“Bails, at full energy output to 2046, the hangar averaged 91,700 billion miles away from our current spatial location. I need a specific date for convergence.”

“Oh... uh.” he frowned, “Just pick a date somewhere in the vicinity... my birthday, or something.”

“Bails, position locked. You have asked me to conduct a fluid temporal simulation. During the first few hours his clock will tick at a decreased rate in relation to our real-time, but as the distance widens with this change, exponentially, time will pass at a much faster rate. By the time 17,322.04 hours have passed the exposure granted...”

“Yeah, yeah. Just get on with it, will you?”

“Bails, I was about to say; by the time 17,322 hours have

passed, Nestor will have accumulated 408,000 hours, or 23 years, 191 days, seven hours, eleven minutes and 23 seconds.”

“OK, thanks. So age... he'll be...?”

“Bails. Nestor will be 49 years of age on TTR back to Diamitress, tomorrow midday,” Sandy complied, then ended with the caveat: “Even a system lock down of 18 hours lab time, to hold Nestor in dislocation, will be a serious drain on the Goreletchy grid network. Do you not think it unwise to run this risk, in case of a trip or other intervention?”

“Yes, I do. But do we have a choice..?” a pause. “Good. Anyway, I'm thinking...”

“Bails, you have only recently transported directly from one transporter to the other; Nestor will be removed entirely from the Diamitron ramp and, as you are well aware, this amounts to a highly complicated, physical restructuring link in order for Diamitress to perform a lock-on and exercise full, trans-temporal relocation in the correct sequence – something which you yourself have questioned.”

“So..?”

“You have never run an experiment as just proposed with my prior knowledge. To add a sustained sequence between dislocation and relocation will likely have a decreased success contingency, perhaps you would like a simulation run to analyze data retrieved? There may also be psychological implications to Nestor's mental health, a concept you likened to... *red-eye flights*?”

Bails was in no mood for lectures. His mind was not on the issue of Nestor's well-being. He was thinking about how this was all going to affect his work now that Armstrong was lurking in the shadows. There had to be a connection, nothing happened by mistake, there were no coincidences.

“No time, Sandy. We'll have to accept that risk. This is the best chance of a life we can offer him, some 23 years, created by a two year retro flip through cross-dislocation. He can live it out as if everything were normal – and, Diamitress controls his return, so he can't run out on us.” A glance up at one of the monitors above his head. Then turning to speak to Sandy again.

“He must return for tomorrow, because he has to be there. Why? I just don't know. The important thing is that he arrive in time to convince his second self not to enter the hangar, at least then we'll have secured him a favorable chance at living. I only hope we're satisfying fate... We have to be!”

He was adamant; thoughts running crisply through a holographic simulator, intense eyes scanning every detail on the four screens above him, an alert mind descrambling layers of exotic patterns... he was near. Could smell the burning intensity of the console in front of him. And then a reckoning... Who had pioneered this whole, miserable affair? *Wasn't Armstrong to blame, and so, should she not fit into the equation?* Worse still, how would he, Bails, know if he had succeeded? The whole outcome of his plan was to be played out in another moment, another location, a place where the event of his death was to be narrowly misjudged. And of course, he was not there. *Definitely not the place to be, just in –*

Oh, wait! A wicked thought!

Part Three

TOMORROW:

From within the hollow, chasmous interior of that old, abandoned hangar, nothing echoed but for a beating sign and the howl of wind showering sand on a cold, steel shell. When the massive, hangar doors slowly slid apart, the interior hungrily inhaled and a body became visible behind the swirling atmosphere. It was struggling to close them. Rusty guide wheels squealed in ancient disregard as the doors were drawn together; two structures burdened by motion, not in any mood for life.

The man in the green parka stood facing the doors a while, then turned towards the interior and the peace of a prairie womb. He was confronted by the nose cone of an old airplane; a Dakota, partially skinned and gaping but somehow content with neglect. To the left a small office was pinned up against the wall, a few sheets of plastic for windows and a door swinging precariously – as if in agony – off a single hinge. But it was to the right that the man in the green parka looked. Away in the far corner at the back of the huge hangar there was a ramp, partially lit with a couple of standing spots. It stretched long into an unrelated perspective:

There she was: little sister, Diamitress.

He had emerged on the ramp some twenty five minutes earlier and had then headed immediately for the exterior to confront his earlier self.

Now he would prepare himself. As if he wasn't already prepared? No, it was somehow different. How could one prepare for emptiness? He likened his predicament to falling off the roof of a tall building in slow-motion: being able to see the ground approaching; knowing there was going to be an impact; wondering what the surface was made of and if he would feel his bones

shattering... Being able to think all those things on the way down. Was that it?

He'd been falling for years...

Twenty odd years. Yes, he reminisced, while standing a moment by the doors. So long since he'd last seen a transporter, since leaving Goreletchy that same day, or rather, yesterday. Bails had told him to pack his bags, that he shouldn't be privy to whatever might transpire in the hangar the following day, that a far more comfortable life he could lead if he didn't carry the burden of such memories with him. Any knowledge of the outcome might also affect his judgment on returning, as he had to, to this fateful day.

He had made his way back to his apartment yesterday evening and a few days later he and Trisha were touching down at a geological outpost in Alaska on board a brightly coloured puddle hopper. He'd been happy to leave, live out the remainder of his life away from all this mayhem. The Alaskan job offer had been facilitated by Sandy and Bails had been the reference.

Trisha had been excited. She had thought perhaps the new life might offer more reward, having been stuck in a secretarial job with no prospects and no way out. They had been getting along well, it was time, she'd thought, to take their relationship to a new level, the prospect of family life so very new and enticing. He had, however, never explained his predicament to her; he'd had no idea how he could possibly have done so. And it had soon become apparent to her that something was not right.

His evasions hurt. She'd consistently badgered him about children and why it was he couldn't bring himself to go through with having any. She'd reminded him again and again of their social obligation, that without offspring they would not be allowed to seek full term. And the joy a child would bring to their lives. What was his problem?

He couldn't tell her, how could he? *this fate his doing, not for her to suffer, too.* Oh yes, he'd always wanted a real life, to bring up kids and watch them grow. But that would have been selfish of him, knowing they'd be barely turning twenty for his funeral. No! Nestor had instead told her a lie. He had said he was

sterile, meanwhile secretly taking INF drugs to douse his fertility. His story was that he had been given no alternative by the authorities: Either he work in the basement with a lunatic called Bails or he would become another case for Biotomy, where all deformed humans were destined to end up if they had a design flaw. Simple choice.

Trisha had had no alternative but to accept. But then she was trapped, just as she had been before, a dead end of a life. She'd had no family to return to, her mother and father had been retired during the census cull, which only made her heart bleed more with the desire to raise a family of her own. Adoptions were a thing of the past, if she was to have a baby it would have to be by natural means and registered as a viable entity in Anchorage to seek full term; that was how things were.

Up in the wetlands, forgotten and small, Alaska had been a promise of something pure. Just the two of them, living a simple existence, away from the city; a rustic, old world setting with just the odd scientist popping by, now and again. Besides his job as caretaker, maintaining and repairing station equipment, he would enjoy driving one of those rumbling, tracked vehicles to the store for supplies, and taking weekend walks with Trisha in the frozen tundra. Then there was the comfort of a warm hearth, the smell of wood and a slow game of chess.

Slow..? Perhaps that was it, what Sandy had meant when she'd rambled on about the iterations of continuum. He could relate now, on looking back. The pace of youth, frightening, it had all gone by in a flash as if he'd missed it all, never to get it back. These days he disliked anything that traveled faster than the change of a season. He wanted to cherish every moment.

Yes, perhaps a seed sown by Sandy which only now was beginning to break the surface of consciousness. Somewhere in his mind the notion that slowing up life would somehow slow up the inevitability of death, had been in his mind for years.

He would often walk out to the tree line for personal space to redress internal strength, leaving Trisha to wonder, peering out at him from one of the windows of their little cottage. He'd been determined to live his demons alone, a hermit within himself. But

with the years came more tears and a longing to be free. Not his freedom from horror – hers. It was Catch 22: Either way he looked at it, he was being selfish. Suffer with him or suffer without him. While a slow pace seemed to take his mind off the inevitable and give him back some meaning, the cruel truth of all that had gone before would still often surface in those forlorn features she bore.

He'd found a clock in one of the stores in town, an old digital thing with little, red numbers and a radio frequency tuner. Trisha had never been allowed to touch the antiquated device, though she'd been curious having never seen one before. He was going to fix it up, so she waited.

Being eight years younger than Nestor, she'd been brought up with T-Scan and implant technology; no need for devices cluttering up the work surface when all information was readily transmitted to consciousness with just the merest suggestion of a thought. Naturally, the clock was a curiosity. So was his mind. He'd eventually re-wired the clock's circuits so the numbers would run backwards, not hours but days, all 8,400 of them. He had wanted to watch his life ticking down. It had been important to him at the time, she could tell.

Trisha loved him and nothing would ever make her stop loving him. She had always, from the moment they'd first met. Sadly, she had seen a great change in his ways, from those early years when time had been of no concern. It hadn't been long before he could think of nothing else, talk of nothing else – an obsession.

At sixteen, she'd been snapped up by the Goreletchy Nuptual Agency with guarantees of a full, life term on the bearing of a child, though her genetic profile was bare minimum. She would have to wait for a match, if she was lucky; if not she would be retired. She'd had a hit with just one: Nestor. He, on the GNA male list with thousands of other applicants had been given a choice of some twenty matches – and he had picked her.

It wasn't like there were any other options in life, no alternative means of fulfillment. She had been born into a system that required obedience and been educated by it. It had been expected of both to comply. Nestor had been very sweet about it. He'd followed through, met her and they'd become lovers, willingly.

It was, he'd said, her shiny, long black hair and dimpled cheeks that had willed him to choose her, Of all the girls he'd been shown on screen, her face was the only one that had spoken to him. She was like electricity, he'd quipped, and he fell for her.

For Trisha, the move to Alaska had been a harsh awakening. No more effortless entertainment, alternate realities and dreamscapes. No more alimentary conditioning or ion showers. Nestor had persisted in his efforts to explain to her all the many things they'd need to do in order to survive, unaided. And she'd slowly accepted responsibility, had learned how to prepare meals and consider hygiene, how to forecast time and weather and the need for sleep during the tedious daylight nights. It was only after many years accommodating to such changes that she'd noticed his unwillingness for it all. Slowly he'd begun to despise their fortune, though she'd fought to keep him on track. Now it was she who was telling him what to do. As if he were growing down, becoming irresponsible, more frustrated and distant. Yet through it all she'd remained desperately in love with this man, a man who could have turned his back on her all those years ago... but hadn't.

Then one day he'd come home, had been away for longer than expected and she'd been worried. He hadn't said hello on entering, no smile, no kiss, no cuddle. She could tell he was in a state. The numbers on the clock had been reading 31 for nearly a full circuit of the sun.

He didn't take off his boots, he just dropped his coat to the wooden bench by the door and walked over to the stove. She waited. Then, as she expected he would, he finally spoke.

“I have been lying to myself for over 20 years and in so doing it has made it easier for me to lie to you. Now I must tell you the truth.”

“Only if you want to, Nestor,” she replied, cautiously, great trepidation heaving in her chest.

“I must. I can no longer trust what I think. Many years ago I spoke to myself, not in a dream or in the head, I don't mean like that. No, I traveled through time and met myself in the future.”

Trisha interrupted. “Nestor, listen. It's okay. You're anxious,

I know. But you can't escape reality by making up silly stories, you'll only hurt yourself more.”

“No, Trisha. Believe me,” he said, not looking up. “It was a terrible mistake. It was part of the work we were doing at Goreletchy, down in the basement. I never really told you what we had achieved because it was classified, you only got snippets of what was really going on. We'd built a time transference ramp; we were able to dislocate in time.”

She drew in a sharp breath. “I don't need to know, my love. I didn't then and I don't now.”

“Yes, you do. Please, Trisha, let me finish.”

Reluctantly, she nodded. He didn't often call her by her full name, it was usually Tish or Hon. Whatever it was he was about to say was going to hurt, she knew.

“That day I stood face to face with my own future self and lied to him, my own flesh and blood, even though he had stood where I was then and so knew that what I was saying was a lie.”

“So he caught you out? It happens.”

“It's much worse than that.” He looked up, straight at her face. “I told him I would not kill him in order to save myself, but that was a lie. I would have. Do you know what that makes me?”

Trisha was shaking her head. “What do you mean?”

“I was prepared to kill myself, in a fit of selfish arrogance... to kill my own self. Of all the people in the world, my own self. Did I not love myself enough? Was that it?”

“Are you sure it was you? I mean, it could have been a replicant or a hologram,” she said, hoping.

“It was me. And it will be me in little over a month.” He swallowed, as did she, waiting for what was to come. “If I can't trust myself then who can I trust. Nothing I say any more can be believed. I have doubted my own self for years and it's time to put an end to it.”

Nestor straightened his back and walked slowly passed her to a window. With a tug on the latch it flew open, the fire in the

stove roaring up in response to the sudden blast of cold air. Reaching under his belt he drew up a revolver, flipped out the cylinder and snapped in a reloader of six bullets. Slamming it shut in his palm he then raised the gun and fired out into a snow bank.

“No, Nestor. What are you doing?” she screamed, jumping to her feet with the roar of thunder still ringing in her ears. But before she could reach him a spin of the cylinder, a slap and he had raised the barrel to his temple for the second shot. She saw the horror of what was to come in med step, powerless to stop it.

Click!

“Nestor... please. No!” She was tugging at his collar.

Instantly, his arm swung out towards the window as he pulled the trigger again and this time a deafening explosion dropped her to her knees. She was in tears, sobbing desperately and clawing at his boots when he spoke again.

“You see, I can lie, but I cannot die.”

Too terrified and too breathless to respond, Trisha could only hammer at his knee, anger welling in her heart, confusion in her mind.

Nestor cursed on. “I killed myself that day, only to discover that I was then immortal. But, you know, life is nothing without trust. I would prefer death over damnation. Love is the affirmation of trust, and I love you. That is why you must hear the truth.”

As the words fell from his mouth he released the revolver from his grip to the carpet and knelt down beside Trisha. He swept sodden black strands of hair from her eyes and kissed her on the forehead.

“If you get sick they will not treat you, you will not be allowed to reach life term.” Speech became staggered as his thoughts raced to catch up. “I have been taking INF all this time. I stopped. I want to have a child, even though I will never get to see the little thing in your arms it is your right – my wrong.”

“... What?”

“I'm so sorry, Tish.”

There were many things said that night, many things to be undone, many travesties to be corrected and many wounds to be healed. Weeks it took, and when the clock read just 05 her period did not come.

* * *

The man in the green parka blinked through damp eyes. A numbness had enveloped his adam's apple, as if he'd been chewing on an anesthetic and had just swallowed. He'd not told Trisha where he was going that early morning, had not said a thing, just that he'd be back in a while. But she'd seen the clock; it frightened her. With a kiss to the cheek she'd heaved an old, green parka over his shoulders and he'd stepped out into the cold white of night. Sometime later, a few miles from the research huts, a green speck on the horizon was peacefully absorbed by the past... carried beyond the events of that life and returned to this.

To the side of Diamitress, against the towering wall of the hangar, lay a wooden crate small banks of fine sand had forced themselves against. It was hardly recognizable as such, and seemed of little interest. But to the man in the green parka it held fond memories.

He crossed the expanse of dusty floor and approached the crate. Looked again at the thirty foot ramp which disappeared off into a corner. This was the final act, he thought, time to play out just one more scene in the hope that destiny would be satisfied.

The crate stood in front of him, the top about waist high. Raising the lid on easy hinges he carefully folded out a plastic sheet and removed a swath of dull material. Shining up and out from the crate, playing flickers across the wall and casting a shadow of a man high to the curved ceiling above, rows of tiny lights indicated there was much more to the crate than would first have been imagined.

The man in the green parka removed his hood and gently unbuttoned the front of the heavy garment. It was hot beneath the burning, steel roof – uncomfortably stuffy. An arm then extended

inside the crate and he directed his forefinger into a holographic port to allow for structural examination and access. He inhaled... was given access and exhaled, relieved. A smile broadened and he stretched his vision to the left, out and behind the old Dakota's tail. With a slight tightening of the neck, he then raised his head to the rafters and spoke.

“Sandy, it's been a long time. How are you?”

“Nestor, you left the lab 17 hours and 44 seconds ago. This is not a long time relative to human life expectancy but, due to the condition of your epidermal layers and much cartilage deficiency, I conclude that you have just returned from an extended dislocation sequence. I am becoming aware of your personal considerations and will express myself accordingly.”

There was a pause from the crate. Then she spoke again: “Nestor, it's so good to hear your voice, how long has it been?”

“Too long, Sandy,” he chuckled. “Goreletchy Enterprises treating you all right?”

“Nestor, thank you. I'm very well.”

“Has Bails been keeping an eye on your... the er... what's it called?”

“Nestor, my vital-signs support monitor?”

“Yer, that's it. Your VSM. So, is he looking after you?”

“Nestor, you are very considerate.”

“Say, put ‘the old crash-helmet’ on line, will you... I'd like to thank him.” He drew in a long breath and returned his gaze to the innards of the crate beneath him.

“Nestor, Bails is not here.”

“Not here?”

“Nestor, that is incorrect. He is not here!”

“Well where the hell is he at a time like –”

“I'm right here, Nestor,” a voice echoed all around ...

Had he heard right? Hesitated. A voice, yes, it had come

from behind. Then recognition; it must be time, the final moment. A rush of liquid cold flowed up and out to the far reaches of his body, a sensation of elixiate enveloping him, a tingling in the joints and an acute awareness of slow, unwinding revelation. *Oh, Jeez – let it be done.* He winced, a flutter of expectation, was turning ...

Turned. Was looking... hearing,

“Astonishing work, Bails. You are to be congratulated. I cannot believe he can be here in his future and you sent him from yesterday.” A puerile chuckle. “But wait! He looks so old. What have you done, Bails. Speak, some answers if you don't mind.”

That voice! That festering tone... It was Armstrong's, how could he have ever forgotten it. But why? What was she doing here? The man in the green parka was about to ask as long shadows crept up towards him from beneath a wing, but was not in time.

“Well, Mam,” Bails answered, “Due to time dilation, My guess is, 24 hours turns out to be a lot more in the future. Looks like we've got some work ahead of us, halting the aging process... er... and stuff like that...” The voice faltered, fluttered, then dropped to the dusty floor like a pillow.

“What about me?” Armstrong suddenly shrieked, whipping a mirror from her breast pocket and examining her face.”

Bails shook his head and replied, “No, Mam. We did not dislocate to the future, we are in sync' with lab time.”

The man in the green parka, eyes adjusting to the dark, penetrating the gloomy interior of the hangar, could now see. Was seeing one... no, two shapes, approaching from beneath the fuselage. He recognized them. Yes, Bails out front in a blue shirt, stony-faced beneath a bald dome, stepping forwards. And behind and to one side, the other body, Armstrong, her voice – that voice – now resurrected from the throttle of silent time, following her like a dog. She was staring at him, pointing ominously at him with a frilly cuff on the end of a white sleeve, a shaking finger scratching at the distance between them.

“So, what are we going to do with you? Not a pretty carcass you're wearing, tee, hee... would you like to borrow some of my face cream, dear? Let's hope Bails doesn't screw you up even more

on return.” She shook her head and lowered the sleeve. “Old age, such a scary thing, you know. I hate decrepit forms, withered and decaying life... If I were you I'd end it all right now!” she gurgled contemptuously.

Bails slipped into gear. “Oh shit. Well, I told you the system was not really ready. Probably be another couple of years before we get it right,” he muttered callously, concealing a smirk.

“That's no good, you imbecile, you sent him one day into the future and he's turned into an old man. No, no... No goddamn good, Bails. You get me out here to show off your latest contraption and it turns out you've massacred the guy... Good God!” She regained her minimal stature, brushed down her white blouse... howled some more:

“Now, get me out of here. I want results, sort it out or you and this contraption will be scrap, do you hear? Now go, go, GO!” The finger spun an intricate pattern in the air then flicked its way across the hangar to the ramp.

Bails shrugged, licked the corner of his mouth and turned to Diamitress. The remaining steps to the crate took him past his old partner: the man in the green parka. He winked.

“Let's see what happens,” he whispered, “Nothing like a bit of mayhem to tempt fate. By the way... the green parka – nice touch.”

“Well, actually...! Yer...”

Bails smiled, it had been a long time coming. “Listen man, you've got a lot of courage doing this, I don't know if I could do whatever it is you're about to do. Thanks, buddy.”

“Yes, but... You shouldn't be here. None of you should. This is not how it was. I'm telling you... I...”

Then Armstrong, screeching, “What are you waiting for? Get me out of here!”

Bails uttered a command to Sandy in the crate and the ramp responded. “Mam, I should relocate Nestor first, as the system is already set up with his —”

Armstrong swept them both aside and stepped up onto the ramp. “When I say now, I mean NOW!”

Blue tracking lights flickered into life along the ramp. The spots grew with intensity, washing the area with clarity, thin films of thread-like dust seen rushing this way and that across the ramp as if seeking shade. Bails looked up.

“Er... Mam?”

With nothing better to throw at him, Armstrong tore the wig from her head and flung it impatiently in his direction, “Come on, come on... haven't got all day.”

Sandy spoke up. “Bails, procedure validated, a reading of zero-variance configuration. Please await set up for molecular, life assembly program.”

Armstrong took a step forwards down the ramp. Bails raised her writhing wig in objection on seeing the bald woman's agitation.

Sandy again. “Mass ascertainment complete. Now reversing non-sequitur temporal transference. Initiated. Please, Nestor you may proceed.”

Then a commotion. Nestor and Bails turn abruptly towards the hangar doors. A burst of activity fills the pressured hangar. A rippling draft lifts dust from the floor as if life has been momentarily offered to each grain of sand. It creeps along the floor and under the old Dakota like a spring tide in a narrowing estuary. A deep thud follows... falls away into the corners of the hangar and there is calm. Bails grabs Nestor and drags him back into the shadows, under the old Dakota.

With the swiftness of a carnivore, a creature springs from a dissipating cloud of dust by the doors and races for the side wall and the wooden crate, eyes sharply focused on the bald figure illuminated on the ramp.

Armstrong, paralyzed in exhale by the sudden uptake of Diamitress, has turned but can only watch suspended in amazement; the unfolding drama too swift to fully comprehend, the ingredients too posterous to accept. *What..! Another Nestor?* She has

barely begun her journey down the ramp when this man in a riding coat sweeps the stale air aside in his haste to reach the crate. While melting into each moment, a coagulation of existence bonding the very fibres of time together, the body on the ramp has no opportunity of retreat; though fear registers horribly in her eyes, she has lost herself in a moment a machine has awkwardly displaced. Trapped... even her fear has become infinite.

The man in the green parka, his eyes back to the crate, sees a long-coated man hammering at the contents, kicking wildly at the device, and with each blow the wretched body on the ramp lurches uncontrollably; arms, then legs; a grotesque and terrifying contortion of the body as if freed from the bonds of physical rule, is swung to the side, stiffens, topples off balance, then backward crumpling to the floor.

The body shudders ... A groan. Then back up, lifted by an incomparable force and flung again, this way and that. A face now turning back from the ramp, conforming to the reassembly program, no longer that of a bald and bloated person... now trying to contort, find some likeness within the input formula... that of a tall, young man, not a likeness at all.

And the wild-coated avenger is watching, the gleam in his eye, penetrating. He watches the end; desperate, disgusted, terrified by his act... but willed to continue. As the gruesome transformation takes place, abruptly the gleaming is to vanish with an horrific recognition. He sees, then cries "OH, Jesus GOD... it's MEEEE!"

Runs, stumbling... crawling to the now lifeless and disfigured form on the ramp. There, with jaw agape, he rolls a hollow cry, long and drawn as if pulled by the hand of a bowman, slowly, to the limit of flexibility. Drops a tortured head into his hands and screams again, a desperate cry for something to explain this all away. Then reels across to the nose of the aircraft, sobbing and shaking uncontrollably. A grinding of metal on metal, a shudder and a thump. The figure in the riding coat has gone.

Over in the corner of the hangar beneath spotlights, as would a taught elastic seek its true form, remnants of past moments still lingering on the transporter ramp render themselves to inevitability and are shot forwards into the back of beyond. What

was Armstrong, no more.

A crackle from the crate. A woman's voice,

“Bails, apparent anomaly on last procedure. Prepare for extended ramp exposure and sterilization... interference resolved and formatting for exacted mass/molecular integration. Be advised, initiating reversal of non-sequitur temporal transference. Please, Nestor.”

A nod from the man in the green parka. He approached the battered and broken crate. “Sandy, cancel the current procedure. Be advised: I cannot override my own existence.”

Silence. Then a hiss. “Nestor, if that was an attempt at humor... I enjoyed it. Procedure canceled.”

Wow... she smiled, he mused, *Now that's a first*. He smiled back down at her, imagining she was there in the crate below him. “Yes, Sandy. No more dislocating for me, thanks. I'm done. Take good care of yourself... and Bails, too. He needs you. This is Nestor saying goodbye, one last time.”

“Nestor, thank you for being a good companion. I will never forget.” With that, a small yellow light in the crate blinked twice and then extinguished.

Nestor cleared his throat. He knew she wouldn't. She couldn't. He stepped back and looked at Bails under a wing. “How the hell did you know?”

“Hey. I didn't. I just worked through it. There was no way another Nestor could be here. I checked everything, I ran diagnostics... nothing. So I proposed a concept, hoping that fate would accept. I just put it out there, for consideration. We all do this everyday of our lives. Sometimes destiny rejects our efforts and sometimes we get it right. Nothing more than that. I just set the pieces in play.”

“I heard you prep' Sandy. You reversed my TTR protocols. What were you thinking? That you could shoot me back there and bring my younger self here from the lab all those years ago. Bit of a stretch, even for you.”

“Something like that.”

“I suppose, you thought I'd go along with this crazy idea?”

“Yeah. Something like that, too.”

“And, how was that not going to kill me?”

“Well.” Bails answered, as he stepped out from under the old Dakota and made his way over to the crate. “You remember we successfully disengaged you from Diamitron for the slingshot. I figured we could possibly reverse that, same. Then you as you are now, your older self, would have been freed from this time-line. Shit, I had to give it a shot. And anyway, we'll never know if it would have worked. Fate decided otherwise.”

“You could have stopped Armstrong...”

“What, and start a fight?” Bails sneered as he stepped up. “I did try, but it was too late by then. Anyway, she's the Boss. You don't argue with 'pigshit'.”

An affectionate chuckle as the man in the green parka turned to go. “I'll miss you, Bails, in some strange way.”

“Hey!” Bails held him up. “Good thing you showed up or none of this would have taken place. Turns out you were not invincible, after all.”

The image of a revolver to his head came sharply into focus. The man in the green parka froze. After some consideration he turned back. No one, not even Bails, was in command of time.

“Bails, you're wrong. I didn't come here to die. I had to be here to make sure I didn't... Take care of Sandy, will you?”

“Sure thing. I'll look after her, I'm getting used to her,” Bails replied, bent over, lovingly attending to his stricken crate. “You know, I think I'll give her an Irish accent... my mom was Irish. Anyway...” Bails shrugged. “What will you do with the rest of your life..?”

The man in the green parka stepped through the hangar doors, the wind calm – but a faint whisper now – a cosmos clear and blue greeting him. He dropped a crumpled green parka to the ground and reached his sight out across a flat geography to a city skyline in the distance.

He turned and faced the rugged west, over a landscape of drifting, blonded wheat; towards a wife, a destiny and a dream of children to be. Then took a firm stride and walked ahead, as we all do – not knowing what will become of us, what is prepared for us – into the back of beyond.

...END

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British born, Alan Graham has spent his whole life traveling, his father having been in the diplomatic service. He is a wildlife photographer/filmmaker and published author of novels in the genres of speculative fiction and thrillers. He has also written countless articles for international prints including BBC Wildlife Magazine, Travel Africa and International Living over a career spanning 30 years. His most successful TV documentary “The Affairs of Hares” was filmed entirely in the wilds of Devon, England, between 1996 and 2000.



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