

TIME
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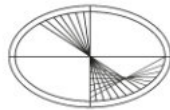


MICHAEL WALSH

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Michael Walsh

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Dedication

Dedicated to Tiffany, Henry, and Anne.

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CHAPTER 1

Sunday September 18, 2016

LATER, EVEN I wondered how I could arrive home without immediately noticing the black smoke coming from the house next door. I had a lot on my mind, which is to say I had descended the proverbial rabbit hole. What led me there wasn't the potential consequences of some foreign diplomatic crisis, or the terminal disease one of my parents was in the throes of—actually, they're both in good health. Rather, it was a cocktail party, although that was a fanciful description of the thing. 'Cocktail party' usually meant a smoky parlor with floral carpet and heavy drapes, men in double-breasted suits, and women more clever than they let on.

Tonight hadn't been that.

What tonight *had* been was the annual faculty party for the Spalding University Philosophy Department. My colleagues always arrived at these shindigs fully prepared. Each of them brought an arsenal of anecdotes about professional conferences conquered, forthcoming publications, and a litany of the slight, but grandiose-sounding ways they were about to upend some traditional philosophical viewpoint. They were always sure to relay these tales with a dizzying array of -ists and -isms, many of which even I had to look up. I, on the other hand, arrived with eyes for a stiff drink—not that it usually helped much—a set of real-time calculations for the first opportunity to make a discrete exit, and a cache of forced smiles and vague expressions like, “yeah, I can understand that.”

Now that I was on my way home, and on the wrong side of a three martini high, random scenes from the party buzzed across my mind. I recalled Margo Leslie, the party's host and department chair, showing me into her living room when I arrived as most of my colleagues pretended I wasn't there. My left shoulder still ached after I'd been leaning against a corner bookcase for too long, hoping no one would notice that I wasn't involved in a conversation. Those displays of social agility were nothing to be proud of, but something else had started all this joyless reminiscing. I'd been drifting along the periphery of party conversations when I thought I heard a snide comment about me and my “philosophy of time business.”

Had I *really* heard that? Maybe whoever said it merely mentioned it and the sneering tone was something I cooked up in my imagination. And who exactly was it that—

“Damn it!” I said aloud, slapping the steering wheel. *What are you going to do*, I asked myself, *lose sleep because someone you don’t even like takes a dim view of your research?* Not so deep down, I knew the answer was probably ‘yes.’ However, before my self-loathing became truly weaponized, Spalding U’s radio station, WSPL, played the first few notes of *When The Sun Hits*, which I hadn’t heard in a while. It was a tune by Slowdive, a band I’d grown up with and arguably the preeminent Shoegaze band of the early 90s. The traffic light turned green, and my mind fell into a natural groove with the dreamy lyrics about losing sight of a lover who grows distant as time passes.

Many songs just go from verse to chorus and back again, but this song’s chorus actually *blooms*. A collage of memories from the early 90s, activated by the swooning guitars and haunting vocals, replaced the half-seen images from a faculty party gone sour.

The song ended just as I pulled up near my apartment, located in a renovated Victorian house. The edge of my vision was foggy, ‘fishbowl-head’ as I’d taken to calling it in graduate school. Nothing to do now but get inside, brush my teeth, and settle under the covers.

I started up the front steps to my apartment, thinking mostly about getting into bed, when I thought I heard someone say the address of the house next door. All at once, I noticed four or five college-aged people standing on the sidewalk in front of the house. One of them held a phone to his ear, while two others stared uneasily at my neighbor’s house.

I started walking over to them, about to ask what was going on, when I saw black smoke coming from an open window in the front of the house. “Oh, God. There’s a fire!” I exclaimed, feeling foolish at stating the obvious.

“Yeah. I just called 911,” the young man with the phone said.

My martini buzz evaporated instantly. An older woman named Miriam I occasionally said ‘hello’ to lived in that house. She was probably still inside. “Did they say how long until the fire truck gets here?” I asked, speaking rapidly.

The young man shrugged and stared at the house. “I don’t know. They said they were gonna come, like, right away.”

That didn’t inspire much confidence. I looked up the street, listening for sirens, but heard nothing. “Did any of you try to get in there?” I asked, getting a response of head shakes and slightly guilty looks. A series of actions unfolded in my mind, all of them starring yours truly, Cal Sutherland. I was no firefighter, yet I couldn’t just stand around with these kids.

“Shit,” I said aloud as I bounded up to the front door, armed with the

cockeyed confidence borne from a total lack of forethought. Naturally, the door was locked. I ran around the side of the house as one of those kids said, half-laughing, “Dude. Just wait for the fire department.” I reached the back door and found it locked too. The door had a window. There was a small garden with a brick border next to the back patio. I hesitated.

My life seemed to be a series of situations just like this: If I didn’t act, I’d regret it for weeks afterward; if I did act, it would turn out to be a rash decision that I would also regret, probably more so. I pictured breaking the window only to have Miriam come walking along, find me here, and laugh about burning some toast.

Then again, the smoke at the front of the house wasn’t from burnt toast.

I wrested a brick from the ground, grimaced for a moment at the window, and then easily smashed it with the edge of the brick. Smoke didn’t pour out and choke me, which I saw as a good sign. I felt a deadbolt inside and unlocked it. Once inside, I pictured Robert Redford at the end of *The Candidate* looking into the camera and saying as if to me, “What do we do now?”

If Miriam was here, she was probably upstairs in bed. I galloped through the kitchen to a small hallway and stopped in the doorway to the living room. The room was rapidly filling with smoke. It was surreal to see Miriam’s furniture—a small love seat, oval coffee table, and wing-back chair—sitting there as if nothing was amiss, just as she’d left them before going up to bed.

Fire spread along the front wall toward the bottom of the stairs, as black smoke filled the opening to the second floor. I crawled toward the foot of the stairs but had to stop because I couldn’t breathe. I stumbled back to the far side of the room, coughing violently as I collapsed on all fours. My eyes stung with tears, and the whole scene momentarily faded.

When I finally stopped coughing, I felt disjointed. The light beige carpet went in and out of focus. All at once it seemed as if this was happening to someone else, like being in a dream with a complete set of your own memories, yet convinced you’re seeing the world through another’s eyes.

People in movies sometimes wet down blankets before running through a fire. I had passed what was probably a guest bedroom off the hallway that led from the kitchen. Maybe there were some bed sheets or heavy curtains I could soak. As I turned toward the bedroom, I genuinely believed I was in an off-kilter dream world.

A man stood in the bedroom doorway.

Neither of us moved, which made his presence even more unsettling. I just stared at him, wondering for a moment whether the fire had somehow taken physical form so it could finish me off. That was silly, of course, but his sudden presence—where the hell did he come from—unnerved me in a way the fire

hadn't. He was a couple of inches shorter than me, with white hair that matched his white shirt. He also wore one of those yellow air tanks like firefighters wore. He held something in his left hand. It might have been a book, but it was hard to focus on anything specific, his mere presence here being so unnerving.

He looked right at me, but he hadn't reacted to me otherwise. Strange, as my presence must have been as surprising to him as his was to me. There was an odd expression on his face, too. Was he trying to hide a smile?

Maybe he was a firefighter. Why else would he be wearing that yellow air tank? I finally recovered enough to shout hoarsely, "I think there's a woman trapped upstairs. We need to get her out of here!" I could hear the desperation in my voice. Yet he just stood there without so much as a glance toward the stairs. I shouted, "Didn't you hear me! There's a woman trapped upstairs!" My growing aggravation dampened my fear and sharpened my mind. It was absurd having to spell this out to a firefighter. It was like the end of *Dr. Strangelove*, where Peter Sellers actually has to convince Keenan Wynn that it's okay to damage a Coke machine because it would help avert a nuclear holocaust. *That* was a funny thought.

"I know," the man said flatly, which wasn't funny at all. He still hadn't moved from the doorway.

"Well, come on! I can't make it up there because of the smoke, but maybe you can." The smoke was getting to me again. Was I speaking incoherently? Maybe that was the problem. The man looked over to the stairs for a moment, then back down at me.

"You know we can't save her," he replied. I barely knew Miriam beyond a few 'ellos' and idle pleasantries, but saving her suddenly became a matter of principle. I resisted the urge to grab this guy by the collar and shake him.

"We *have* to try!" I shouted, trying to get to my feet.

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid it won't work," he said in an oddly sympathetic way before turning away toward the bedroom. He paused and said to me over his shoulder, "Perhaps you ought to be going as well."

I swore at him and tried returning to the living room. I ducked down as low as I could to draw a breath, but it was no use. If I had the air tank he was wearing, I might be able to make it to the stairs. He wasn't too large. Maybe I could tackle him and get the thing off him. What the hell kind of firefighter acted like this anyway?

I crawled back toward the empty bedroom just in time to see this strange man step into a closet and shut the door behind him. My outrage ebbed as I crawled over and yanked open the door.

The closet was empty.

Part of me must have expected this, because his sudden disappearance

didn't feel nearly as surprising as his appearance in the bedroom doorway. I stared into the closet, willing him to materialize out of thin air. *Had he been there in the first place*, I wondered.

Finally, I got to my feet and stumbled into the hallway. It was so smoky that I immediately fell to my knees again and had to crawl through the kitchen. I tumbled out the back door and into the yard, coughing and hacking the whole time.

"Hey buddy," I heard a muffled voice say nearby. It seemed real in a way that nothing during the last couple of minutes did. I turned to see a yellow boot tip a foot or so from my face. A firefighter looked down at me. When I saw his breathing mask my eyes must have grown in alarm because he bent down and asked me, "You okay, man?" I nodded weakly. "Is anyone else inside?"

I struggled for breath and spoke hoarsely. "I think there's a lady trapped upstairs." I heard him shout something down the alleyway about needing rescue and an inch and three-quarter line. What he said seemed so banal that I was convinced it was really happening—at least the part where Miriam's house was on fire.

The firefighter helped me to my feet and walked me to the front of the house. The formerly small crowd of young people had moved to the grassy median on the other side of the road. A dozen more onlookers had joined them. There were now three red trucks of varying sizes parked out front and beige hoses running everywhere. Flames enveloped the entire front of the house, lighting up half the block, overwhelming the artificial glow of the fluorescent lights from the fire trucks. I didn't want to look, but I did. It was an impressive sight, even beautiful in a strange way.

The firefighter walked me to a smaller rescue truck and left me with a paramedic. The paramedic asked if I was having any difficulty breathing or wanted oxygen, but I turned him down. He smirked when I blew a wad of ebony-colored mucus into my handkerchief. A moment later, another firefighter walked over to us. A police officer accompanied him.

"Could I get your name?" the firefighter asked.

"Cal Sutherland," I replied.

"What the hell made you run in there, man?" he asked with a trace of condescension that I didn't appreciate.

"It wasn't something I spent weeks deliberating over."

"Well, go ahead and leave it to us in—"

"What about Miriam? Did you get her out of the house?" I interrupted.

The police officer eyed me suspiciously. "How did you know someone was in the house?" he asked. He reminded me of the grim-looking highway patrol officer from *Psycho* who discovered Marion Crane sleeping in her car.

"I didn't *know* for sure. I live next door and figured she might be inside."

"You live next door," he repeated. "You have any ID on you?" I reached into my back pocket for my wallet and handed him my driver's license. He looked at it without smiling before handing it back.

"You know her well?" he asked.

"Not really. Just to say 'hello.'"

He seemed to consider this for a moment. "Where were you tonight?"

"A party," I said. He asked me for the names of people who had attended the party, claiming it was just routine.

"What about Miriam?" I asked again.

"We were the first engine on the scene," the firefighter said. "But the guys in the rescue didn't pull anyone out as of a couple minutes ago. If anyone was still in there..." his voice trailed off.

"Well, what about the other fireman that was in there?" I blurted out, as if accusing them of playing a trick on me.

He hesitated. "Uh. Which...which one?"

"The one in the house with me." All three men exchanged confused looks.

"The first unit on scene was Rescue 33," the firefighter said.

"One of their guys brought you up here," the paramedic added.

"Why the hell didn't he go upstairs for Miriam when he had the chance?" The three of them exchanged looks again, which was becoming aggravating. "What?" I asked harshly.

The paramedic bit his lower lip. "Well, Dave—that was the guy who brought you up here—he said he found you in the backyard."

"Okay," I said.

"He saw you come *out* of the house. He hadn't been inside yet."

"And we rolled up right when you got here," the firefighter added. The police officer looked at me in a way I didn't like.

"It wasn't him," I said angrily. "There was another guy, another *fireman* in the house."

"What makes you think he was a fireman?" the cop asked.

"He had on one of those air tanks." The three men continued looking at me with a mixture of confusion and disbelief. I felt like I was pleading with them now. "He had on a white shirt. I'm not making this up. I *talked* to him!"

Had I talked to him, though?

"Our lieutenant wears a white shirt," the firefighter said, "but he was in the engine with us. Plus, he'd never go into a structure fire without the rest of his turnout gear."

"And no one else came out of that house but you," the police officer added without smiling, as if it was supposed to be some dramatic coda to a soliloquy.

I felt like I should be angry and indignant. He as much as called me a liar. Instead I felt embarrassed and foolish for charging into a house fire totally unprepared. Even worse, I told them what I'd seen inside when I didn't fully believe it myself.

The three of them moved a few feet away. They talked in low voices, and occasionally glanced my way. I stood up and walked a few paces towards Miriam's house, staring at the hive of activity.

What on Earth had happened tonight?

Time Starts Now

CHAPTER 2

Monday September 19, 2016

I HADN'T SLEPT well the previous night, so I overslept this morning and got to my office later than usual. I put forth a less than heroic effort to avoid dwelling on the fire. In my defense, living next door to the burned out house didn't help. Getting to my office at Spalding U was a relief. I had a graduate seminar this afternoon that I hoped would take my mind off things.

I settled in at my desk to make some notes on a journal article for an upcoming class. After a while I glanced up at the black and white poster of Orson Welles smiling knowingly during a key moment in *The Third Man*. It felt like he was mocking me. I heard a light tapping at my office door and looked up to see Margo Leslie, Chair of the Philosophy Department, standing in the doorway.

"Morning Cal. Mind if I sit down?" She sat down before I could answer.

"I guess I'll get over it," I said.

"So what's new?" she asked brightly.

"Not much," I replied, trying to sound noncommittal. In contrast to the rest of my colleagues, Margo and I got on easily. She was an iconoclast, often about intellectual matters, which rubbed some other faculty members the wrong way. They didn't always appreciate her good-natured ribbing and what could best be described as locker-room talk. Margo could fill a room, but she wasn't full of herself. She sometimes came by to chat me up, even though she knew how small talk made me ill at ease. That was the thing with Margo—small talk with her didn't feel like small talk.

"Good weekend?" she asked. I thought I saw her look at me a little longer than necessary when she asked.

"Eh, uneventful."

"Was it now?" she said eagerly. "And don't try to tell me the faculty party I gave was the highlight, because I know what an anti-social stiff you are."

"If you wanted to thank me for making your party such a smashing success, you could have just sent a card."

"I could've." She shrugged. "But then I wouldn't get to ask you why the police were checking up on your whereabouts for Saturday night."

"Damn it," I spat.

"Oooo," she said with glee. "So there is something more to this!"

"No," I said, trying to make it sound final.

"Oh, c'mon Cal, it's just us girls. You're not on the lam, are you?"

I paused for a moment, trying to think of how and what to explain. "The house next door to me caught fire."

"My goodness," she said, genuinely concerned. "The fire didn't damage your place, did it?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. They got it out relatively quickly. In fact, the fire had just started as I was pulling up."

She seemed to consider this for a moment. "Well, other than being the house next door, what does this have to do with you? More to the point, what does it have to do with me?"

I'd been hoping the next part of the story wouldn't come up. I rolled my eyes as I answered. "Well, I went into the house and—"

"You mean while it was on fire?"

"Yeah. I kind of knew the woman who lived there, and these kids were just standing around out front when I pulled up. The next thing I knew I was breaking a window and going in through the back door."

"Well, I'll be damned," she said, clearly impressed. I felt the color rise in my face. The more I reviewed it in my mind, the more foolish I felt for going into that burning house. I hadn't come close to saving Miriam. Plus, there was the 'other thing' after I got inside. "So Jack *was* right," she said.

"About what?" Jack was her husband, an insurance broker. A nice enough guy, but I didn't like that he and Margo were talking about me.

"That the police figured you set the fire."

"Wonderful," I grumbled.

"Arsonists are often attention-seekers. Jack's heard of dozens of cases where an arsonist will turn up at the scene of a fire that he himself set, even trying to quote-unquote help out the firefighters. Or, in your case, set a fire to have the opportunity to show off."

"I hope you weren't that forthcoming with the police."

"Certainly not," she snapped. "I just mentioned that you were an attention whore, and that I felt sorry for you, what with all the money problems and legal woes you're having at the moment."

"Thank you," I smiled.

"Anyway, I wouldn't worry about it. You have an airtight alibi that three-fourths of the Philosophy Department can confirm. I'm just glad you turned up here today, safe and sound." She paused for a moment. "Talking of which, you have your, uh, seminar today?"

"Yes. My 'uh' seminar is today," I said.

"It's going all right then?"

"Fine," I said, waiting for her to work up to whatever was on her mind.

"How many students are enrolled again?"

"You're the department chair, Margo. You already know the answer to questions like that. What are you trying to tip-toe around?"

She sighed and smoothed out her pant legs. "I think I'd like you to offer something more...let's say, traditional next time around."

"What's wrong with what I'm teaching?"

"Well, nothing per se. It's just..."

"Just what?" I asked, sounding more indignant than I'd intended.

"Now hold on, Cal. I'm on your side. But you have to remember there are other points of view I have to consider."

"Such as?"

"Our department is developing a reputation for biomedical ethics."

"Which I don't have much taste for," I interjected.

"Nor do I Cal, but that isn't the point. You've got all of seven students in your seminar, and we could easily get four times that many if Hardwick taught a biomedical ethics class."

Bruce Hardwick had been in the department about ten years longer than I had, although 'in the department' was a relative term. He'd become a sacred cow in the field of biomedical ethics and rarely condescended to actually teach a class—and even when he did, 'preening' would probably be a better description for it. He spent most of his time padding his already lengthy CV by jetting off to conferences on the university dime. As far as I could tell, he'd been publishing the same two or three articles for the last eight years, making only minor revisions to them and changing the titles.

My mind flashed back to Saturday's faculty party. As I'd made my way around the party—mingling without really mingling—I briefly joined in on a conversation he and some others were having. The conversation centered on Hardwick, of course. When I casually inquired what they were discussing, Hardwick seemed to think it was a chore to have to explain it to me. The rest of the group was mildly amused, which I didn't appreciate.

"So Hardwick is pissed I'm teaching a seminar this fall while he's pulling a Jerry Hathaway and using his newfound grant money to renovate his house?"

Margo looked around uncomfortably hoping no one walked by and overheard that. I'd gone a bit too far with that remark. "Sorry, Margo. I know you've got plenty of people around here to try and keep happy."

She nodded. "It isn't entirely a numbers game, Cal, but the plain fact is that enrollment *does* figure into my decisions about teaching assignments. Therefore, so does subject matter."

“Ah,” I said, catching on.

“It’s what you teach, Cal. I mean...philosophy of time and time travel?” She said this as though she herself were trying to understand it.

“It’s a legitimate area of study within metaphysics,” I said. “It may not be that popular, but it isn’t any more far out than some other areas of philosophy. Just because biomedical ethics is the flavor of the moment doesn’t mean—”

“Hold it a moment, Cal. Physicians *actually* practice medicine. They *actually* deal with many of the issues discussed in biomedical ethics. Now, when was the last time you bumped into a time traveler?” I stared hard at her for a moment before looking away. After a while Margo continued. “Look, you know there was some opposition to offering your philosophy of time course as a graduate seminar. I was the one that helped push it through. I didn’t mind doing it, either, but I can’t do it again any time soon. Not when there’s greater interest in other subjects.”

“Okay,” I said flatly.

“We all go through these infatuations with unusual areas of study,” she said. I caught her glancing surreptitiously at the classic film posters I had hanging on the walls. “So, you’ve had your fun, you’ve enjoyed it, and you’re working on a journal article too, right?”

I had written an article on time travel and ethics following a colloquium this past April. It was already turned down for publication twice, but Margo didn’t know that. “The best thing to do, Cal, is focus on getting tenure during the next academic year. You could use another article under your belt before the penultimate tenure review meeting next spring. After that, your turn at a graduate seminar will come up again, and who knows what you’ll find yourself interested in.”

We chatted for another minute or two, even though my mind was elsewhere. This must have been how people who worked regular jobs felt when the boss sat them down for a talk about a lack of productivity. The trouble was I enjoyed what I studied. I enjoyed it very much, and maybe for purely personal reasons. Couldn’t I just be left alone to pursue it?

Being left alone, however, didn’t seem to be a possibility any more.

§ § §

I got back to my apartment around 5:30, following my seminar. I made some spaghetti and garlic bread but didn’t feel like eating all of it. By the time I finished the dishes the sun was setting. I rolled up a skinny joint and cracked the side window of my bedroom, which faced Miriam’s burned-out house. Most of its front was either badly charred or missing, and there were gaping

holes in the roof. Yellow caution tape hung limply around the front porch, and someone had boarded up the window I'd broken on the back door.

I took my time hitting the joint and stared at the house as day turned into twilight. As often happened when I smoked up, my mind bounced along in many different directions at once. Inevitably, they turned back to my conversation with Margo earlier today.

Philosophers—who never tire of drawing distinctions—sort those who study the nature of time into roughly two camps: the presentists and eternalists. As the name suggests, presentists argue that only the present moment is real. The past was formerly real, while we were experiencing it, but no longer exists. The future has yet to occur, so it will become real at some point, but is not yet real. Eternalists, on the other hand, take the position that the past, present, and future are equally real. Yes, it may no longer be the year 1951, but 1951 is just as real as the present moment even if we aren't experiencing 1951 in the same way we experience the present moment.

I was solidly in the eternalist camp. While that didn't have the same cachet as being an impressionist painter or a libertarian, being an eternalist did have one very important implication: it meant I believed in the possibility of time travel. After all, in order for one to travel back in time, the past has to be a real "place" one could actually arrive at.

This belief in time travel put me at odds with much of the philosophical community. Those who bothered to think about it didn't believe that time travel was even possible. Among other reasons, travel to the past opens the door to closed causal loops, or as they are usually misnamed, paradoxes.

Ordinarily, one event causing another isn't problematic. The sun emerges from behind a cloud and *causes* the air temperature to rise and flowers to bloom. The sun came out first and the other events occurred later in time. Nothing extraordinary there. Introduce the possibility of time travel, however, and matters quickly go off the rails.

Off and on during my life, I dreamed of writing a screenplay for a great film. If I had a time machine, one would think I'd be in an awful hurry to travel back in time so that I could "write" a screenplay that had already been written and take the credit for it. Seems straightforward enough, and haven't there been dozens of movies where something like this happens?

So let's say I settle on 1950's classic *All About Eve*. I travel back to late 1948, presumably just before Joseph Mankiewicz has started work on the screenplay I revere so much. I arrive in 1948 and turn in my own copy of the screenplay to the poohbahs at Zanuck Studios. Voila! *All About Eve* premieres to wide acclaim in 1950, and we see 'Written for the Screen by Cal Sutherland' during the opening credits.

At first glance, this seems like a perfectly coherent plan. Now take a closer look: the hall of fame screenplay for *All About Eve* is what caused me—in 2016—to travel back in time in order to turn in the screenplay for the very film that caused me to write the screenplay. Put another way, I would have caused a film to exist which *later* caused me to undertake the action that caused the film to exist in the first place! It's a bit like claiming that my being wet at 1:00 pm caused it to start raining a half hour earlier at 12:30 just so my hair would be dripping at one o'clock. This is an example of a closed causal loop. If it sounds incoherent, it most certainly should. Future events can't cause past events that bring about the future events that led to the existence of those past events in the first place.

Knowing all this may not ruin the plot of *Terminator 2*, but to most philosophers it makes the prospect of time travel impossible. Any trip back in time, they reason, would necessarily involve a closed causal loop of some kind. I, however, didn't believe that. Rather, I figured there was a great deal that a person *could* do if he traveled back in time. That, for better or worse, was my primary area of research. However, as Margo had correctly pointed out, there were no time machines and time travelers. I wasn't just barking up the wrong tree, I was barking up a tree that didn't even exist.

I tried not to let that bother me, but it did. I was coming up for tenure soon. If I got it, I'd have a job for life. If I didn't get it, I'd be lucky to find a job where I spent forty hours a week in a cubicle, or running around town chasing after someone else's shit. I didn't have any other serious philosophical research interests, so I didn't know what I'd do for the next couple of years.

I stubbed out my joint and watched Miriam's house fade into the darkness.

Tuesday September 20, 2016

It was another one of those weekday evenings where I'd run out of things to do around six o'clock. I decided to walk up the street to get a coffee. As I left my building, a car pulled into Miriam's driveway. I didn't pay much attention to it. There had been cars and trucks coming and going from there since Sunday afternoon. I continued down the front steps and started up the street.

"Excuse me," a female voice called out. I turned to see a man and woman walking toward me. "Do you live here?" she asked.

"Mm-hmm," I answered warily.

She gave a sad smile. "Then it was you the other night?"

"Sorry?"

"During the fire. One of the firefighters told us a neighbor went into the house to try and save my mother. We only caught a glimpse of you that night. There was a lot going on."

"Oh," I replied blankly. It was all I could think to say.

"I'm Nancy. This is my husband Eric," she said, pointing to the man behind her. We nodded at each other. She stopped for a moment, apparently trying to compose herself as her husband looked on sympathetically. "I was hoping to run into you, because I wanted to say how much we appreciated..."

"Forget it," I said before she could finish. "I just wish I could've...well, you know." A moment of quiet lingered. "I knew your mom a little bit. You know, just to say 'hello.' She seemed like a very nice person. I'm sorry this happened." Nancy nodded and pressed her lips tightly together.

Eric put his hands on her shoulders to comfort her. "We just stopped by to go through what's left of the place one last time before they tear it down next week," he said. "Technically we're not allowed inside, but I think we've got a right."

"No argument there," I said. "Is there much left?"

"A little," Nancy said. "A lot of my mom's things were burned up."

"Or water-logged," Eric grumbled.

"I'm glad you were able to recover a few things," I said, beginning to feel uncomfortable. I genuinely felt bad for them, but I had no idea what to say to these people other than the usual bromides.

"There was one thing we weren't able to find the other day when we were here," Nancy said.

"Oh?"

"My brother's old Bible."

"Well, I guess that would be a tough thing to find after a fire. Especially with the thin paper they use in Bibles."

Nancy shook her head in frustration. I hoped I hadn't said something insensitive. "It wasn't where my mom left it. It should've been in the back bedroom downstairs, but when we were here on Sunday we couldn't find it."

That piqued my curiosity, though I couldn't say why. "If you don't mind me asking, how do you know it would've been there?"

Nancy sighed. "That was my brother's old bedroom. The Bible was a First Communion present."

"Have you asked your brother about it? Maybe he has it and doesn't realize it," I said, trying to be helpful. As I said this both of them flinched.

"My brother was killed in a car accident," Nancy said solemnly.

"Shit," I hissed, wanting to disappear. "I'm sorry, I didn't know that."

"It's all right," she said, waving her hand dismissively. "Mom kept the Bible in his old room. Every night, before she went up to bed, she would go into his room and pray for him on that Bible. I know how it sounds, but she felt like she was talking to him. She used to say that she didn't want him to

think she'd forgotten about him just because he died." This time I was smart enough to keep quiet. I was an atheist myself, but I could hardly fault Miriam for mourning her late son this way.

"Anyway," Nancy continued, "I know Mom would've wanted to be buried with his Bible. I just can't imagine what happened to it."

"Probably a firefighter got sticky fingers," Eric said.

"Oh Eric. A firefighter wouldn't take a Bible. It's not as if it was worth any money. We'll find it somewhere."

I wished them luck with their search, but I knew that Bible was long gone. It was a victim of the fire, just like Miriam.

Wednesday September 21, 2016

And...Done!

My undergraduate metaphysics students had a paper due in two weeks, and I'd just finished writing up a list of topics to hand out in class tomorrow. As the list of topics rolled off the printer, I heard a faint chime amidst the Doves album that was playing. I clicked over to the tab with my email and stopped breathing for a moment. I had a new email with 'editor@namphilreview' in the 'from' column. The title of my latest manuscript was in the subject column.

I'd been dying to hear back about my article, so naturally the first thing I did was sit there staring at the screen, idly wondering what the message said. This was the third journal where I'd submitted the manuscript. The previous two journals seemed wholly uninterested in the article and hadn't even given me suggestions for revisions. I sometimes wondered whether manuscripts were truly blind reviewed.

My latest attempt was with the *North American Philosophical Review*. It was a second-tier journal, but still perfectly respectable. I took a deep breath and clicked on the email. 'Dear Prof. Sutherland:' it began. I got halfway through the first sentence when my heart sank.

Thank you for submitting your manuscript entitled "Time Travel and the Ethical Safeguards of Closed-Causal Loops," which we regret we must decline on editorial grounds.

The rest of the letter was boilerplate about how many perfectly good articles are rejected and how they hoped I'd find some success elsewhere—as though they were sitting around holding their collective breath for poor Cal Sutherland to catch a break.

"Fuck!" I slammed the keyboard drawer closed.

CHAPTER 3

Thursday September 22, 2016

A NIGHT'S SLEEP must have done me some good, because I didn't wake up with yesterday's rejection foremost in my mind. There were other journals, after all, or so I told myself. I showered, shaved, and walked to the nearby corner store for a newspaper. It was mid-morning, always my favorite time of the day, especially on a weekday. Today was sunny and just cool enough to remind everyone that it was becoming autumn.

The Beechtree Avenue section of town—dubbed the Beechtree Village by the zipper vest and Subaru crowd or the Beechtree Strip by everyone else—was an older neighborhood that had become “urban chic” during the last few years. It was a bustling commercial district lined with prideful independent businesses and teeming with self-satisfied hipsters. I don't always care for that vibe, but I love the look of the neighborhood. I often pictured this neighborhood in some past era, with porch swings, men in fedoras, and pig-tailed girls jumping rope on the sidewalk as the sun set on an April evening.

I noticed the rhythm of people in passing cars going to work, caught up in a stream of mundane tasks. I felt bad for them. I had an enviable work schedule and made it a point to notice the shops along Beechtree Avenue opening for the day while everyone else just passed them by. It sometimes seemed as if it were all happening just for me.

As I returned to my apartment, I noticed a white-haired man in Miriam's front yard looking up at her house. I figured he was from the insurance company or something. I nodded 'hello' to him as I walked up my front steps. He answered with what sounded like a British accent. I went inside, closed the front door behind me, and froze.

Was that the man I saw inside Miriam's house during the fire?

Of course it wasn't. That was as paranoid as it was ridiculous. Then again, the man in the fire had white hair, too, and he was about the same height. I thought about going back outside to talk with him, in the light of day this time.

Then I realized why it couldn't have been him: whoever was in the house with me that night got a good look at me. The man outside Miriam's house just now had clearly seen my face, yet he hadn't given me a second glance.

I continued up the stairs and into my apartment. I dropped the newspaper on the couch and just stood there. My heart beat more rapidly than it should. I crept into my bedroom as if someone was watching and listening to everything I was doing. I went to the side window and cautiously looked out just in time to see the man walk up the driveway and into the backyard. I fully expected him to look up at me and give a sinister nod, but he kept his eyes on the house the whole time. He looked the house up and down and stopped at the back door. I saw him touch the wood that covered the window I'd broken. He frowned and appeared unusually curious about it. He wore an olive-colored suit jacket and took a small notebook out of his breast pocket to write something.

My mind was an utter tangle. I felt just as powerless to continue standing here as I did to go out and talk with him. Then another thought occurred to me.

I could follow him.

That seemed like my most ridiculous idea yet. Following him would either end with me learning nothing—very likely—or with him catching me and my having to brush it off with some half-baked excuse—somewhat likely. Then again...

"Aw fuck it," I said aloud. There was no telling how long this would take, so I threw my lecture notes into my shoulder bag in case I had to drive straight to Spalding for my afternoon class. I flew out the door and down the stairs. When I got outside, I casually looked over toward Miriam's house but didn't see the man there. My car was parked two houses away, so I sat in the driver's seat waiting for him to leave. I wished I had a straw hat to throw onto the shelf below the back window like the undercover detectives in *The French Connection*.

A minute after I got into my car, the man walked down the driveway. I instinctively hunched down in my seat, but he never looked my way. He got into a small black sedan and pulled away from the curb.

"Here we go," I said, allowing a moment to go by so that he would stay far enough ahead of me. At the next intersection I held back to let another car get between the two of us. He drove down a few other residential streets. He didn't seem familiar with the neighborhood, because he backtracked a little and nearly turned the wrong way down a one-way street. Finally, we turned left onto Beechtree Avenue. I had to smile when I guessed correctly that he was turning onto the expressway. It was a shame I hadn't grabbed my *Vertigo* soundtrack when I left. It was a bright day, just like the first time Scottie followed Madeline around San Francisco.

I stayed a few cars back from him on the highway. I usually took the same route to Spalding. There were a number of commercial office parks near the campus. I pictured myself following him into one of the nondescript glass office buildings and cooking up a cover story so that the receptionist would

let me in. I even imagined being especially daring and following him into an elevator, standing just behind him with a knowing look on my face. But I could never pull that off. I wasn't that smooth.

Worse still, even if I tracked this guy to where he worked and found out his name and title, how would that begin to explain why he was in Miriam's house during the fire? What's more, he'd done a pretty good job disappearing that night. He probably didn't want to be discovered. How might he react if he knew he was being followed?

I put it out of my mind as his right turn signal came on. He was taking the same exit I usually took to Spalding. I went extra slow around the ramp as we merged onto Marendra Boulevard. I could see the top of the red brick clock tower at the center of Spalding's campus. I was two cars behind him in the right lane as we came to the last intersection before the entrance to campus. I prepared to turn right.

He kept going toward campus.

I threw my hands up in a futile gesture of confusion. What the hell was he doing at Spalding? Did he know I was following him? If he saw me that night and knew I lived next door, he could've found out all about me. He probably even knew my class schedule; it was online after all. Maybe he led me here today just to have it out with me.

I started to sweat as he continued through the campus. The school's three and four-story red brick buildings were usually a pleasant sight, but right now I barely noticed them. What could I say to this guy if he confronted me? Then again, what did I need to say? I worked here, didn't I? I even had my notes with me for my afternoon class. I had a perfect right to be here. So what if the two of us happened to arrive at the same time?

He turned toward a section of the campus that I was only vaguely familiar with, some distance away from the Philosophy Department. Spalding dated back to the late 19th century. Noll Hall, the cathedral-esque home of the Philosophy Department, was built during the 1920s. The man I was following pulled into a small parking lot outside a newer-looking building. It was a charmless square structure made of brown bricks that reflected a total lack of effort to blend in with the surrounding campus. It was probably built during the style-bereft 1960s or early 70s.

The parking lot was too small for me to enter without being noticed, so I rolled past and made a U-turn a little farther down the road. I watched him get out of his car and turn away from me toward the building. I stared open-mouthed as he walked up the front steps and disappeared inside, just like he seemed to disappear into that closet the other night.

My mind was a sea of doubt. Had he really been in the house that night?

Had *anyone* been in the house? Who was I following just now? I rolled slowly past the parking lot. The name of the building was Dancy Hall. Then I noticed something else.

His sedan had a faculty parking tag hanging from the rear view mirror.

Friday September 23, 2016

Finding out who I'd been following turned out to be easy. A quick search of Spalding University's website yielded a list of departments in Dancy Hall, along with photos and CVs of the faculty. The man I followed was a member of the Physics Department.

Lionel Bradshaw.

As I now sat outside Dancy Hall, I pictured his photo in my mind. His white hair and small brown eyes made him look like any one of a hundred-thousand grandfathers. He also appeared to be hiding a smile, as if he knew something none of the rest of us did. That sent a chill up my spine. He gave me the same half-smile in the fire that night—a strange mixture of amusement and sympathy—just before he disappeared into Miriam's closet.

From his CV I learned he was originally from England but had been teaching at Spalding for a little over 20 years. He was a full professor who specialized in quantum engineering, whatever that was. Some of his published articles contained words in the title like 'polarization and magnetization,' 'temporal waves,' and 'electro-deposited multilayered wires.' He didn't seem to pad his CV like most academics. For someone who'd been around as long as Bradshaw was, you'd expect a CV of at least 20 pages consisting of the same few publications and presentations with slightly altered titles. Bradshaw's CV was well under 10 pages. So what had he been doing all this time?

I'd been sitting outside the entrance to Dancy Hall for about fifteen minutes, hoping Bradshaw might walk out and I'd overhear part of a conversation. Yesterday I sat here for over a half hour. Finally, I decided to do what was either the smartest or the foolhardiest thing yet: go inside the building and poke around a little.

§ § §

"Are you sure this job is worth the trouble?" he asked the man in the suit.

"No turning back now," the man in the suit replied cheerfully.

The first man pursed his lips. "Even so, there's a bit more danger in this one."

"I don't know that 'danger' is the word, but I am taking more than the usual precautions." He nodded toward a yellow air tank leaning against a wall in the far corner.

"Including visiting what's left of the house in broad daylight?"

The man in the suit frowned. "Yes. Including that."

"You know he followed you again," the first man said gravely.

"He was rather hard to miss the other day, wasn't he?"

"Do you know who he is?"

The man in the suit chuckled. "As a matter of fact I do, though you may want to sit down for this, Roger." He reached behind him and picked up a folder, opening it so the first page of its contents was visible. "I managed to attend a colloquium he spoke at last April. That's a copy of the paper he delivered."

"Jesus Christ!" the first man exclaimed as he flipped through the paper.

"Indeed."

The first man spent a few minutes skimming through the folder as his companion looked on. "So this is why he's been following you?"

The man in the suit shook his head. "I don't think it is at present."

"But how can you say that? I mean, look at this," he said, waving the folder in front of him.

The man in the suit put his hand out to calm his companion. "I'm not saying this bloke's field of study isn't rather an amazing coincidence, but I believe there's another reason he's so interested in me."

"Which is?"

The man in the suit turned serious. "Think it through a moment, Roger."

Roger put down the folder and stared intently at the floor. Suddenly he looked up in alarm. "God, no!"

"It would appear he's seen me somewhere before."

"And this is the next door neighbor? I warned you this isn't worth the trouble."

"Call me a soft touch, if you like. I know how much it would mean to that poor woman's family."

"Do you think he'll figure out what we're doing? If he hasn't already, that is."

"He might, actually."

"What should we do about him then?"

The man in the suit chuckled again. "Well, we're not going to assassinate him, if that's what you're asking."

"Do I need to remind you he's been following you? He's been inside this building."

"I know."

Roger threw up his hands. "What, and that's it?"

The man in the suit shrugged. "Warning a fellow off isn't really our style. Perhaps we should just let him be. Despite who he is, there's a very good chance he'll never figure out what we're really up to."

"And what if he does figure it out?"

The man in the suit smiled. "Then we tell him everything."

Time Starts Now

CHAPTER 4

Saturday September 24, 2016

IT RAINED OVERNIGHT as a cold front passed through. There was now a noticeable bite in the air, but the front dried everything out and left a clear, sunny weekend day in its wake. My students were between assignments, so I didn't have any grading. I spent the day alone, as I often did on the weekends, cleaning my apartment and going for walks around the Beechtree Strip. My parents, which is to say my mother, often chastised me for not getting out more and "making a few friends." Maybe she had a point, but if there were any existential problems in my life, they weren't due to a paucity of friends.

Last night I'd gone out for a while to a nearby bar, The Green Friar. It was a relatively new species of bar known as a 'Gastropub.' That meant it featured "gourmet" pub food, a selection of three dozen or so hard-to-find craft beers on tap, and a growing number of insufferable hipsters from the surrounding neighborhood. Their pseudo-intellectualism sometimes dampened the vibe of the place, but I guess they didn't do any real harm.

I'd gone there last night for a beer—which turned out to be a very good English brown ale—and to meet with Jimmy, my weed connection. He was a visual arts student at nearby Vizenor College. He was a nice kid and didn't seem put off because he was an undergraduate and I was a professor. Jimmy was a good example of the kind of people in my life these days: not bad people, but not close friends, either. I had a steady girlfriend for a while last year, but we called it quits around the holidays. I can't remember whose idea it had been.

When I returned from my after-dinner walk, I saw a copy of the manuscript for my recently rejected article sitting on my desk. I resolved yesterday to send it out for publication again, this time to the *Quarterly Journal of Metaphysics*. I stared at the manuscript for a moment. Sure, I'd send the damned thing off again, but even if they published it, would it make any difference?

"Eh," I growled, shaking myself out of the gloom. It was Saturday night and I had no other plans, so I decided to smoke up and watch a movie. I opened the middle desk drawer and took out my stash and a glass pipe. Jimmy told me this strain of weed was called 'White Widow.' He claimed it gave a nice mellow high and was good for creativity. Out of the corner of my eye, I

noticed the shade covering the side window. I was sick of looking at Miriam's burnt out house.

Strangers on a Train had been in and out of my mind lately, so I decided to watch Hitchcock's 1951 classic about two men who discuss the idea of "exchanging murders." They figure, or rather the villain figures, that if each man kills someone associated with the other man, there will be nothing to connect the murderer to the victim, and hence no way to be caught. "Criss-cross," as Bruno Anthony, the villain, delightfully puts it. I had to admit, it was a pretty good plan. What's more, Robert Walker is spectacular as Bruno Anthony. He's Hitchcock's second best villain after Norman Bates.

I took a couple hits from my bowl and started the movie. The weed took effect quickly, and the film swallowed up my attention as the opening credits finished and Hitchcock made his cameo, trying to force a double bass on to a train. The film took my mind off the last week or so, at least until just past the halfway point when the police start following the main character, Guy Haines, because they suspect he murdered his wife.

My mind returned to following around this Lionel Bradshaw. Maybe it was the weed-induced social paranoia, but I realized I could've gotten into a ton of trouble for following him, especially at a place like Spalding. Professors are often touchy and very insecure; it does a lot to explain our choice of profession. What if my following him came to the attention of the university administration? Would I lose my job?

Meanwhile, the film had flown by. I fired up my bowl again during the tense scene where Bruno reaches through a sewer grate, straining to grab the cigarette lighter with Guy Haines's initials engraved on it. Bruno plans to frame Guy by dropping the lighter where Bruno earlier murdered Guy's wife. It always struck me as funny that a cigarette lighter was the key to unraveling this carefully planned murder. The police find Bruno clutching it in his hand at the end of the film.

I almost laughed aloud as I realized something else: the name of the murder victim in the film is Miriam, just like my late next-door neighbor. Far out. As I hit the bowl, the night of the fire flashed through my mind again. I didn't want to picture Lionel Bradshaw standing there looking down at me, but I couldn't help it. I'd still swear he had a sympathetic look on his face and a small black object in his hand. Maybe it was a book. It didn't matter anyway. So what if he had a book that looked like...

I started coughing violently as smoke billowed out of me. I set the bowl down and got up to walk a few paces to stanch the coughing fit. The film played in the background but seemed very far away. I had hold of something in my mind's eye, like the flash of a solution to a problem. I pictured the night

of the fire again, only this time I tried not to focus on Bradshaw's face but what had been in his hand.

"That looked like a fucking Bible!" I gushed aloud. Miriam's daughter told me they couldn't find her late brother's old Bible. Did Bradshaw have it? That was idiotic. Bradshaw having the Bible didn't make any sense. Why would someone break into a house to steal a Bible that only had sentimental value to the old woman who lived there?

Maybe Bradshaw set the fire—that would explain why he knew to wear that air tank—but even then, grabbing the family Bible on the way out didn't fit. He might have guessed that Miriam's family would be anxious to get it back, but even if they offered a reward, it couldn't be that much. Even worse, there was no way he could have known they would be looking for it until *after* the fire. My spine turned to ice.

"*After* the fire," I gasped, falling to my knees.

I suddenly had a coherent explanation. In fact, it explained everything perfectly: why Bradshaw wasn't in a rush to save Miriam, why he looked at me the way he did, and how he ended up in that burning house in the first place. Yet I felt like a complete ass for even considering it.

I didn't know whether to try and put this out of my mind or not. I had hold of an idea too ridiculous to believe and yet too plausible to ignore. I only half heard the music playing over the closing credits to *Strangers on a Train*.

It figured to be another sleepless night.

Tuesday September 27, 2016

Yesterday I'd chickened out. I watched Lionel Bradshaw come out of Dancy Hall and suddenly decided I had no idea what to say to him. I cut and ran before he even got to his car. I might as well have been sixteen again, picking up and putting down the phone half a dozen times before calling up a girl for a date.

I had good reason to lack confidence beyond my usual neuroses. Consider how this grandiloquent solution of mine came about: while getting stoned and watching a classic film, I somehow unraveled why a man was in a burning house wearing an air mask and refusing to save a woman's life. To top it off, the conclusion I reached was even more ridiculous than how I arrived at it.

I looked back at the entrance to Dancy Hall. No one had come out for almost ten minutes. Maybe I could find out a little more about Bradshaw before I started asking him questions. He must have a publication that would shed some light on this situation. I got up and started down the steps, away from the building.

I nearly bumped into Lionel Bradshaw.

My heart hammered inside my chest, and my mouth went dry. For a moment I couldn't remember why I'd even come here, let alone what I might say to him. He looked at me with an oddly amused expression.

"Hullo," he said evenly, with an unmistakable British accent. I just stood there like an idiot. "Uh, are you waiting for someone?" he finally asked. For a moment, I felt like he was playing games with me.

"No...well, yeah. Uh, she should be here any minute." He looked me up and down and seemed to consider this for a moment.

"I see. I'll be on my way then," he said, starting toward the entrance.

"Oh, you work here?" I said louder than I intended. I saw him stiffen at this question and expected him to wheel around, angrily demanding to know just who I was and what I was really doing here. Instead, he smiled at me.

"You know perfectly well I do."

"What're you talking about?" I said, laughing unconvincingly.

"Mmm. Perhaps it was my mistake. Nevertheless, I'm glad we're meeting *today*. Had I run into you a couple of days ago, you might have had me at a disadvantage." I stood there with my mouth open, trying to work out what he meant by that. Finally, he said, "I fancy a cup of tea. Would you like one?" I looked nervously from side to side. "Just inside," he said, motioning toward the building.

"In there?" I asked stupidly.

"It's only a campus building. You've surely been inside one before." As I mulled over whether to go along, I pictured Virgil Sollozzo in *The Godfather* telling Tom Hagen 'Relax Consigliere. If I wanted to kill you, you'd be dead already.' His face didn't look menacing at all. In fact, it seemed like he'd be hurt if I didn't go with him.

"Okay," I shrugged, following him.

"Excellent."

There seemed to be a slight spring in his step as he led me down the hallway. He stopped in front of an office door. He was on the verge of opening it when he suddenly snapped his fingers. "Why don't we go to the lab instead? A bit more room there." We walked down the hallway to a door marked 'Lab 7.' Lionel swiped his card and the door unlocked. "After you, old man," he said, holding the door open.

I entered into an expansive space that was about a story and a half tall with small rectangular windows near the ceiling. There was what looked to be unused equipment scattered along the walls. The lab seemed a little cluttered, but hardly in disarray. In the far corner, I saw what looked like a paint-booth. It was a couple of steps above the ground and surrounded by transparent plastic paneling. I couldn't make out whether there was anything inside

because the booth was dark. There was a table in front of the booth that had two flat-screen monitors, dozens of switches, and a keyboard interface. Off to my right was a glassed-in office with the door open. Lionel walked over to the office and set his briefcase down on the desk. "Why don't you have a seat, and I'll put the kettle on. Is Darjeeling all right?"

"Uh, sure," I said, assuming Darjeeling was a brand of tea. It was difficult to process the situation. Not five minutes ago, I was working up the fortitude to speak to Lionel Bradshaw. Now here I was inside his lab while he fetched me a cup of tea. Why the hell had he invited me here? If he was going to warn me off, this was a needlessly elaborate way to go about it. I pulled out a swivel chair from under the table and sat down. As I did, I noticed something I hadn't seen before. Near the entrance to Lionel's office, unobtrusively leaning against the wall, was a yellow air tank. My pulse quickened again.

It was the first piece of direct evidence that corroborated my memory of seeing him in the fire. Before I had time to reflect on this apparent victory, Lionel emerged from his office. I must have jerked my head too abruptly, because he turned around to follow where I'd been looking. He seemed to consider the air tank for moment before casually sitting at the worktable opposite me. He nodded behind him, towards the air tank.

"I suppose that allows us to cut through some of the preliminaries, doesn't it? However, we ought to be *properly* introduced. It's Calvin Sutherland, I believe." He held out his hand and I shook it. "I'm Lionel Bradshaw."

"Call me Cal," I said.

"All right, Cal. I'll come straight to the point. What exactly do you believe is going on here?" He asked it without a trace of animosity or irony, just as I'd ask a student a question, hoping they'd give the correct answer.

"Uh...well. I don't actually *know* what's going on here," I stammered.

"Perhaps, but you must have something you want to get off your chest. After all, you've been following me around for the better part of a week."

He may have been right, but I hated being called out on it. "What were you doing in Miriam's house during the fire?" I asked reflexively.

"Ah! You mean how did I end up there?" His eyes brightened. "That's for you to figure out, old man. Now if I were to guess, you have a pretty well worked out theory on what I was doing there. But you're afraid of how ridiculous it would sound in the light of day." He paused for a moment before adding, "Try me."

I felt my ears get hot. The son of a bitch was right. No matter how many times the night of the fire replayed in my mind, or how much I told myself I believed my interpretation of events, I couldn't bear to utter it aloud. In fact, there was a very good chance he was trying to bait me into making a fool of myself.

"Forget it," I said, standing up to leave.

"Now you're just being disingenuous."

"Huh?"

"You're not forgetting anything, especially this. You want too badly for it to be true."

I pursed my lips. "You don't even know what I'm going to say yet."

Lionel shrugged. "Allow me to make a deal with you. You tell me *how* you believe I ended up in that house, and in return I'll tell you *why* I was there."

I took a deep breath before speaking, even though I couldn't look Lionel in the eye while I said this. "You traveled back in time." My heart beat quickly, and I felt embarrassed. Lionel looked at me sympathetically. He leaned forward and rested his head on his hands.

"Go on. What led you to that conclusion?"

I imagined myself in front of a class being challenged to explain the reasoning behind some position. It no longer seemed that he was leading me up the garden path, but I needed to make sure of something first. "It *was* you I saw in the fire, right?"

"It most certainly was."

I relaxed. "It's funny. Until I noticed the air tank just now, part of me still didn't believe it was you." Lionel nodded understandingly. "Well, for starters, you just disappeared into thin air that night. No one saw you leave. In fact, other than me, no one saw you there at all. So how did you just vanish like that, let alone enter the house in the first place? Hell, even I had to break in through the back door."

"But all by itself that doesn't add up to time travel," Lionel said.

"Not even close," I said. "Last week I ran into Miriam's family. Miriam was the woman who lived in the house, but you probably knew that already." Lionel nodded. "Anyway, they were looking for an old Bible that belonged to Miriam's late son. They were sure it was in a part of the house undamaged by the fire, but they couldn't find it. Then, over the weekend, I remembered you were holding something that looked like a small black book. I assumed it was the Bible, but that didn't make any sense. For one thing, why would you steal an old family Bible?"

"If I may interject," Lionel said, "I didn't steal it."

"No," I said, looking at him for a long moment, "I don't believe you did. At any rate, it all seemed like an amazing coincidence. Miriam's family comes in search of a missing Bible that wasn't where it should have been. I see you holding a Bible, in a burning house of all places, on the night Miriam died. Then I realized why it seemed like such a coincidence: you couldn't have known they'd be looking for the Bible, because they wouldn't be looking for

it until *after the fire*. I don't claim to know exactly how you became aware of it, but you must have found out about the Bible after the fire and traveled back in time to get it."

It felt like I hadn't talked that much in years. I was so absorbed in my explanation I'd forgotten Lionel was even there. "That's rather a remarkable account of things," he finally said.

"What's more, you're not a firefighter, but there you were wearing an air tank in the middle of a neighborhood house fire. How else would you have known to do that? I doubt you drive around with an air tank strapped to your back, looking for burning houses that are about to swallow obscure family heirlooms."

Lionel chuckled. "No, I can't say that I do."

"You had to have known about the fire in advance. Maybe you set the fire yourself, but that wouldn't explain how you ended up with the very Bible Miriam's family would only *later* be unable to find." I was surprised to see Lionel sitting up straight and looking at me with an approving expression.

"I suppose it's time for my end of the bargain," he said cheerfully as he walked back to his office. As he returned, I could see he was carrying something. I knew what it was without having to ask. "Here you are."

My hands trembled a little as I looked at the Bible. I opened the front cover and saw an inscription:

*To Andy
on the day of your First Communion
May 2, 1988*

"Jesus," I finally said after staring at the Bible for a while.

"Quite," Lionel said as I handed it back to him. "You more than likely have some questions of your own."

"That's understating things a bit."

"I guess we can start with the reason I have this Bible, though if you're a little disappointed I'll understand. During the week after the fire, probably around the time Miriam's daughter Nancy spoke to you, I was hired to find it."

"Hired?" I don't know what I expected Lionel to say, but it wasn't that.

"Yes. You see we—my colleagues and I—have what you might call a historical research and recovery firm. People hire us to find things, things they otherwise believe are lost to history. Like that Bible for instance."

"You mean Miriam's daughter knows that you're..." I started to say.

"Oh, certainly not. We don't explain to our clients *how* we're able to recover their valuables. We invent cover stories for that end of things. Take this

Bible," he said, holding it up. "Naturally, when there's a house fire, some bloke has to investigate the cause. During the course of the investigation, while he was collecting evidence, perhaps this Bible fell into his possession. It was purely an accident, of course, but being that I have connections with various government agencies, it was no problem for me to track it down."

"And you think they'll believe that?" I asked skeptically.

"They always do. I grant it sounds implausible to you, but then again you know the truth of the matter. Time travel isn't a possibility that would occur to most people. Plus, our clients are so happy when we recover their treasured items, they likely wouldn't care if we robbed someone to obtain them."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. In all the years I'd spent researching and pondering the possibilities of time travel, this never occurred to me. Yet now that Lionel brought it to my attention, it made perfect sense. "Yeah," I said aloud, "with a time machine you could do that. In fact, you'd be in an unusually good position to do just that. If you knew exactly when some object disappeared, you could travel back to that very moment and recover the item immediately *after* it disappeared. Because, unlike the person who lost it, you'd know just when to look for it. You could even observe a conversation at a critical moment, because you not only know when it takes place, you know the future events to which it pertains."

"My word, Cal. You are a quick study."

"Well, I've been preoccupied with the philosophical side of this for a while now."

Lionel seemed to consider this for moment. "Yes. I rather enjoyed your presentation at the university colloquium this past April. I never would've considered the past as a, how did you put it? 'A garden of ethical safeguards.'"

I stared at Lionel wide-eyed for a moment. I was about to remark on the unearthly coincidence that he happened to attend a philosophy colloquium nearly six months ago, but I couldn't help smiling as I thought about it in a different way. "So, did you travel to the colloquium just before or just after you encountered me in the fire?"

Lionel grinned. "Just before, as a matter of fact. It seems all out sequence, I know. My colleague and I noticed you following me. When we did a little digging and found out you lived next door, we guessed that you'd turn up during the house fire, which was probably why you were following me in the first place. Once we learned that you were on the faculty here, I figured I'd try to learn a little more about your research interests. I suppose I could've read something you'd published, but..."

"Since you happen to have a working time machine, you traveled back and attended the colloquium in person," I said.

"Indeed."

I pictured the colloquium in my mind. "I'm trying to remember whether I saw you there or not."

"It's doubtful. You wouldn't have known to look for me."

"True."

"For what it's worth, I found your paper fascinating. Is a publication forthcoming?"

I frowned. "Not so far. In fact, it was rejected again the other day. That makes the third rejection."

"Oh, dear," Lionel said. "I am sorry to hear that."

"It's not a total surprise. Even around the Philosophy Department, what I do isn't considered an emerging area of research."

"Good thing, too," Lionel said. I looked up at him sharply. "Oh, don't misunderstand. I think what you're doing is wonderful, in and of itself. In fact, the way you responded to some of the questions people threw at you back in April showed a remarkably keen understanding of the ways of time travel."

"No, what I meant was...well, I don't think I need to impress upon you the need to keep secret what we do here. If the fat arses of the university administration, let alone the general public, ever learned of what we're up to...I don't even want to think about the consequences."

I nodded affirmatively. "I understand, believe me."

Lionel patted my shoulder as he stood up. "I knew you would, Cal. Best to have them thinking you're a doddering eccentric. It's some of the best camouflage there is, and you still get the last laugh. You know I..."

A low sound of machinery interrupted him. He turned abruptly toward the enclosed area that resembled a paint booth. The lights inside the booth were now on and cast a dull yellow glow. Both monitors at the desk in front of the booth suddenly displayed data and graphics I couldn't make out from where I sat. Lionel looked back and forth between the instrument desk and me.

"Stay right there. I just have to attend to this. Oh, and for the time being, leave the explanations to me. Shan't be a moment." He hurried off toward the instrument desk. As he did, I bolted up from my chair.

"Holy shit! Is that the time machine?" I yelled, thunderstruck.

"Of course it is, Cal. You didn't think I was making all of this up, did you?"

I shuffled over to where Lionel was standing. "It just seemed too good to be true." He was fast at work at the instrument desk, clicking through graphical menus and occasionally adjusting some of the nearby switches. He seemed to know what he was doing.

The whirring sound grew louder, and the lights inside the enclosed booth were brighter. For a moment, I felt like Roy Neary standing on the landing

pad at Devil's Tower at the end of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* as the alien ships swooped in. I didn't know precisely what was going to happen next, but you would have needed a crane to move me from where I stood.

Just then, I noticed two cylinders—one lowering from the ceiling, the other rising from the floor—enclosing an area inside the booth. They met about four feet off the ground with an audible click as the mechanical whirring reached a crescendo. Then the cylinders slowly began to part.

“Oh my God,” I drawled.

“Sometimes the proverbial picture is a worth a thousand words,” Lionel said with a smirk. As the cylinders moved apart, they revealed a man.

He looked very unhappy with me.

CHAPTER 5

THE MAN INSIDE the booth had thinning black hair and stood half a foot taller than Lionel, closer to my height. His attire was striking. He wore a black suit that seemed cut a little longer than one would usually see. Underneath was a matching black vest with a pocket-watch fob attached. He also wore a dress shirt with a detachable collar. He held a bowler hat under one arm and a small attaché case in the other hand.

He looked back and forth from Lionel to me and sauntered out of the booth, fixing me with a displeased look. Lionel hurried over to him.

“Ah, Roger. Good to have you back. How did everything go?”

“Well enough, I suppose,” Roger said with a noticeable British accent.

“Excellent,” Lionel replied. His joviality now seemed forced. “There’s someone I’d like you to meet.” He turned back to me. “This is Cal Sutherland. Cal, this is my colleague, Roger Blanchard.” I extended my hand. He just looked at it without offering his own hand. He turned back to Lionel.

“Lionel. A word,” he said harshly, walking past me to the far corner of the lab. Lionel gave me an embarrassed look.

“Not to worry, Cal. Just stay right here. I’ll be back momentarily.”

Lionel hurried over to meet Roger on the far side of the lab. From Roger’s body language, I could tell he was very upset. He shook his head at Lionel and even angrily pointed in my direction once. I turned away from them, looking toward where I’d just seen Roger materialize—materialize from some past time! I shook my head at that. Would any of this ever seem completely real?

At that moment, the door to the lab opened. A younger man with tousled dirty blonde hair entered. He wore a faded green backpack and looked to be in his early twenties. He had a pair of white earbuds in each ear. When he saw me, he froze for a moment and plucked out the earbuds. He looked over at Lionel, who gave a disarming wave. The young man looked back at me and shrugged. He set his backpack down on the table.

“Uh, hi,” he said, more unsure of himself than unfriendly.

“Good afternoon.” I replied.

“I’m Jack. Jack Greenwood,” he said, extending his hand.

“Good to meet you,” I said, shaking his hand. “My name’s Cal.”

He drew back surprised. “Cal Sutherland?”

"Uh, yeah."

"Oh cool," he said. "I started reading that paper you wrote. It was really interesting."

"Really?" I asked, incredulously. If three people outside of my department had read that colloquium paper, I would've considered it an unprecedented success. Now here was the second person to have mentioned it this afternoon.

"Oh yeah," he said, walking over to the instrument desk that Lionel was operating earlier. "I mean, I didn't understand all of it, but that part about the rights of adopted kids and using time travel to find their real parents was smart. It kinda made me wonder why we haven't had any foster kids asking us to track down their real parents yet."

"Well thanks, um, Jack. Glad to hear you enjoyed it." I was about to ask him a couple of more questions, but the volume of Roger's voice suddenly rose.

"It's an exceedingly bad idea, Lionel," I heard him say. "And I resent the way you've forced my hand like this." He started to walk away from Lionel and back toward where I was standing. I noticed that Jack looked up from what he'd been doing.

"Now, just a moment," Lionel said, "you and I discussed this very thing only the other day."

"We didn't *discuss* anything. You said you wanted to tell him...even bring him here to show off what we're really doing. I said you shouldn't." Roger waved at me resentfully. "And yet, here he is anyway."

"He," Lionel started to say, "that is, Cal, isn't just anyone, Roger."

"He certainly isn't. Up until you unfurled all of our work for him, he was someone who didn't know about any of this. That's the way I would've preferred to keep it."

Lionel held a finger in the air. "Now that's where you're wrong. Cal sussed the whole thing out before I even told him."

Roger stared at me for moment, sizing me up. Then he turned back to Lionel. "What did he figure out exactly?"

"How I came to be in that house during the fire. I wouldn't have brought him here otherwise." That was a half-truth. Lionel had brought me into the lab before I recounted my interpretation of events, but I wasn't about to protest.

Roger frowned. "I still don't like it. We can't just bring every Tom, Dick, and Harry in here because they wrote some high-flown article about philosophy and time travel."

"No offense taken," I said sarcastically.

"Steady on, Roger," Lionel said. "Apart from you, Jack, and me, no one else in the world better understands the need for secrecy here. I think Cal appreciates our unique position more than you realize."

Roger rolled his eyes. "So, should the American scientists working on the atomic bomb have just up and told their Russian counterparts about their designs, merely because they happened to be in the same line of work? We can't predict what he's going to do now that he knows."

I'd had enough of being talked about as though I wasn't there. "The Russians and the Americans were *competitors* for the atomic bomb. I'm a lot of things, but I'm not your sworn enemy. Plus, I wouldn't know how to create a time machine even if I did have all the specifications."

Roger sneered. "I don't think time travel is something to make light of."

I took a step toward him. "That makes two of us." He glared at me for a second and started to walk away.

"Just a moment, Roger," Lionel called out to him. "Cal. When you saw me in the burning house, you were rather upset at me for not trying to save the woman who lived there. Remember? I had the breathing apparatus on and everything, but I didn't even *try* to save her."

I hadn't thought of it until just now. "Yeah, I do remember, now that you mention it."

"Okay," Lionel said, rubbing his hands expectantly. "So here we are, all together in the same room. You know for a fact it was me in the house, yet you're suddenly not at all upset. Why on Earth not? Didn't I have some moral duty to save her life?" These questions stopped Roger in his tracks. Even Jack Greenwood made his way over from the control desk and looked on curiously.

I knew what Lionel was asking me, but at first I didn't completely appreciate why. The answer was a pretty simple one, at least to me. Lionel was asking a common question associated with time travel. It was an issue that most people and most perfectly good sci-fi movies got totally wrong.

"Well, if you're hoping I'll say something about unraveling the space-time continuum, you're in for a disappointment," I said lightly. "It's like this: Miriam's family hired you to find her late son's missing Bible. They did this *after* the fire that killed Miriam. So, Miriam did in fact die in the fire. Miriam dying in the fire is what led her family to you in the first place. This means that neither you, nor I, nor any other time traveler that may have been lurking in the past, acted to prevent her death. She *was* killed in the fire, period. It isn't so much that you *couldn't* save her—a better way to put it is that you *didn't* save her. No one did. That things happened the way they did is absolute proof that no one intervened to change anything. So I can't be mad at you for not acting to save her, because it simply wasn't possible."

Lionel smiled approvingly and turned to Roger. "There you are. And we didn't even have to drag him to November of '63 to straighten him out about paradoxes."

"November of '63?" I asked.

"Story for another time," Lionel said.

Roger still frowned at me, but his expression softened ever so slightly. "I still don't like him being here," he said, and he finally turned to address me directly. "It's nothing personal, Doctor Sutherland. But I can see that my colleague's mind is made up." He started to walk away and turned back. "You really don't believe the past can be changed?" he asked me.

"Afraid not," I said, wondering why he seemed so concerned about this. "Privately, I've taken to calling this the First Law."

"Oh?" Lionel asked.

"A time traveler cannot alter the past in order to change the future."

"The First Law," Lionel said. "Well, if it's all right with you, I think we'll co-opt that phrase ourselves. It took us a good bit of trial and error to figure out what you've intuited, Cal. Well done."

My mind was awl. I'd been toiling in obscurity with philosophical issues that no one took seriously because, according to them, there was no such thing as time travel. Yet here I was, standing among three time travelers with a working time machine just a few feet away! It was tremendously vindicating. It didn't even bother me that I had to keep it secret. Though I'd just met Lionel, the time machine already seemed like *my* secret. I imagined picking Lionel's brain about time travel and discreetly translating that into a future article. The possibilities for additional research which, only an hour ago seemed small and futile, had multiplied immeasurably.

When I came out of my daydream, I noticed Roger had left the room, and Lionel and Jack were bent over the instrument desk talking about something. I figured they had work to do, and I took this as my cue to get going. It was already a beautiful day, and I looked forward to spending the rest of it contemplating what I now knew. After the shock wore off, that is.

"Well, Lionel, thank you very much for showing me all this. To say the least, it's given me quite a lot to think about."

Lionel looked up with a confused expression. "I'm sure it has."

"Rest assured I'll keep this all a secret. But if you're free sometime soon, I'd love to talk with you more about time travel."

"Talk?" he asked with a laugh. "Oh no, I'm afraid we've done all that."

"Oh," I said, disappointed.

Lionel walked over to me and nodded in the direction of the time machine. "Like to have a go?"

I was stunned. Life-altering questions have a way of doing that.

"Are you serious?" Lionel looked at me quizzically as my banal response shook me out of my stupor. "Sorry. That was a stupid thing to say. It's just..."

Lionel placed his hand on my shoulder, and I noticed Jack Greenwood trying to hide a smile. "Easy does it, old man," Lionel said. "This isn't the queen of the spring pageant asking you for a date."

"True. This ranks much higher on the 'too good to be true' meter."

"Nevertheless," Lionel prompted.

I threw up my hands and laughed at the absurdity of it all. "Hell yes!"

"Excellent." Lionel grinned. "I have just the place. In fact, you can help with a bit of business I have there." He took a step back and looked me up and down. "Of course, we can't have you looking like that. You see that room over in the corner? Go to the rack marked '3' and pick out a nice suit. Nothing too formal. Be sure to choose one of the belts as well. Very important about the belt."

I started to walk over to the door Lionel indicated. "Oh," he called out to me. "You'll need an overcoat too. Rather chilly where we're going." Lionel returned to the instrument desk to talk something over with Jack.

I opened the door Lionel had indicated. It was dark inside, and I felt around to my right for a light switch. The room was about 20 feet square with concrete block walls. It was filled with racks of clothes that reminded me of the wardrobe room for a theatrical company, except better organized. Directly in front of me, on a rack marked '0' were articles of clothing that looked like something worn by an English Lord. The jackets, all of which had matching waistcoats, were either black or tweed and cut with very high necklines. There were some walking sticks nearby and an assortment of hats. I also noticed something more subtle. These clothes hadn't been in style for about a hundred years, yet they were brand new. They clearly weren't purchased in some vintage clothing shop. These were the real thing.

"Far out," I said with a smile. I moved farther into the room and found the rack marked '3' about halfway back. The clothes were still authentic, but newer than what I'd seen on the previous clothing rack. The pants were high waisted, and the jackets had lower necklines. The style, along with the number '3,' gave me an idea of where Lionel and I might be going.

Smiling the whole time, I finally selected a slate gray single-breasted jacket with creased trousers, a white shirt, and a blue and white striped tie. As I slipped on the jacket, I looked at myself in the full-length mirror. I felt a little ridiculous in the high waisted pants, even though I'd seen Cary Grant pull off this same look in a dozen different films. I found a matching fedora and slipped it on my head, tilting it forward.

I picked up my own clothes and started back out to the lab. "A belt," I said, snapping my fingers. I saw several belts hanging on the wall. As I grabbed one, I noticed a small box attached to it just to the left of the silver-colored buckle. I slipped it around my waist and flipped off the light on my way out.

"Very smart," Lionel said, giving me the once-over.

I made a turn to show off the outfit. "William Powell, eat your heart out."

"You'll need to empty your pockets of any personal effects, like your wallet and *especially* your mobile phone. Be rather difficult to account for, you know."

"Leave my wallet here?"

Lionel must have noticed my frown. "Not to worry, Cal. I suppose my lot has come to take this sort of thing for granted. Not much time will pass while we're gone. In fact, the clock on the wall will have only advanced about fifteen minutes by the time we return. Now then, Jack. Are we ready?"

"We should be," Jack said, not looking up from the controls. Lionel turned to me, holding his hand toward the time machine.

"Cal, my dear fellow, right this way."

I took a deep breath and pulled open the door to the booth where I'd seen Roger appear a little while ago. It was very warm inside, a combination of my overcoat and the lack of air circulating. On the floor were several seven-sided platforms that were a translucent bluish color. I could just make out some wires and conduit crisscrossing below each platform, and I heard the dull hum of a running motor.

"That's it, Cal. Just stand in the center of any of the Nora Pads you see beneath your feet."

"Nora Pads?" I asked.

"The bloke who designed this part of the apparatus named the components after his daughter."

"Should I do the joke about beaming up?" I asked.

"Quite," Lionel smiled. "This was merely the best design that could be employed for confining and manipulating temporal waves. One of the preliminary designs was actually an egg-shaped container that would have required us to curl up in the fetal position. You'll just need to stand still as the tubes close around you. It's a bit confining at first, but it won't last long. You will feel a bit, shall we say, on edge, but I assure you it's all quite painless. Ready whenever you are, Jack."

The booth's overhead lights dimmed, and the sound of a mechanical latch releasing was audible. I saw the bottom tube rising up and jerked my head back, realizing the top cylinder was coming down simultaneously. The whirring sound, barely audible a moment ago, grew quite loud. Something was clearly happening. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Lionel standing there as though he were doing nothing more than waiting for a bus. The tubes were now about eighteen inches apart. My heart pounded, and I felt perspiration under my arms.

What happened next is a little difficult to describe. As the tubes closed

completely, all the hairs on my body felt like they were standing on end. It was a tingly sensation, like the shock from static electricity, but not painful. As the whirring hum reached a climax, I felt myself gently pulled in many different directions at once. I don't know how, but I knew I couldn't move. I tried to say something, but there was only a dull echo within my mind.

What is this? What the hell is this! I can't...

Then the physical and psychological cacophony suddenly stopped. Everything was totally black and silent. I pushed myself to form a coherent thought, anything to reassure myself I still existed and was still whole. I felt like I had been painlessly scattered into a million pieces that somehow didn't occupy physical space. A dim feeling of alarm echoed within a thick fog of mental molasses. Then I heard what sounded like...the wind. Everything in front of me became too bright to see. The light dimmed, and the surroundings came into focus. I knew I could move and was somehow whole again.

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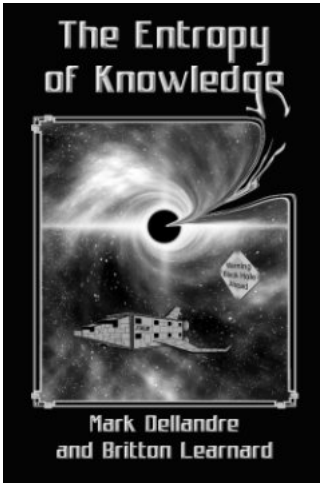
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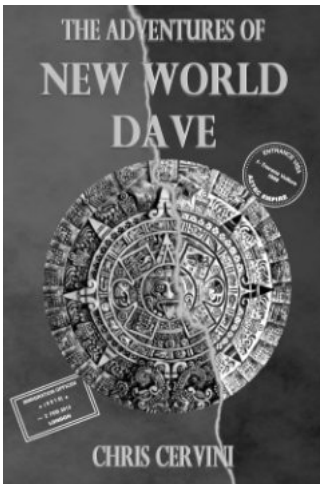


The Entropy of Knowledge

Mark Dellandre and Britton Learnard

We've all had moments when we felt like we were surrounded by idiots... Babylon Briggs feels that pain every day because his town, his planet, even his galaxy, is jam-packed with the most thick-headed simpletons imaginable. So when his home world is invaded by a group of equally clueless conquerors, it's up to Babylon to save the day. The only question:

Is he smart enough?



The Adventures of New World Dave

Chris Cervini

In the spring of 1519, Hernán Cortés arrived at the shores of Mexico to conquer the Aztec Empire and claim its gold for Spain. That's what the history books tell us. But sometimes, right in the middle of the history we know, somebody goes and does something to change one important detail, and the world is never the same...

On my third day in 1992, I saw Laura Dietrichson.

It was one thing to read about murders in true crime books. The victim had a life—accounts and photos were merely evidence of that life. But that's all it was. The person was still dead as you read about them.

Yet here I was looking at a future murder victim, as real, as alive, and as wholly unaware of the date she would die as I was of my own. Her murder in ten months somehow made her seem even more alive.

Professor Cal Sutherland's research on the philosophy of time and time travel elicits only snide remarks from fellow philosophers and rejection notices from journals. Even Cal would admit that time travelers probably aren't real—until he encounters one, Dr. Lionel Bradshaw, inside his neighbor's burning house.

Cal accompanies Lionel on a trip back in time to retrieve a rare set of tumblers, and Cal happily lives out what had formerly been a mere thought experiment. But when a 23 year-old murder threatens the secrecy of the time machine in the present day, the only one who can help is the murdered woman herself—still very much alive somewhere in the past. It's up to Cal to track her down and learn all he can about her death, before it happens.

Cal soon learns that, while the past cannot be changed—the “First Law” of time travel—there is much a time traveler can do in the past. Unfortunately for Cal, this includes the possibility of dying there....



About the Author: Michael Walsh is a philosophy professor and sometime actor in a local community theater. He lives with his wife and their two children in Western New York. *Time Starts Now* is his first novel.



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