

TIME REPAIR: A USER'S GUIDE

by

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A Thesis
A Submitted to the
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in Partial Fulfillment of
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of
Master of Fine Arts
Creative Writing

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by

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my loving wife, Renée.

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ABSTRACT

TIME REPAIR: A USER'S GUIDE

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Hap fixes time machines for a living. People rent them, travel back in time to try to fix their shattered lives, and when they breakdown somewhere in space-time, Hap is called in to save them. Hap lives in his own time machine with a semi-existing dog and an artificially intelligent interface who he's in love with. He hates his job. He hates his life. And, just as he's about to give up the search for his long lost father, he receives a book which promises to reveal his father's whereabouts. It's called *Time Repair: A User's Guide*, and the author is Hap from the future.

Read this book. Then write it. Your life depends on it.

CHAPTER ONE

I've got just barely enough space to live inside here for all of eternity.

But *barely* is enough.

The operation manual says, "A user of the Recreational Time Vehicle can survive in isolation for an indefinite period of time." Which works out really well, because that's exactly what I've been doing: living in here indefinitely.

Or at least *mostly* living indefinitely.

Sometimes I pick up the occasional job from Modern Time HQ. But, to be honest, jobs have been coming in less and less often, so when I'm not working I throw the gearbox in neutral, set the computer to Presently-Indefinite and kind of cruise through space and time.

Right now my head hurts and it's hard to think.

There must be some kind of error in the internal time alteration cylinder, because when I look at myself in the bathroom mirror, I see the face of my father, or perhaps it's my face slowly turning into his.

And I look just like him, particularly how he looked on the nights when he came home so exhausted he couldn't even make it all the way through dinner without falling asleep right there in his chair with his bowl of onion soup turning cold, a brothy fragrant

bowl that, minute by minute, was giving up its minute quantum heat into the vast average temperature of the universe.

The base model RTV runs on super hi-tech ChronoLOGIC™ technology: a twelve-cylinder syntactical drive built on a thermo-nuclear 3.8 liter engine, which features an applied duolinguistic construction allowing for free-range navigation within an open environment.

Or, as my mom calls it: *that box thing*.

To operate, you hop in. You pull some leavers and push a button or two. It takes you to far away places in distant times. Turn this knob to go back in time, flip this switch for the future. You hop out and hope the world has changed for the better. Sometimes it's the same but *you 've* changed for the better.

Or neither.

I don't go outside much. Outside of the RTV, I mean. Outside into linear time.

But I do have a dog with me, which is pretty much all I need.

I mean, he's not really a dog, per se. Just sort of a dog. He was an experiment, sent by a group of scientists into a black hole to test the limits of living matter. When he popped out on the other side, his existence had become non-linear, which means that he exists in many points across space and time. That means, if he so chose, he could exist in all seven of Earth's continents at once, as well as on the moon, the center of the star Betelgeuse, in any time he wishes between the beginning and end of the universe. Luckily, he chooses to hang out in time with me.

I found this particular mutt sniffing at a pile of iron oxide off the equator of Titan, which is one of Saturn's moons. In the course of human history, I don't think anyone has been as happy to see another living thing as this dog was to see me. He licked my hands and my face and I named him Bruce.

Bruce has a pointed nose, but a soft face and bald spots on his hind legs where he chews on his fur. He's also halfway invisible, like a kind of ghost. When I look in his eyes, I can see the eyes of a good dog, but I can also see whatever's behind him, like the wall of the RTV or my time control hub.

Bruce sleeps around twenty hours a day and sometimes licks his paws to comfort himself. He also doesn't smell all that great, but I'm fine with it. He also doesn't need food or water. I'm also fairly certain that he doesn't understand that he doesn't technically exist. He's just this strange phantom dog who yields nothing but slobbery and loyal affection. It must break some kind of law of conservation, all of this drool. Drool and love, I guess.

Drool and love from this abandoned nonexistent animal.

People assume that I'm like some kind of scientist because I work with time machines. Which isn't true. I was planning to go to school for applied science to become a temporal engineer like my father. But then things got complicated when my dad went missing, so when this job came along, it made sense for me to take it.

And so I've made a career of it. I fix time machines for a living.

To be specific, I am a Class-3 T-system specialist qualified and trained to service public-use duolinguistic time vehicles. Technically I'm an independent contractor, employed by Modern Time, which is an American multinational space-time conglomerate headquartered in New York City, headquartered in the Modern Time Center, a 128 story glass building zoned for residential, commercial and retail use.

Do I like the job? No. For one, the pay is insulting. For another thing, it's painful to wake up everyday and put on a uniform embossed with the logo of the same company that drove my father down a dark spiral so steep and abysmal that he vanished one day from my life, from my mother's life, without even a letter or a simple note—just a sticky note on the fridge.

But, that's life sometimes. You wake up one day and you need a job because food and apartments don't come free, plus you've got your mother to take care of and that's a nightmare in of itself, and the only thing you no how to do is the thing that you spent your entire life hating but it's the family business and you don't know how to do anything else.

Plus, I'm not exactly happy with the ways things are going at the particular moment, because my Tense Actuator keeps acting up.

It's happened three times today already. Or maybe that was yesterday. Or maybe tomorrow? Or maybe a long time ago? I don't know.

Then again, that could be the whole point. I mean, if the RTV really is acting up, sliding in and out of gear-shifts, how could I know when, and therefore, how this happened. Hey, maybe it was even me who broke the thing in the first place. After all, I

am the one tricking myself into believing that I can go on living in this thing. Out in the middle of nowhere, stuck in time, forever.

My computer's going haywire and a red light above the monitor just started flashing. I can't get the screen to show me anything but random flickering decimals between 0 and 7, so I print a crash report. The report's ten pages of code which, in a very detailed and scientific way, basically describe that I'm fucked. "You can't keep doing this." *This meaning life*, or at least that's my best guess. It's all mathematical language for, "Hey asshole, you are massively screwing everything up."

Trust me, I'm aware. I know about screwing things up better than anyone. I don't need a bunch of microchips and a seven-hundred feet of fiber-optic cable to tell me what I already know.

Those microchips and cables, which are housed in the walls around my living quarters, which silently work 24/7 to keep me alive at this single point in time, comprise the artificially intelligent interface who is Suzy.

On start up, the RTV's computer comes in one of two personality skins: Sam or Suzy. You have to choose wisely because you can only choose once and you're stuck with your choice forever.

And I won't lie to you. I chose Suzy because she was a girl. Do I enjoy Suzy's visual screen configuration and digital voice support? Yes. Do I find her auburn-brown hair, bright blue eyes and pixelated wire-rim glasses kind of sexy? Yes and yes. Has there ever been a moment in all the time I've spent in this vehicle, where, let's say, I've printed

a screenshot of Suzy and done you know what with it? I can't tell you that. I am pretty certain that everyone in life at some point loses their capacity for embarrassment. I haven't gotten to that point yet, but I'm also not that far from it.

Let's take a look, shall we? I'm five nine, 195 lbs. Rounding to the nearest (rounding down, if we've got to be accurate). I've got a major thinning condition going on with my hair. I may be hiding from time here, but I can't deny the truth that is my own biology. Also can't hide from gravity.

So, yes, I went with Suzy.

Do you want to hear the first thing Suzy ever said to me? "Your password must be at least 6 characters and must contain at least 1 letter and 1 number." Want to hear the second thing? "My programing won't allow me to lie to you." The third thing she says is, "I'm sorry, okay?"

I say, "What are you sorry for?"

She says, "I'm just not a very good interface."

I say that I had never met a computer program with such low self-esteem.

She says, "I'll really try though. I really want to give it my best shot, just for you."

Suzy always tells me about how bad things are. She's programed to believe everything around her is going straight to shit. Having a female computer isn't exactly what I expected. Do I sometimes regret my choice? Yes. If given the chance to live it all over again, would I choose Suzy a second time? Absolutely. What do you want from me?

I'm a lonesome guy. And she's nice. She knows I have a crush on her and she allows me to flirt with her, from time to time. I'm not proud of it.

I never got married, though I did once think about the possibility. The woman I never married was named Marie. Like Bruce, she doesn't technically exist, except she does. It's a bit of a paradox, but in reality, The Woman I Never Married is a perfectly valid, living entity. Or at least a class of living entities. I guess, if you wanted to get technical about the whole thing, you could argue that every woman who ever lived is The Woman I Never Married. So I figure, why not call her Marie? That's my thinking, anyway.

This is how Marie and I never met:

On a bright fall day, Marie walked to the park in town, across from the library and the church, next to the old Italian market that is now a tile and flooring warehouse. I'm guessing. She very well could have. Someone somewhere in time must have done something like that, right? Marie brought with her a lunch in a brown paper bag and an old hardcover. She lived down the road, about a quarter of a mile, in a small yellow colonial on Elm Street, or Cherry Street, or Pine. She had lived in that home for three years. Or her whole life. Or she had never lived there. I don't know. She sat at a picnic table by the baseball diamond, ate her sandwich and read her book. Thirty minutes passed, then an hour. I never showed up at the park, never came to the picnic table by the baseball diamond, down in town across from the library and the church. I was never there, wearing my only suit I ever owned with the red tie with the hole at the bottom, which no one ever saw. I was not there to notice her for the first time, to see her turning

each page over slowly, as if to run all of her fingers over the worn corners of each leaf. I never saw her stop to ponder a passage, to stare out over the tops of the orange maple trees. I did not catch her eye, while stumbling over my rigid new shoes. I did not make her laugh. I never asked her what her name was and she never told me that it was Marie. I did not talk to her the next day, embarrassed that I had called her so soon. We did not get married a year later in the church in town by the library, which overlooked the park. The park where, on that first day, we sat at the picnic table and tried not to stare while we both secretly imagined a life together, a life we were never going to have. A life that could never be lost because it never even began. A life that could have begun right there in that park, but never actually did.

CHAPTER TWO

I'm deep asleep.

No dreams.

No nothing.

Then, through the darkness I hear Suzy weeping to herself.

I sit up and, I'm like, "How in the hell do you even know how to do that?" I'm talking about the crying. Like, it's not like Suzy has any vocal cords or lungs. Or even a real mouth, just a digital one, made up of the red, green and blue light of my computer monitor. And yeah, I could be more delicate when it comes to her feelings—I know I can be a bit of an ass. But I also don't understand why the techs at Modern Time would have programmed her like this. Sensitive. Dejected. Generally unhappy. "Where the fuck in your code," I say, "does this even come from?"

Of course, this only makes her cry harder. She's at the point where her voice starts to shutter and she has to gasp heavily between sobs, almost dripping digital snot from her pixelated nose. The first few times she did this, I went to reach for a box of tissues before stopping myself.

I mean, look, I usually think of myself as an empathetic guy, or at least I like to think so. But, for some reason, I've never been good at dealing with criers. It's hard to watch and it gives me so much anxiety that my first response is to lose my temper. And,

of course, after that, I feel guilty because of the monster that I am. And not like the stealing/lying/cheating kind of guilt. The kind of guilt you get from being a terrible person. The kind of guilt no apology will fix. Like, I was born a sack of shit and I will always be one, no matter what I do.

Or, you know, who knows? Maybe I'm fine. Maybe I just didn't end up becoming the person I was supposed to be. I'm not sure what that's supposed to mean. I've been messing with the Tense Actuator again and I think I broke it for good. Anyway, actuator or not, you can't say stuff that means diddly-Jack anymore.

I think maybe I should ask Suzy what she's getting on about, but it doesn't really matter. My mother used to do this too. Feelings, like pure liquid feelings, would fill her like a gas tank, right up to where she was brimming with it, the emotion swilling around. And at any moment—like at Sunday dinner, let's say—she could be easily tipped over by—let's say my father—and it would come pouring out like a waterfall into our home.

"It will be all right," I tell Suzy.

She says, "What will be all right, Hap?"

I don't say anything at first.

"What Hap? What? I'm asking you. What will be all right?"

I say, "Whatever you're crying about."

"Do you even know what I'm crying about?"

"Jesus, I don't know. Just don't worry. Everything will be okay."

She asks, "What will be okay?"

I say, "Whatever it is that you're upset about."

She says, “That’s exactly what I’m crying about. How can you go on when the world isn’t ending, that everything is just doing fine? I mean, we’ll never share our true feelings for one another because everything is just *okay*. We’re so okay that we can just sit around all day being okay. In our state of okay-ness, we forget that the life of the universe is waning, that we don’t have a long time before everything ends. Soon, it’s not going to be okay.”

Sometimes when I can’t sleep, I worry about Suzy. One of these days she might get tired of things. Tired of all of all those processing sequences, calculating and storing a hundred and seventy-two petabytes of information, running at seven thousand megahertz all day, everyday. Maybe one day she’ll just stop all her subroutines, halt of these metacycles and just turn off. Then I’d have to do a manual crash report and I don’t even know how I would explain everything to Mordern Time.

It’s a lonely life. Most RTV repair workers who live exclusively in their machines, floating in space-time, either just went through a breakup, divorce or some kind of personal catastrophe or are secretly trying to write the Great American Novel. Me? Well, I shot my boss. In the leg. Not anything serious. Well, anything *really* serious.

I mean, I didn’t mean to. It was at a wild office party. A Christmas party. Before I lived in the time-machine fulltime. Ten years ago.

To be fair, for the first three years I’d worked at Modern Time, Jerry Babich, my squirrely little husk of a boss with a mustache, hated me. I don’t know why—maybe I reminded him of someone or maybe he didn’t like my general work ethic, which is not

the best, but enough for someone to say, “Yeah, that guy’s a good guy. He shows up on time and gets the job done.” What the hell more could you want from me? I do the job I was hired to do.

For Jerry, maybe that wasn’t good enough.

For Jerry, it seems, not much is good enough.

Anyway, Modern Time gives out these standard-issue prototype paradox neutralization concept ray guns to us service techs, for the rare occasion when a client refuses to cooperate and endangers himself or the structural integrity of space-time. And at the party, everyone was pretty hammered, including me, so I was *not* alone in this, and we all wandered out onto 58th street because it seemed like the way the part ought to go, and we all started singing and someone in accounts payable said how absolutely awesome it would be if we had some fireworks right now, to which a handful of techs pull out their ray guns and someone says, “What, like these?” and we all set our lasers to stun and fire at the night sky, except me, who forgets and leaves it set on “Kill” and stumbles a bit and sends a few shots down instead of up.

And you can trust me on this: there will be a time in your life when you have a gun in your hand and you will have your finger on the trigger. Now, the gun may not be a gun, but you *will* have your finger on the trigger of whatever it is. And you may mean it, or you may not mean it, but your finger will begin to squeeze, you’ll find yourself ceding the responsibility of your actions to fate, going through the motions, watching yourself, at ease about all future events, the outcome of your inevitable action, not feeling much of

anything, unable to change the path of your body, your arm, your hand, your finger, the gun, the bullet.

And the bullet will leave the gun. And sometimes you will miss and everything will be okay. And sometimes you will hit something, like the patella of your boss's left leg, because you were drunk and maybe had been aiming for his head. Or maybe not, you're not sure.

But the thing is, your boss is now convinced that you were trying to kill him, and now you're on thin ice. Thinner than before. Like *way, way, way* thinner. The thinnest ice there could possibly be. Basically, you're walking on water.

He can't prove you were trying to kill him and since time repair technicians are very hard to come by, so he can't exactly fire you, even though you *really should* be fired because who the hell can shoot their boss and keep their job?

And if you think that I sound like I'm royally screwed, you'd be right. I wish I *had* been fired. I'm constantly looking over my shoulder, always waiting for the axe to fall, any slip up I make could result in things happening that I don't want to think about.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Oh and fun story real quick: My name is John. But no one calls me John. They call me Happy, as in "Trigger Happy." Ha. Ha. Ha. Even Suzy calls me Happy now, though I don't think she's doing it to be mean because mostly she calls me Hap, which is kind of endearing, I guess. It's just so engrained in the company's systems by now, I think it's leaked its way into her RAM. Either that, or Jerry's behind it, which would not surprise me.

So there's that.

There's also a really small percentage of something deep in the back of my mind that keeps me living in this time machine day to day that *does not* have to do with having shot my boss. And that is a thought that I've recently come to terms with: *What the hell else am I going to do?* I have no friends, nowhere to be, no one waiting for me. Might as well just float around, hang out with my dog and my computer. Why not, right?

Still, though, it can get pretty boring from time to time. It's been ten years, after all.

I suppose one of the perks of being an RTV repairman is the personal use of an individualized-wormhole maker. I'm free to distort the fabric of time and space as long as everything I do is completely reversible. I modified the wormhole maker to open really small peephole sized windows into other universes, other realities, through which I can watch alternate versions of myself. All in all, I've spied on forty-eight of them, of which, thirty-seven are complete assholes. And I've come to accept what that most likely means. If 77.08 percent, just over three quarters, of the other versions of yourself are total jerks, chances are you ain't exactly Mr. Perfect yourself.

The really terrible part is, those thirty-seven other-me's are doing really well. The other eleven aren't that bad off either. But each and every one is doing way better than me. No one's shot their boss but me. I am the only version of me who has shot someone. I am the worst version.

And here's the thing about this version of me: the worst has yet to happen. When it does happen, this is what happens: I shoot myself. I shoot myself right in the stomach. Not, my self-self. My *future*-self.

I shoot my future-self.

Right in the stomach.

I shoot my own future.

So I've got that to look forward to.

CHAPTER THREE

A call comes through on my monitor. The screen reads,

NAME: WASHINGTON

LOCATION: 39.984354, -75.199374 (PHILADELPHIA, PA)

TIME: 9:17:03 AM, JULY 1, 1776

and at first I get really excited. Like *Oh, man, holy moley*, and I shift the RTV into gear. But low and behold, it's not you know who, with the tricorne hat, the brass buttons and the legendary proficiency with a musket. I open the client profile and find that it isn't George, it's his nephew, Lawrence.

Don't ask me how these people get their hands on time travel units.

And when I say "these people" I mean these historic types. Pre twenty-first century folk who mostly have never even seen a light bulb, never mind handle the complexities of intertemporal tourism. The majority of people wrapped up in the world of time travel are tourists and probably thanks to some jackass who thought it would be a good idea to give up his worldly possessions and take up residence somewhere around the birth of America, an RTV got left behind in the past somewhere and now the

Lawrence Washington's of the universe are free to travel to and from wherever they please.

I set the RTV down on the bank of some river that I'd probably be able to recognize if it were two or more hundred years in the future, but right now, it's just trees, mud and water. The crash site is about three hundred yards up a hill to the east. I park amongst some reeds and pop open the door, listen to the *whoosssshh* pneumatic hatch release. It's a nice, calming sound.

I climb up to the crash site with my toolbox and as I'm catching my breath, I notice a dent in the side panel of Lawrence's unit. Lawrence himself is standing nervously behind a tree, about two hundred feet away. He thinks this a safe distance from the RTV—like in case it were to burst into flames. I'm not going to explain to him that this particular model has a thermonuclear battery which, if punctured, could not only take out the both of us and every living thing in this neck of the woods, but also the majority of greater Philadelphia. But I find it's best not to explain things.

In fact, I usually don't say much at all. Think about how you'd feel if you found yourself stranded in a strange place in a far away time, everyone you know is either dead or yet to be born, and you think you might be stuck there until your dying days... then you press a button in the ship marked "Assistance" and instantly another time machine appears and a man from the future or past jumps out with a clipboard. It's very unsettling. Maybe it doesn't sound so bad right now, but wait until it happens to you.

I go to open the dented panel, but it won't budge. I pry at it with a screwdriver until it pops open and a fair amount of smoke comes billowing out. It takes a few seconds for the smoke to clear and reveal a small fire burning in the cosine function gasket.

I get out my clipboard and yell out to Lawrence, "You can come out now." I've met some of the Lincoln, Roosevelt and Jefferson family members, and one time even a Clinton, but I'd never met a Washington before. Even so, I feel like I had a good idea of what to expect.

What I don't expect to see is a kid. As he gets emerges out into the sunlight and pushes his hair out of his eyes, I can see that he's a boy. A tall boy, but not a day over eleven. When I ask him what he's even doing with a time machine in the first place, he mumbles something about how I wouldn't understand. I say, "Try me." He looks down at his feet then shoots me a look like, *I'm eleven, what do you want?*

I say, "I hate to break it to you kid, but you can't change the past. There's one line, one path, which we can't deviate from, little man. If you never killed your uncle in the past, then you can't change that. That's a little thing we in this business call fate."

"But what if I did?"

I say, "Then, I would say, go right ahead. But you didn't. Sorry, little man."

He says, "Then what's the purpose of time travel?"

"Not for trying to kill your great uncle when he was your age," I say.

He tilts his head back and sighs really dramatically. With his eyes closed he says, "You don't understand what it was like to grow up with an uncle who also happens to be the father of the entire nation."

“Look,” I say, “That doesn’t have to define you. Like, in the story of Lawrence Washington, George might only be a footnote. You can start over again and have a new beginning.” I say, “If you want some real advice kid, change your name.”

He opens his eyes and looks at me in this very serious way (even for an eleven-year-old) and says, “Okay, maybe you’re correct,” but I can tell that he doesn’t actually mean it. This whole dark never-living-up-to-the-family-name thing is huge—he’s never going to get enough momentum in life to get out from under it. If he did, that would be a heck of a accomplishment. He’d deserve some kind of medal. Or his uncle’s job, you know, as the leader of the free world.

Or maybe not. But for heaven’s sake, he’d deserve something.

Most of the time the RTV isn’t even broken. They’re just mad because they can’t change the past. I used to show up and try to explain the fundamentals of the Sequential Self-Consistency Principal, but they never want to listen. They don’t want to know that they went to all this trouble for nothing. That’s the reason half of our clients even rent an RTV in the first place—to go back in time and fix their shattered lives.

The other half call because they’re freaked out. They arrive at their destination and get all panicky and scared to touch anything. They’re freaked out about the implications of changing the past. *What if I go back and I bump into a butterfly who’s suddenly flapping its wings differently and suddenly history’s changed forever?* Like they’re going to be the reason the Germans won World War II.

At this point, I usually have to sit them down and tell them that I've got good news and bad news. "The good news is, you don't have to worry," I say, "You can't change the past. Bad news is, no matter how hard you may try, you can't change the past."

CHAPTER FOUR

The usable interior volume of the main compartment of the RTV is a bit bigger than that of a phone booth. Standing one way, with my arms outstretched, I can touch the sides of the unit with my palms flattened, but turning the other way, along the vehicle's lengthwise axis, I can't touch both sides with my full wingspan, and in fact, lying down in the unit along that axis, with my hair lightly brushing one wall, if I point my toes, I can just barely touch both ends with the entire height of my body. So that's how I sleep in here. It's a bed, an office, a living room, and a tool shop. I take it to go to work, I use it for work, I go home from work in it, I live in it until the next day.

I have everything I need to move through time in here, and nothing I don't.

I will say, though, that it's hard to stay in shape in a Recreational Time Vehicle. I eat a lot of Ramen. There isn't enough room to do push-ups. Sometimes I pick up Bruce and curl him a few times. He grumbles a bit but puts up with it.

My personal clock shows that I've been in here, more or less, for almost ten years. Nine years, eleven months, and twenty-nine days. That's how much time has passed for me, for my body, my head, even though technically no time is passing at all.

I guess that makes me thirty. Thirty-one-ish.

Sometimes when I can't sleep, I try to see how far back into my childhood I can remember. The earliest memory that I can grasp is of me sitting on my bed with my dad as he reads me a book that we checked out of the library. It's bedtime. I am under the sheets and he is sitting on top of them, still dressed in his work clothes, still with his shoes on. I am about three years old. I don't remember anything about the book except that the cover was blue. I can't remember if my room was messy. I can't remember the things on the shelves. I can only base the way the room looks on subsequent memories of growing up in that house. I *can* remember the way my father had his left arm around me, the way I fit in right between his arm and his body. I remember the orange glow in his chin in the light of my lamp, a lamp with a thin cloth shade patterned with stars, planets and galaxies.

Most importantly I remember:

- a) the little pocket of space he makes for me
- b) how that little pocket is enough
- c) the sound of his voice as he reads
- d) the way the light shoots through the stars and galaxies on the lamp shade, projecting them outward onto the walls around us
- e) how the room feels like its own universe
- f) how the bed itself feels like a spaceship

My father built a time machine a long, long time before any one else had figured out how to do it. While all the other scientists working in quantum mechanics were trying

to figure out the constraints of basic math and the limits of life in numerous situations one might find while traveling through space-time, my father had actually built one. It resembled a refrigerator—the precursor to the modern day Recreational Time Vehicle—and it worked, just not well. Not well *enough* anyway.

Either my father was a gifted or a cursed scientist, depending on how you looked at it. He had a distinct awareness of time. He had the ability to feel it, and I don't mean like you or I do, like "Hey, it's three o'clock already?" He could feel it inside and out, on a primitive, visceral level. And yet, my father still spent all his life, as time wore on, trying to calculate the cause and effect of improbability, to equate the loss of energy with the logical fallacies that are inherent in traveling from point A to point B, where A equals your exact location in the universe and your precise moment in time, and where B equals neither of those.

This is what happened when you got in my father's time machine: If you closed the hatch and flipped the switch, you could go back, maybe three seconds in time or maybe three into the future. That was it. Three seconds. On the outside. Which was pretty incredible, at the time, considering the previous record to beat was zero. But the thing was, no matter how my father worked it, you'd move three seconds either way from the present and arrive at your destination in flames. Through my childhood, there had been countless fires, out in the garage where my father had created his workshop. The time machine crashed. It always crashed on arrival.

Each crash/fire had been followed by my father's emotional periods of extremity in the following order:

1. Hatred
2. Blame
3. Self-loathing
4. Questioning
5. Giving up
6. Silence

A period of silence might last a day or a month, then one day he'd be back out in the garage, tinkering and formulating, which soon led to many late nights and months rebuilding.

Then: crash, burn and repeat.

My father exhausted more than four decades coming to terms with what he called *The Absolute Injustice of Existence*, the inescapable fact that in life, *we only get one go-around, only one beginning and one end. And he came to terms with The Absolute Injustice of Existence* all while trying to deconstruct the idea of *once*, trying to put it into an equation, trying to quantify once as a variable, trying to come to grips with the difficulty and overall horror of understanding what it means to exist *once*.

He wasted years of his life. Years of my life. His life with my mom. His life with me. All of it down the drain. Near us, but not close. Out in the garage, working through calculations on sheets and sheets of graph paper and the chalkboard we hung on the sidewall by the yard equipment, the time machine sitting idle against the far wall.

He built a time machine, and then spent the rest wishing for more time. He spent all the time he had with his family thinking, *If I could only just have a little more time*.

He left when I was eighteen, just about to graduate from high school. He just disappeared one night. He took nothing with him. For a while there, I found myself in the garage every night making my own calculations on the chalkboard, trying to unravel his timeline and mine, trying to understand where he went and why. For years, I kept looking for him. I wasn't even sure what I would do if I found him.

And then I gave up. I never found any evidence of his whereabouts, never figured out why he would want to leave us, why he would remove himself from our equation. It took me a long time to realize that I never would, a lot longer than I'm proud of. And even though I've given up, I can't help myself from wondering, from time to time: Is he by himself? Is he happy now wherever he is? When it's late at night and he can't sleep, what does *he* think about?

CHAPTER FIVE

Sometimes I think back to when my father and I were first starting to sketch it out in his study at home, just ideas on a pad, first starting to realize what might be possible, and I suspect that he knew even then that he would get lost. He wanted to use it for sadness, to investigate the source of his own, his father's, and on and on.

I remember the graph paper we used, the pattern of one-centimeter squares in a light green grid. My father would open a package of five pads, each one a hundred sheets thick. He used to open the package with his company-logo letter opener, pulling the letter opener out of its holder in the heavy brass piece sitting on top of his desk (I can still picture the black box it came in, with fancy gold cursive letting on it—"EXECUTIVE DESK SET"—how at first, the words seemed like a kind of promise, a rare admission of his hope and ambition, and I can also picture the dust that gathered on the box, how, with each passing year that layer of dust thickened, how I wished I could have snuck into his office when he was at work and thrown that box away so that word wouldn't have to be right there on this desk, starting him in the face every day, "EXECUTIVE," a thoughtless word, a thoughtless gift from the company for ten years of unappreciated service).

He would worry the cellophane in a spot would just a bit, just enough to pinch between his fingers the big of clear wrap and tear the membrane, making that delicate, fine-structured sound of it being torn.

“Ahhh,” he would say, half smiling, enjoying the sound, he would hand me the wadded-up ball of cellophane, so I could crunch it in my hands and listen to it crackle a bit, then crunch it harder and toss it into the gray wire wastebasket, where it would sit atop a sliding sheaf of bills and return envelopes for bills and credit card offers, an unstable mountain of debt and credit, an avalanche waiting to happen.

I would take out one of the five pads and then he would put the rest back into his cabinet. The squares of the grid went all the way to the top, and the bottom, and the edges on either side, which was pleasing and good-natured and right.

Where the pad was bound at the top there was a red, waxy strip and sometimes my father would tear off the top sheet, so we could work on it without leaving impressions from our pen on the two or three or four sheets below, and that sound would be somewhat similar but in many ways quite different from the ripping-cellophane sounds, this one heavier, coarser, deeper, but more often my father wouldn't rip off a sheet at all, and instead leave the paper on the pad.

“Look at that,” he said. “How the ink bleeds.” He loved the way it looked, to write on a thick pillow of the pad, the way the thicker width of paper underneath was softer and allowed for a more cushiony interface between pen and surface, which meant more time the two would be in contact for any given point, allowing the fiber of the paper to pull, through capillary action, more ink from the pen, more ink, which meant more evenness of ink, a thicker, more even line, a line with character, with solidity. The pad, all those ninety-nine sheets underneath him, the hundred, the even number, ten to the second power, the exponent, the clean block of planes, the space-time, really, represented

by that pad, all the possible drawings, graphs, curves, relationships, all of the answers, questions, mysteries, all of the problems solvable in the space, in those sheets, in those squares.

“Consider a body,” he said, “maybe a boy separated from his twin, and moving at the speed of light. Or a lonely astronaut, missing home,” and with a few casual sweeps of his hand across the known world, what had been empty world was no a place full of direction and distance and invisible forces.

I loved the way he used the paper, the whole paper, as a space, when he would write notes in the corner, or label the axes, or create a symbol key in the lower left-hand corner, or, best of all, draw a curve on the x - y plane and then write the equation for the curve $f(x)$ equals one-half x cubed plus four x squared plus nine x plus five, up in the upper left-hand corner of the graph, that equation existing in the realm of science.

I loved seeing his lettering, so neat, practiced from thousands upon thousands of hours of problem sets no doubt, both in school and after school and in his spare time and in his work and in his after-work brainstorming, and now with me, his son, his student, his would-be research assistant. Lettering so uniform, letters so straight and consistent in size and well lined they looked like words in comic book dialogue bubbles.

The words were right there along with the graph, this space in the realm of science, where curves and equations and axes and ideas coexisted as equals, a democracy of conceptual inhabitants, no one class privileged over any other, no mixing or subdividing of abstractions and concrete objects, no mixing whatsoever. The whole space inside the borders, the whole space useful and usable in possible, the whole, unbroken

space a place where anything could be written, anything could be thought, or solved or puzzled over, anything could be connected, plotted, analyzed, fixed, converted, where anything could be equalized, divided, isolated, understood.

CHAPTER SIX

When you fix time machines for a living, you learn a lot.

Like about freewill.

Freewill is complicated. It's easy to understand and hard to understand all at the same time. The easiest way I know to explain it is through this thought experiment:

A group of scientists are challenged with the task of knocking an olive on a toothpick that's balanced on the edge of a cocktail glass into the drink. Without touching it with their hands.

A pendulum device on a long chain looks promising. The swinging round ball definitely has what it takes, but the scientists keep either missing short or breaking the glass. After many tries, and many refills of the drink by a bartender in the room, they figure out what to do.

They set up a board with markings to get the ball in a precise spot, and use a button that deactivates a magnet holding the ball in place so the push on the ball is exactly the same every time. It doesn't take long for them to find the sweet spot where the olive is gently knocked into the glass.

And they can do this repeatedly. The lesson? If something is done in exactly the same way, the same thing will happen according to the laws of nature. Which means, if you could know everything there is to know about the universe, you could predict anything. Which means, there aren't really surprises. There is no freewill.

Like I told Lawrence Washington, life is a single path, one we cannot deviate from. What you will do, are doing, have done, has always been done and cannot be undone. You are fated to wake up, eat a bowl cereal, and walk to work. Then you are fated to get hit by a bus. You can't avoid it. It's going to happen.

But here's the caveat. You *can't* predict where you life is going. So really, it is a surprise to you. You may eat Lucky Charms tomorrow, but how do you know? Maybe it will be Froot Loops. For you, it hasn't happened yet.

That being said, here's something else I've learned in this line of work: If you ever see yourself somewhere else in time, run. Drop everything and run in a straight line as fast as you can in the opposite direction. That's really the main rule of all of this: Never ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever say or do anything to any other version of yourself. Not to your past-self. Not to your future-self. You are told this at least seven hundred times in Duolinguistic Basics and it gets at least one mention in the weekly emails from HQ. Usually they say something along the lines of "Don't do anything stupid and don't try to be clever. If you think you see yourself, don't think, just run."

Because if you can see your future self, then you know where your life is headed, at least partially, and suddenly, you've gone from understanding nothing about your own fate to understanding a whole lot. And there is nothing you can do about it, RE: you lack of freewill.

And that shit can drive you crazy.

On the first day of time travel school, after drilling the run-from-yourself stuff into our brains, they tell us that the best way to follow the first rule is to strictly adhere the second: the Self-Existence Prohibition Principle. It's yet to be proven, but quantum physicists have long assumed to be true and moreover, time travel technicians everywhere have been following The Principle to a T for years without any single mishap, so that's got to mean something.

The Self-Existence Prohibition Principle states: *A time traveler removed from his or her own objective present by at least half of one standard deviation cannot, in a controlled space-time environment, meet another version of him or herself.*

Basically: DO NOT ATTEMPT TO TRAVEL ANYWHERE WHERE YOU ALREADY ARE.

Doing this job also has its ups and downs.

Like, for instance, the inability to care for your mother who, instead of living with her son, lives instead in a continuous 600 Series hour-long reinforced time loop. The time loop itself is run by a little black box in the living room which projects a holographic temporal field to every corner of the apartment, which is a complicated way of saying

that the apartment itself has become a time machine. The time loop allows an hour to pass in the apartment, and then, every hour on the hour, the entire apartment is sent back in time back exactly 60 minutes, and the events of the sixty minutes play back exactly as they had before.

You often see it on TV marketed toward mid-to-low-income buyers. It's a product made by the company Titian, a subsidiary of Modern Time, which specializes in economical (cheap) living systems for small homes or apartments. They don't come right out and say it, but their product is essentially a technology-aided approach to providing the elderly with assisted living on a modest budget.

My mother gets to live out her glory days trapped a sixty-minute loop her choosing. The hour she chose is a Sunday-night dinner from sometime before my father left, back when I was about sixteen. My mother still lives in the apartment where I grew up, a second floor of a four-floor walk up in Astoria, Queens. It's a two-bedroom, one-bath with a combination kitchen/living room. In the loop, she brings in vegetables from the garden on the patio and cooks (my mother would be nothing if she couldn't tend to her plants and harvest her own vegetables), then my father and I wander in and sit and we all eat together silently.

The way the salesman explained it to me is that when the apartment resets on the hour, my mother will be reset too. She'll be hooked up to wires and tubes that feed her and run her memories, while she gets to have Sunday dinner with my father and I for infinity. In essence, he explained, it's like she's dreaming, unaware of the world around her, only focused on that single sixty minutes of her life.

When I asked him what he meant by “dreaming” because sometimes in a dream you are actually aware you are dreaming and if my mother will in fact be aware of living in this loop, he laughed and said he wasn’t sure, but what he was sure of was that now was the time to buy and that I was getting a heck of a deal.

The loop will repeat itself until it hits the prepaid limit. Last month I cashed out my savings account for eight thousand prepaid hours. If you’re doing the math, that’s just under a year. I’m not really sure what happens once the limit’s up.

Look, I’m not that bad of a son. It’s a pretty good set up, considering how bad it really could be. It’s not like I left her rotting in a gutter somewhere. The 600 Series was two steps above the cheapest option and I even sprung for some extra features like the ability to change background music between five pre-set classical station (plus one show tune station, which she’s taking a real liking to).

I mean, do I wish I could have gotten her the 900 Series? Yes. I’m trying to save an extra portion of my paychecks so maybe down the road, like one Christmas maybe, I can surprise her with an upgrade. The 900 Series comes with an extra half-hour and gives the user an improved impression of free will. Right now, though, it’s a bit out of my price range. It was tough that day in the Titian store, sitting at the sales manager’s desk with her, watching a short presentation on the 600 while drinking old coffee, neither of us about to say what we both wanted to say, which was, of course, that the 900 was what we both really wanted.

Sometimes I go visit her, watch her happily making dinner, having a conversation with an imaginary version of me. I could interrupt, of course, I could ring the doorbell,

and I imagine she'd open it, happy as ever, like it was the first time. She might give me a kiss on the cheek, finish cooking, and call out to the holographic version of my father while I set the table. I could do that, but I never do. So she gets by with this ghost-image, this set of data encoded with a simulation of my physical likeness, my personality. He probably treats her better than I do anyway.

It's not ideal, obviously, but I guess it's what she wants, to live in a kind of imperfect past tense, in a state of recurrence and continuation, an ambiguous dreamlike state, a good hour, a family dinner we could have had, on a good day, but never actually did, an hour that continually repeats, is always happening and yes is fixed in its already having happened.

So yeah, my mother's in a time loop and my father is lost, and me, I live in a box. I live in a box that I constructed with my father. That's what we did. Growing up for me was a series of boxes. We worked in our garage, a box of cold air and the harsh light cast by that single light bulb, encased in its yellow plastic safety housing, hanging from the hook my father had anchored up into the ceiling, with the extension cord running down and around the car and looped over the hood ornament and plugged in to the socket on the far wall. It wasn't ideal, but it worked. Nothing about the set up was ideal, but that was okay with us. It was our homemade laboratory. It was where we were going to make something, where my father was going to make something of himself. We drew on boxes, in boxes, we graphed on graph paper with the world subdivided into little boxes. We made metal boxes and put smaller boxes inside and onto those boxes we etched little two-

dimensional boxes, circuits and loops and schematics, the grammar of time travel. We made boxes out of language, logic, rules of syntax. We made the very first crude, undiscovered, uncredited prototype of this box that I'm sitting in now. We made equations. Equations that had sadness as a constant, whose escape velocities seemed impossibly out of reach. A lot of strange variables went into those equations, got imprinted onto boxes, onto us, onto him. He was trying to make the perfect box. A vehicle to move through possibility space, a vehicle to happiness or whatever it was he was looking for. We trapped ourselves in boxes, inside of boxes in boxes, inside of more.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When you are a kid, playing with other kids on your street, and everyone is fighting over who they are going to be, you have to call dibs early, as soon as you see one another, pretty much as soon as you step outside your house, even if you're halfway down the block. First dibs gets Han Solo. Everyone knows that. You almost don't even have to say it. If you are first, you are Han Solo, period, end of story.

There was one time Donny, the kid from two blocks over (the other side of the freeway), got first pick and said he was going to be Buck Rogers, and everyone laughed at Donny so hard and for so long that he looked like he was going to cry. He begged to change his answer, but by then it was too late. Justin, who had second dibs, got to be Han Solo that day, which was like winning the lottery with a ticket he didn't even buy, and he milked it for all it was worth. Donny was in agony, was in hell really, and everyone called him Suck Rogers until he peed his pants and then got on his blue Huffy bike and rode away, never to return.

I was never totally sure why everyone wanted to be Han Solo. Maybe he was because he wasn't born into it, like Luke, with the birthright and the natural talent for the Force and the premade story. Solo had to make his own story. He was a freelance protagonist, a relatively ordinary guy who got to the major leagues by being quick with a gun and a joke. He was, basically, a hero because he was funny.

Whatever the reason, first place was always Solo, always, always, always, and second place was usually Chewbacca, because if you weren't the one saving the galaxy, you might as well be eight feet tall and covered with hair.

But no one grows up wanting to be the time machine repair guy.

No one says, "Hey, I want to be the guy who fixes stuff."

My cousin is in accounts receivable up at HQ, and whenever we talk he always says how nice it'd be if I joined him. He says they have a good cafeteria. So that's an option. And there's an openings at the social services bureau. Government pension.

And then there's my gun. It's actually a pretty cool, semi-scary-looking gun, not at all wimpy. I've never used it, except for that one time, of course, but once in a while I'll take it out of the holster and pose with it in front of the mirror, just to see what I would look like arresting someone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I remember there were Sunday afternoons in our house when it felt as if the only sound in the world was the ticking of the clock in our kitchen.

Our house was a collection of silences, each room a mute, empty frame, each of us three oscillating bodies (mom, Dad, me) moving around our own curved functions, from space to space, not making any noise, just waiting, waiting to wait, trying, for some reason, not to disrupt the field of silence, not to perturb the delicate equilibrium of the system. We wandered from room to room, just missing one another, on paths neither chosen by us nor random, but determined by our own particular characteristics, our own properties, unable to deviate, to break from our orbital loops, unable to do something as simple as walking into the next room where our father, our mother, our child, our wife, our husband, was sitting, silent, waiting but not realizing it, waiting for someone to say something, anything, wanting to do it, yearning to do it, physically unable to bring ourselves to change our velocities.

My father sometimes said that his life was two-thirds disappointment. This was when he was in a good mood.

I guess it was a kind of self-deprecation. I always hoped but was afraid to ask if I had anything to do with the remaining one-third.

He had always been considered, by his colleagues and advisers and superiors, to be a very good scientist. I watched him through five-year-old-eyes, and then through ten- and fifteen- and seventeen-year-old eyes, looked at him through a scrim of slight awe and fear.

“The only free man,” he would say, “is one who doesn’t work for anyone else.” In later years, that became his thing, expounding on the tragedy of the modern man: the desk job. The workweek was a structure, a grid, a matrix that held him in place, a path through time, the shortest distance between birth and death.

I noticed, on most nights, his jaw clenched at dinner, the way he closed his eyes slowly when my mother asked him about work, watched him stifle his own ambition, seemingly to physically shrink with each professional defeat, watched him choke it down, with each year finding new and deep places to hide it all within himself, observed his absorption of tiny, daily frustrations that, over time (that one true damage-causing substance), accumulated into a reservoir of subterranean failure, like oil shale, like a volatile substance trapped in rock, a vast quantity of potential energy locked in to an inert substrate, unmoving and silent at the present moment but in actuality building pressure and growing more combustive with each passing year.

“It’s not fair,” my mom would say, setting his dinner on the table, trying to console him with a hand on his back. He’d flinch from her touch, or, worse, pretend she wasn’t there. We would all sit and eat in silence, and then my mother would go to her separate bedroom to read herself to sleep.

He kept index cards, three inches by five, in a metal box. They started as a kind of engineer's Rolodex: sparse, efficient, joyless. On each card on the top red line, was a person's name, a friend or an acquaintance or a colleague, in his tight, clear, unerring hybrid of print and script. Underneath it, in the blue lines of the rest of the card was some note on this relationship to, or the noteworthiness of, the person.

Harold Simpson, Fluid Dynamics

—says he admires my thesis

—his son is looking for internship

Frank Lee, Damage and Durability

—possible project together?

—waiting to hear back

As a kid, I saw those cards as the beginning of something. I saw their ordered state, their formality, each one representing a connection to some outside mind, to other scientists. I saw that metal box as a treasure chest.

Looking back now, I realize how few cards there were, how carefully each one was written, I understand that this level of care was due to how sparse the contacts were.

I remember him sitting by the phone, his small, compact frame tense with anticipation, waiting there for a call that would be a big deal to him, a slight courtesy for the caller.

“I think the phone rang when you were out earlier,” I would say sometimes.

“You didn’t get it?”

“I just missed it.”

“No message on the machine.”

“I’m sure they’ll call back.”

The books in his study, with their rigid cloth spines and their impenetrable titles, they seemed daunting and impossible back then, but now thinking back, I can see how the books were all related, I can see how they were, collectively, a bibliography of a career in striving, in aiming, in seeking to understand the world. My father searched for systems of thought, for patterns, rules, even instructions. Fake religions, real religions. How-to books. *Turn Three Thousand into a Half Million*. Turn half a million into ten. *Conquer Your Weaknesses*. Conquer yourself. *Inventory of Your Soul*. Take an inventory of your own failings. Higher mathematics and properties of materials, somber, gray monographs on single, esoteric subjects were side by side with books with bright red titles, titles dripping with superlatives, with promises of actualization, realization, books that diagrammed the self as a fixable lemon, self as a challenge in mechanics, self an exercise in bullet points, self as a collection of traits to be altered, self as DIY project. Self as a kind of problem to be solved.

When waiting by the phone got to be too much, he used to go to his room, change his clothes, and head down to the garage. I would wait a few minutes and head down there, stand near him, watch him tinker. If he couldn’t figure something out, he’d go to the hardware store, leaving me there to dribble a mostly flat basketball until he came

back. Sometimes he didn't come back for hours. When he did fix something, he would explain it to me, step by step. He was never happier than when he could walk me through a problem, from beginning to end, knowing at each juncture what the next step would be. I asked him questions until I couldn't think of any more, and when we'd exhausted the subject, we'd head back upstairs, wash up, sink ourselves into the couch in front of the TV.

“What are we watching?” I would ask.

“Not sure. I think it's the news.”

We'd watch in happy, tired silence. Mom would bring cut cubes of watermelon, pierced with toothpicks, and the three of us would press them into our mouths, drinking the cold juice.

“How is school?” my dad would say.

“Good, I guess.”

“Tell me about it.”

I would tell him about it, then we'd fall back into silence. After a while, he would lean back, close his eyes, smile.

“What do you think...”

A long pause.

“Dad?”

My mom would raise the back of her hand to her cheek. *Sleeping*, she would mouth at me.

Then all of a sudden: “Son.” He'd snorted himself awake.

“You were saying something.”

“Was I?” He would laugh a little. “I guess I’m a little sleepy.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

This is what I should have asked him: If you ever got lost, and I had to find you, where would you be? Where should I go to find you?

I should have asked him that, a lot of things, everything. I should have asked him while I had a chance. But I never did. By then, he had drifted back to sleep again, smiling. Dreaming, too, I hoped.

CHAPTER NINE

My manager messages me.

We get along pretty well. His name is Keith. Keith is an old copy of Microsoft Middle Manager 3.0. I was assigned to Keith, or Keith was assigned to me, a day after I shot Jerry Babich in the leg. I haven't heard from Jerry again since that day—I only see his digital signature on my itty-bitty little paychecks.

Keith's passive-aggressive is set to low. Whoever configured him did me a solid.

The only thing, and this isn't really that big a deal, is that Keith thinks he's a real person. He likes to talk sports, and tease me about the cute girl in Dispatch, whom I always have to remind him I've never met, never even seen.

Keith's hologram head appears on my lap. I sort of cradle it in my hands.

YO DOG. JUST CHECKING IN.

HEY KEITH. EVERYTHING A-OK HERE. YOU?

YOU KNOW, SAME OLD. MY LADY IS STILL ON MY CASE ABOUT THE DRINKING. BUT YOU KNOW HOW I ROLL.

Keith has two imaginary kids with his wife. She's a spreadsheet program and she is a nice lady. Or lady program. She emails every year to remind me about his fake birthday. She knows they're both software, but she's never told him. I don't have the heart to tell him, either.

SO WHAT'S UP, KEITH?

OH RIGHT. WE CAN'T GUY-TALK ALL DAY, HA HA? I'M PUNCHING YOU IN THE ARM NOW, EMOTICON-WISE. I DON'T KNOW HOW TO CONVEY THAT. ANWYAY, MY RECORDS ARE SHOWING YOUR UNIT IS DUE FOR AINTENANCE. YOU FEEL ME HAP?

This is all I need right now. Jesus. I type,

SHE'S RUNNING FINE.

Suzy hears this and starts to make a noise like, uh, no she's not. I hit her mute button. She gives me a look.

YEAH, I KNOW, HOMIE, I KNOW.

SO WE'RE GOOD? WE'RE GOOD, RIGHT, KEITH?

Come on, Keith. I stroke his holographic hair. Come on, be a pal. Say it, Keith.
Say we're good. Don't screw me over.

YO DOG YOU KNOW MESSAGE YOUR BOY BUT, HEY, UH, YOU'VE BEEN
OUT THERE A WHILE NOW, DOG, AND I DON'T KNOW, MAN, YOU KNOW?

Of course not. I monkey around with the Tense Actuator for ten years and right
when it starts breaking down is when I have to bring it in. I'm going to need to figure out
how to fix it if I want to keep my job.

ALL RIGHT, DON'T SWEAT IT, KEITH. I'LL BRING IT IN. ANYTHING ELSE?

YO DOG, THAT'S TIGHT. WE'RE COOL, RIGHT? I'M STILL YOUR HOMIE?
MAYBE WE CAN GRAB A BEER WHEN YOU'RE IN THE CITY. IS THAT RIGHT?
GRAB A BEER? GRAB. GRAB. GRAB. GRAB. GRAB.

Keith crashes a lot, midsentence. Sooner or later, they're going to upgrade, and
then no more Keith. Or, maybe no more me, depending on how this maintenance check
goes. And yeah it's true I could do without all the small talk but I'm pretty sure I'll miss
him.

CHAPTER TEN

Client call. I punch the coordinates and now I'm in the kitchen of an apartment, in Oakland, in Chinatown, sometimes in the third quarter of the twentieth century. A pot of oxtail stew burbles on the stovetop, fills the room with a deep, rich cloud of stewiness, fills the room like a fog bank rolling over the bay.

I go into the living room and find a woman, a little younger than I am, maybe twenty-five, twenty-six. She's kneeling over a much older woman who lies still, in an awkward position, legs slumped over the couch, left arm dangling down to the floor, mouth slightly open as if she has lost control of it, eyes looking up at the ceiling or whatever's beyond the ceiling, filled with a clear-eyed awareness of what's happening.

"She can't see you," I say to the younger woman.

"But I can see her," she says. She doesn't look up at me.

"Not really. This didn't really happen. You weren't there when she died."

Now the younger woman looks at me. Angry.

"Your mom?" I say.

"Grandmother," she says, and I realize in my time away from time, spent idling in my machine, I've become terrible at guessing someone's age.

I nod. We both watch the old woman lying there, coming to terms with whatever she was coming to terms with.

Suzy discreetly beeps to remind me we have a job to do, rifts in the underlying fabric to repair. If we stay too long, the damage could get worse.

“I’m not saying this to hurt you,” I say. “All I’m saying is that since you weren’t there when this actually happened, you can’t be here now.”

She ignores me and doesn’t take her eyes off her grandmother and for a while, I’m not sure she’s heard or maybe she heard me but doesn’t understand, but then she looks at me.

“So what is this? An illusion? A dream?”

“More like a window,” I say, and I see that she gets it. “By using your time machine this way, you are creating a small porthole into another universe, a neighboring universe. One almost exactly like ours, except that in this alternate world you *were* there when she died. This living room, right now, is the vertex between those two universes and you are bending space and time and light to see into the past, a false past, a past you wish you could go to. Although you can see, through this porthole, what happened back then over there, you’re not really standing next to her. You are in your own universe, our universe. You are infinitely far away.”

She takes a moment to digest this. I open up a side panel and immediately see the problem.

“You tampered with your allotment sensor.”

She gives me a guilty look.

“Don’t worry,” I say. “I see it all the time.”

She looks back at the scene in front of us. “I was a sophomore in college. She was the only reason I even made it there,” she says. “She called and I could hear something in her voice. I should have known. I should have known to come home.”

“You had your own life to start.”

“I could have come home. My dad told me it would be soon. I could have come home.”

Grandma closes her eyes. A look of something unresolved twists across her face, and then a flicker of what could be disappointment, and then, exhausted, she takes her last breath, alone, the pot of stew untouched in the next room.

I wait for what I hope is a respectful interval of silence, then quietly finish the repair and go back into the kitchen to allow her a few more minutes. I can hear crying, then low talking, then what sounds like a song, once sung to a little girl maybe, now sung one final time. The stew smells really good. I’m trying to figure out if it will cause a paradox if I have a bowl when the young woman comes into the kitchen.

“Thanks for that,” she says.

“Yeah, take all the time you want. Well, not all the time.”

“I suppose I cant stay here.”

I shake my head. “If you bend too much and for too long, the porthole becomes and actual hole, and you might end up over there.”

“Maybe that’s what I want.”

“Trust me. It’s not. That’s not home. I know it seems like home, everything looks the same, but it’s not. You weren’t there. It will never be the case that you were.”

My vocational training was in the basics of closed time-like curves, but what they should have thought me was how that relates to people's regrets and mistakes, the loves of their lives that they let get away.

I've prevented suicides. I've watched people fall apart, marriages break up in slow motion, over and over and over again.

I have seen pretty much everything that can go wrong, the various and mysterious problems in contemporary time travel. You work in this business long enough and you know what you really do for a living. This is self-consciousness. I work in the self-consciousness industry.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Keith was right. I was overdue for maintenance. The Tense Actuator is pretty much kaput. I broke it through my cheating, wishy-washy way of moving through time.

This makes me nervous. I know the axe is going to fall on me for sure.

Suzy doesn't think we have enough power to even get back to corporate HQ. Bruce is licking his own stomach like crazy, like he's trying to hurt himself. Which is what he does when he's nervous. He gives me a look like, *You're the human. Do something.*

"Is it my fault?" Suzy says. She always thinks everything is her fault.

"No, it's my fault."

"Is it my fault that it's your fault?"

"I don't even know what that means. I guess so. If that's what you want."

"Thanks, Hap," Suzy says, and she seems pleased.

I abused the RTV. It's not supposed to be used as the primary driver of ChronoLOGIC™ transport. It isn't designed for that kind of use: the Presently-Indefinite isn't even a real gear. And it's bad for the machine. I've been a bad pilot, a bad passenger, a bad employee. A bad son. Fuck.

Bruce sighs. Dog sighs are some from of distilled truth. What does he know? What do dogs know? Bruce sighs like he knows the truth about me and loves me anyway.

I ask Suzy what her optimism is set at. She says very low. I tell her to just move it up one notch, to normal low, and recalculate.

“What do the numbers say now?”

“We’ll make it to HQ. But just barely. There is an eighty-nine percent chance the machine will be damaged in the crash.”

I tell her she can do it. That I believe in her. I say it sincerely, because I do believe in her.

“You are good,” I say.

“No, I’m not. I’m not. I’m not. I’m not,” she says. “I’m no good.”

And then, softly, to herself: “Am I?”

True to her calculations, Suzy gets us there.

It’s like flying into LaGuardia at sunset, which is no coincidence, we are flying right into New York—the present time: 6:30pm.

I grew up in New York. I still rent a room there too. Not an apartment. Just a room. An icy little box for me and my things, a place for a mattress and a toothbrush and a small couch and an almost useless television. I don’t keep anything of importance in here. It just wouldn’t make sense to do anything more permanent in the real-time world. I’m not here enough.

As the machine banks into its approach, we angle into our steep descent spiral.

Sliding into the city, you can see it all, the spiky skyline, high and low points in the overall texture and layout of this place, the mix of styles and the clash of lines and planes.

The city can feel claustrophobic some nights, like it's an overgrown city of insomniacs, crowded and noisy and suffused with a background illumination that glows purple in the sky, in the east sky and the west sky and in the north and the south, in the early sky and the late, high and low and in every corner of every sky, and on nights like these, no one ever sleeps, everyone just stares up at their vast yet tiny piece of the connected sky, listening to the still-humming hum of the primordial radiation.

Other nights, it's the opposite. It's so dark that every single person in the universe feels lonely, at the same time, even if they are holding someone or being held, and no one sleeps, because it's too quiet, too dissipated, everyone just lies awake feeling piny, feeling the enormity of what there is and what there isn't, everyone just stares upward at the heavens, watching their little corner, their swath of the frigid black cloth that swallows all warmth and light.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The hub is jammed, so subspace traffic control pushes us out into a holding pattern, where we end up spending almost two hours waiting. By the time I get clearance to an open channel, I'm hungry and tired and then they tell me the first available channel for my reentry into time is a few minutes before midnight. Which, at first, I'm thinking, *That's just great, what that really means is that my choices for food are the all-night corner deli or the gritty little two-bucks-for-two-hot-dogs place on 72nd and Broadway,* but then I'm thinking, *Eh, who am I kidding, I like those hot dogs.*

After landing, we taxi from our time capture cage over to the maintenance facility. Bruce and I climb out of our RTV and into the cavernous space of Hangar 35X.

The repair bot—they program these bots with Simulated Mechanic Guy personality—takes one look at my RTV and raises his eyebrows at me.

“What is that?” say. “Don't do that.”

“Do what?”

“You know what. With your eyebrows. What am I saying? Those aren't even real eyebrows.”

“Someone's a little defensive.”

“Hey, you don't have the right to judge, buddy,” I say. “I've dealt with a lot of assholes in my life, don't be one more.”

He runs a program to simulate rolling his eyes. He tells me, “Just come back tomorrow.”

I say what time.

He says before noon.

“Can you be a little more specific? I mean, you’re a robot, right? You do have Microsoft Outlook Seventy-three-point-zero loaded into your brain.”

“Fine,” he says. He rolls his eyes into simulated contempt and beeps out a calculation.

“Eleven forty-seven. Your machine will be ready at eleven forty-seven on the dot tomorrow. Don’t be late.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” I say.

On the subway, the guy next to me has his head in a news cloud. *Modern Time is up 14 percent.* If I lean in a couple of inches, I can just make out what it says. *Up 14 percent in the fourth quarter on a year-over-year basis.*

The guy reaches his stop and gets off, leaving his news cloud behind. I love watching the way the way these clouds break up, little wisps of information trailing off like a flickering tail, a dragon’s tail of typewriter keys and wind chimes, those little monochrome green cloudlets, a fog of fragments and images and words. On busy news days, the entire city is awash with these cloudlets, like fifty million newspapers brought to breathing, blaring life, and then obliterated into a sea of disintegrating light and noise.

Coming up the stairs out of the station and into the center of the city, you can be forgiven for feeling, if just for a moment, that you are walking into a place where the ordinary laws of physics do not apply.

Tonight, I feel small. An entire night in the city seems to be too much for me, too immense for me to not get lost in. By now it's past one, the after-hours city is in full swing, and morning is a long way off. Between now and sunrise, anything could happen. And there it is, the feeling comes back, like a coldness in my legs, a tingling up the back of my skull and down my arms. I had forgotten: this is what it feels like to live in time. The lurching forward, the sensation of falling off a cliff into darkness, and then landing abruptly, surprised, confused, and then starting the whole process again in the next moment, doing that over and over again, falling into each instant of time and then climbing back up only to repeat the process. I almost missed this buzzing, gauzy field of vision, the periscoped consciousness, the friction and traction of being in my own life, of using it up, had almost forgotten the danger and pleasure of living in the present, the chaotic, slapdash, yet overproduced stage-scene of each moment, assembling itself then disbanding, each moment taking itself apart, just like that, the sets struck, each instant in time falling apart just as it is coming together.

I stand there for a while, shivering, stuck, trapped, free, until I look down and notice that Bruce looks a little cold. I get a hot chocolate from a guy with a cart, and two hot dogs, one with ketchup and one without, and Bruce and I split everything, although if we're being honest, I think he probably eats a little more than his share.

We finish up, walk back uptown, toward my building.

I get the key from the guy at the front counter. From his stationary, non-time-traveling perspective, he sees me almost every day, only each time he sees me, I've aged a year or two or five or nine. I rented the room when I got the job, ten biological years ago for me. To him, it was last Wednesday. My whole life will probably amount to about a month's rent, by his calculations.

I find a scratchy wool blanket in the closet, shake it out, and lay it on the couch for Bruce. I go down the hall to the community sink to fill a dish of water, and even though he doesn't actually need it because he has no actual physical body anymore, Bruce's appreciative. If I could be half the person my dog is, I would be twice the human I am.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Once upon a time, I am ten years old and my dad is driving me home from the park.

We're floating through the streets in our family car, a rust-red Ford LTD station wagon with the windows covered in a layer of dust and the loose suspension that makes it feel less like a car and more like a scrappy little boat sailing down the avenue. I am tired and sweat-crusting and eating half of an orange Popsicle.

Sitting here in the front next to my dad, he in his uncomfortable-looking blue-gray slacks that he always wears, even on Saturdays, me in soccer shorts, sun beating down on my head, so hot even my hair is hot, my legs stuck to the vinyl seat, trying to concentrate on not letting the melting rivulets of orange flavored sugar water run too far down the side of my skinny forearm, squinting through the windshield. I remember this day, I know what happens, and yet I still feel like I don't know what will happen.

"Kids at school say that you," I start to say.

"That I? I'm what?"

"That you're, uh."

"Strange?"

"Crazy."

I actually say this. I remember saying this. I remember regretting that I had said it even as I was saying it. I regret it even now. Regret what it started, regret all that came after.

He keeps his eyes on the road. I can't tell if he's mad. He doesn't say anything. I'm scared I've angered him somehow; I have a ten-year-old's crude sense of having found a subject that is dangerous, a son's sense of having wandered into the line of fire, into some sort of yet-to-be-discovered axis running between my father and me, and yet, and still, for some reason I keep going. Not to hurt him, no, I keep going just because, for the first time in my young life, it feels like my father is here, in the car, with me, listening to me, that for the first time ever I have his attention not as a boy, his son, but as a person, as a future man, as someone who is just starting to go out into the world and bring parts of it back, parts that can remind him that I won't always be his to teach, parts that may remind him of how small our family is.

I ask him if it's true what they say.

He says what's that.

"Do you really think it's possible to travel to the past?"

He's got to be mad now. He doesn't get mad often, but when he does. Not good. I'm sure he's mad, I'm positive, I'm considering how much it would hurt if I opened the car door and just jumped out, but then he just laughs and takes his foot off the gas and pulls into the slow lane. "We're time traveling right now," he says, the cars speeding by and honking in Dopplerized frequencies. And then he pulls completely off the road into the parking lot of a video rental store and shuts off the engine and I am thinking he's

doing this to somehow prove his point even further, that he's going to explain to me how even now, completely motionless, we are still time traveling, I am thinking I'm about to get a lecture about how I would understand this if I just kept up with my math homework, but instead, my father turns to me and tells me, in all seriousness, this idea he has had, a secret plan, an invention.

My father, the inventor. I had never thought of him that way before that afternoon, although a small part of me felt lifted, opened, as if the world was bigger than I'd imagined, that there were parts of my father I could never have guessed at. I thought of him as old, as someone with a job, as, well, Dad. Not someone with dreams or ideas. My father had ambition. Ambition he had never previously shared with me, and why would he, I was ten, but he also didn't share it with my mother, or anyone else. He kept it inside, in his study, in a box, in himself.

My father had originally come from a faraway country, a part of reality, a tiny island in the ocean, a different part of the planet, really, a different time, where people still farmed and believed that stories, like life, were all straight lines of chronology, where there was enough magic left in the real, in the humidity of August and the mosquito and the sun and birth, enough magic and terror in the strangeness of family itself, that time travel devices were not only unnecessary, but would have diminished the world, would have changed its mechanic, its web of invisible dynamics. The technology of the day was enough, the technology of the sunrise and sunset, the week of work and rest in cycles, in rhythm, sixteen hours of hard labor, the remainder of time in a day left for eating and sleeping, the seasons, the years passing by, each one a perfect machine.

As he described his invention to me, I found it hard to look at him. He was talking a little too loud, for one thing, which, if you knew my father, was alarming all by itself. My father was quiet, but not meek, soft-spoken but not unsure. It was more than that. Quiet speaking was more than just a controlled softness of the voice, more than the virtues of decorum and tact and propriety. Quiet speaking was more than manners, or a personal preference or style, or personality in total. It was a way of moving about the world, my father's way of moving through the world. It was survival strategy for a recent immigrant to a new continent of opportunity, a land of possibility, where he had come, on scholarship, with nothing to his name but a small green suitcase, a lamp that his aunt gave him, and fifty dollars, which became forty-seven after exchanging currency at the airport.

And here he was, voice raw, talking fast, excited in a way that made me uncomfortable, hopeful in a way that worried me. I didn't believe it, or maybe I didn't believe in him, maybe I'd absorbed enough defeat in my short life from watching him, the look on his face as he pulled into the driveway every night, that I already doubted my own father. I thought he was brilliant, of course, he was my father, and a hero, but would the world understand him? Would the world give him what he deserved? There were opposing vectors, stress from the tensors pulling between what was and what could be, between his hopes and the reality of the station wagon we were sitting in.

He spilled out his secret theory in an excited rush, and part of me was thrilled that he wanted to tell me this, that I mattered to him, that I was grown-up enough to trust with his idea, with his hope, with his plan, but I couldn't show any of that to him, so I just stared straight ahead, through our grit-coated windshield, at the posters in the window for

Back to the Future and *Peggy Sue Got Married* and *Terminator*. All of those stories about time travel, they were comforting, and at the same time it bothered me how they always made it seem fun and how everything fit into place, how things could only ever be how they were supposed to be, how the heroes found a way to change the world while still obeying the laws of physics.

I remember my mind drifting to the last time our family had gone into the video store, together, how my mom and dad took forever picking a movie and I'd wandered off and found, next to the licorice and cardboard boxes of chocolate-covered raisins, a comic book. The story itself was a trifle, some sort of third-class superhero, a forgettable guy with some useless power. It was something else in the book that caught my attention. Way in the back of the comic, in the advertisement pages, in the lower left-hand quadrant of the second to last page, a little box, there was a rectangular ad, maybe four inches by five, that read at the top, in bold all-caps:

SPACE-ADVENTURER

SURVIVAL KIT

There were no exclamation points or any squiggly lines indicating weirdness or jokiness, or any other graphics to signify *this is for kids, this is a toy, this is just make-believe*. It just had those words, and it was dead serious. Finding that little box of text, with those words in there, felt like I'd found a secret, a technology no one else knew

about, something that might help me be the hero of the block, that might help my dad be the hero at his work, that might even help my dad and mom.

For five dollars and ninety-five cents, plus a self-addressed stamped nine-by-twelve envelope, sent to a PO box somewhere in a faraway state, the good people at Future Enterprises Inc. would send you a survival kit of great use and convenience for any traveler who finds himself stranded on an alien world.”

Half of me knew it was stupid. I was old enough to know better, but on the other hand, that font! Those letters in all-caps. It didn't look attractive and well formatted, the kind of thing a kid's eye would be drawn to; it looked like it came from a typewriter, unevenly spaced, like there was too much text, too many ideas and words and things that someone had to say, had to let people know about, it looked like it came from the mind of a brilliant, lonely, forty-year-old man, sitting somewhere in his basement in that faraway state, half crazy, sure, but on to something.

According to the ad, the kit had over seventeen pieces, but from the picture I could only see a plastic knife and a Space-Adventurer patch to sew on your clothes, and a map of the terrain of a science fictional universe, and what looked like a decoder, which I figured was for translating languages spoken by different life-forms—all of which totaled four pieces. I wondered what the other thirteen pieces were.

The ad said the kit was your only chance for survival in the harsh environment of an alien universe, but what I remember the most was the picture in the ad, not even a picture, but a tiny line drawing of a boy and his father, holding hands, not smiling, just staring out at you from their little box in the text, buried in the corner of the back page of

that comic, and the ad didn't say, but it was reasonable to assume, to a ten-year-old me, that they were unlucky enough to have been stranded, but at least they had gotten the kit.

This is what I was thinking about when my father, a little out of breath, finished telling me everything he had kept bottled up inside, when he had finally confessed his most guarded dreams and stopped talking. For a long moment, it was silent in the car, and then he turned to me.

“So,” my father said, “what do you think?”

I shrugged and kept my eyes fixed on the families in the window of the video store choosing their movies together, ready for a night of fun and popcorn.

“Dad,” I said, “are we poor?”

I remember he was just starting to look disappointed that I wasn't at least a little bit excited. Then I said it. To this day, I don't know why I said it, where it came from. I was ten years old, he was my father, I wouldn't want to hurt him, couldn't know cruelty yet, what or why or how to be cruel. Could I? Did I? Of course I did. Maybe I'd learned it from the kids at school, had already incorporated it into my own growing theory of the world. Maybe I'd absorbed the capacity to hurt someone by listening to my parents every night, who were under the impression that turning the volume on the television all the way up somehow drowned out the voices, when the truth was and is (and my father, of all people, should have known this about the physical properties of materials, about what goes through walls, what moves through houses, what is muffled and what makes it through): everything gets transmitted. Call it the law of conservation of parental anger. It

may change forms, may appear to dissipate, but draw a big box around the whole space, and add up everything inside the box, and when you've accounted for everything you find that it's all there, in one phase or another, bouncing around, some of it reflected, some of it absorbed by the smaller bodies in the house. The edge in their voices and turning up the TV only meant that I listened to them destroy each other to a sound track of *Fantasy Island* or *The Incredible Hulk* or *The Love Boat*.

Even now, to this day, I don't know if I said it because I was thinking about that survival kit, which I knew I couldn't ask him for, although I wasn't sure why, exactly, not this month, maybe for Christmas, or maybe next year. I didn't know why exactly, I just knew not to do it without anyone having to tell me, and that made me sad for my father, but at the same time it made me a little mad.

Maybe I just wanted a reaction from the man, who was so often cold and distant with Mom and even sometimes with me, the same man who had just now spoken to me about math and science with more passion than I had ever seen him speak about anything. I wanted a reaction and I was sure I'd gotten it. He had to be mad now, I thought, but I was wrong again. He just started the car and backed out without a word.

I spent the rest of the drive home with a puddle of melted Popsicle juice pooling on the top of my tightly clenched fist, afraid to move, surprised that he didn't even look a little mad. He just looked embarrassed. Or really, he looked crushed.

And in truth, I was half asking and half not-really-asking-but-knowing-the-answer, and I think that mixture of genuinely not understanding and half starting to understand the reality of our family, of my father and his job and his dreams and our car

and our neighborhood, it did something to him. It hurt him deeply, but maybe also lit a fire in him, it put a distance between us that would persist for years into the future, and yet it opened up something between us, a channel, an axis, a direct line for honest communication.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

You can get into a lot of trouble in the city when you live like I do.

I've been on the job for a decade of my life now, but it's only been a week since I was last in the city. All the techs talk about how weird it is. You forget that your life is a short window, that you are stuck in the present, forget how your life is still here, waiting for you, wondering where you are, going on without you. You forget that people know who you are, think about you, might even be happy to see you.

I don't feel like running into anyone now, though. I'm only here for a night, and I have nothing to show for my lost decade except for biweekly paychecks from the company that, year after year, broke my father's heart.

I take the subway into Queens, to the second-to-last stop. I find my way through the old neighborhood, around the all-concrete park where it's a bad idea to walk this late, up the little hill near where the subway comes above ground, turn the corner and there it is.

From where I'm standing near the dumpsters, I can see my mom in the window of the kitchen. It's two thirty-one and fifty-eight seconds in the morning. At two-thirty two she will look up and smile. She looks up and smiles. She's washing vegetables.

She's on the second floor. I jump and catch the ladder, pull myself up onto the fire escape, get a footing on the outside rail, and jump over. She's got her back to me. I duck down, watch her moving around the kitchen, setting the table for two.

"Come in," she says. "You want me to squeeze you some orange juice?"

She's not talking to me, of course. Well, me, but not me. She's in the prepaid time loop, living the same stretch of her life, over and over again. It's only an hour, which is what she can afford. I told her I'd help her upgrade, maybe ninety minutes, but she just patted my hand and said she would let me take care of her when I made it big. Whatever that means.

She goes over to the counter, heaps food onto a plate, and sets it down in front of my chair. She looks up, like she's remembering something, almost as if she could sense me here.

"Hi, Mom," someone behind me says, and she turns to look out the window. It's my hologram me, coming up the fire escape, the way I just did.

"Get inside," she says. "It's cold."

"Love you," hologram me says.

"Have some potatoes."

I watch young-me eat as she continues to move around the kitchen, the whole time, never really looking at young-me, just as she never really looked at me, either. She just wants someone to take care of, something to worry about. That's all. That's enough. I'm watching her idea of me, who is, in turn, watching her. She's just going about her business.

After a while, my ears and nose are cold enough that it occurs to me that I should check my watch. Twenty-eight minutes, right on time.

She clears all the plates, washes them, and starts cooking again. I recognize this part. The loop is about to end. Before it can reset, I tap on the window, lightly so as not to scare her, but she nearly falls down in fright anyway.

She snaps out of her time loop, groggy. The apartment snaps out of it too, the little black box in the living room quits projecting and the apartment becomes a normal apartment. My mom's not quite happy to see me. It's been so long that it almost hurts her more that I'm here. This brief visit is just a reminder of how long it will be until the next one.

She opens the window, doesn't invite me in.

"You never call. You should call more often."

"I know, I know."

"I don't like it in here. Why did you stick me in here? Can you please take me out? I don't like it in here."

"I didn't stick you in there, Ma."

"I know, I know. You're a good boy."

"No, I'm not."

"Okay, you're not."

"I'm sorry, Ma."

"It's okay."

"You don't want to know what I'm sorry for?"

“You never call.”

“That’s not it.”

“Then what are you sorry for?”

“Forget it, Ma. I don’t know. Forget it.”

“You’re a good boy.”

“I better get going, Ma.”

“I know, I know. You have a life. It’s okay.”

“I’ll call more often. I will.”

“No you won’t,” she says. “Wait here.” She turns and walks out of the kitchen.

I learned grammar from my mom, who knew it well, considering she was not a native speaker, hadn’t even learned English until she immigrated here. She, like my father, had come from that little island, where they spoke their language, a home language, a private, family language, as well as the mainland language taught in schools, and so this language that I speak, the only one I know how to speak, was actually her third language, and a distant third at that.

And yet she speaks it well, well enough, considering all that, even if she is always translating in her head, even if she never became fluent like my father, never quite able to think fluently in English, and who could blame her? The tenses are so complicated, had never quite made sense to her, as they didn’t work the same way in her language, one based largely on the infinitive.

When my mother taught me grammar, me at the kitchen table with a worksheet and blanks to fill in and verbs to conjugate, she was doing the dishes, cooking dinner, mopping the floor, I was six years old, I was seven, eight years old, I was young, I was hers, still her mama's boy, I hadn't yet entered the father-son axis, the continuum of expectation and competition and striving, I hadn't yet left the comfortable and snug envelope of the mother-space, I hadn't gone outside these parameters, out into the larger, free-form world of time travel. My first understanding of grammar came from her, which is to say, my first understanding of applied duolinguistic principles, of the present, the past, the future. I fall/I fell/I will fall. I am a good boy. I will always be her boy. I don't know what I would do without you. I don't know what I will do without you. I learned about the future tense, how anxiety is encoded into our sentences, our conditionals, our thoughts, how worry is encoded into language itself, into grammar.

Worry was my mother's mechanic, her mechanism for engaging with the machinery of living. Worry was an anchor for her, a hook, something to clutch on to in the world. Worry was a box to live inside of, worry a mechanism for evading the present, for re-creating the past, for dealing with the future.

After a few minutes, my mother comes back into the kitchen holding a box. She brings it over and sets it on the windowsill between us.

"I found this yesterday, in your closet." It's roughly the size and dimensions of a shoebox, wrapped in brown parcel paper. There don't appear to be any seams or folds in the paper.

“Yesterday? Were you out of the loop? Why were you going through my stuff?”

“You don’t live her anymore. You have so many clothes you never wear.”

“Ma, those are from, like, fifteen years ago.”

So? They’re not good enough for you? You don’t remember, you asked me to buy those clothes. I bought them for you. See, I’m wearing your sweatshirt now. See? Fits.

You have so many comic books. They are probably worth a lot now. Can you sell them?

You should sell them. I will find them for you and you can sell them. Such a waste.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“What’s that?”

“Have you been living outside the loop?”

“You think it’s enough? You got me a pretty nice one, okay, but you thought that would do it, that would take care of me, for the rest of, for good?”

“Mom. God, Ma. You just say that to me, like that, this late? Now? Why didn’t you, God, why didn’t you say something earlier?”

“Early when? Tonight? Last year? When you were first showing me the brochure?”

“Jesus, Ma. I’m, I’m sorry.”

“You can’t stay/ I know. I know. Can you stay? I know you can’t. Can you? Just a little while?”

“Ma.”

“I know, I know.”

“You know I want to, Ma. I can’t. You know I can’t.”

“Okay, okay, buy. No sorry. You are a good son. No sorry, okay? I have to cook now. It’s okay.”

She shuts the window, turns, and goes back to her sixty-minute life.

Probably goes without saying, but the time machine repair guys don’t get a lot of action. Had a one-night stand with something cute a couple of years ago. Not human exactly. Human-ish. Close enough that she looked awesome with her shirt off. We hung out a few times, tried messing around but in the end I couldn’t quite figure out her anatomy, or perhaps it was the other way around. There were some awkward moments. I think she had a good time anyway. I did. She was a good kisser. I just hope that was her mouth. Or at least her mouth-analogue.

In the end, it wasn’t going to work. I don’t think she had the brain chemistry for love. Or maybe that was me.

When you are thirteen, you spend all your time imagining what it would be like to live in a world where you could pay a robot for sex. And that sex would cost a dollar. And the only obstacle to getting sex would be making sure you had four quarters.

Then you grow up and it turns out you do live in that kind of world. A world with coin-operated sexbots. And it’s not really as great as you thought it would be.

On the way home, I see a lonely sexbot standing next to an empty glass vending case. She’s an older model, on the plump side of curvy, a face so sweet it’s wrong to look anywhere but at her eyes, but I do anyway. Dark-haired with a hairstyle that seems slightly out of date, but then again, of all people, I’m not really one to talk.

I try to walk past, but she flags me down. Something about the look in her eyes gets me, even though I know they aren't really eyes.

She asks if I could loan her a little bit.

I say what for.

She says nobody buys her anymore, so she wants to buy herself.

I fish a bill out of my pocket. It's a five.

"This probably won't get you much time with yourself."

"Actually," she says, "that's a lot," and she looks so happy about the five-dollar bill that it makes me feel sad. Even the sexbots here are lonely. There really aren't even any bad guys anymore. I'm not sure there ever were. Everyone's always questioning themselves. Am I doing this right, is this how I'm supposed to look? Am I good enough to be a good guy, am I bad enough to be a bad guy?

Up the street a song cloud floats by, sagging a bit, but still intact. I walk faster and catch up with it just in time to hear the ending, a symphony orchestra, the sound full and resplendent, and it is one of those times, you know those times every so often when you hear the right piece of music at the right time, and it just makes you think, *This music didn't come, it was given, it fell from some other universe*, and it reminds you of that other universe, some place you've never seen but in your mind you know is there, because you have felt it, this special universe, stranger and better than the ordinary one, and you hang on to the sound of violins for as long as you can, savoring the feeling of that special universe and wondering if you'll ever get to go there and also wondering if maybe we don't realize it, but we're in that one already, and we have been all along.

By the time I get back to my room, it's almost five in the morning. Bruce, a bit confused, still gets up to greet me.

I take my toothbrush and facecloth down to the sink at the end of the hall. Who is that in the mirror? That's me, in the past, a nanosecond ago, when the light bounced off me. I brush and spit, wipe my face hard to get the grime of the city off me. A lot of news and vapors and sexbot perfume are floating around in the atmosphere here. After a night out in the lost half city, you end up with the dust of dead robots in your hair, or someone's dreams, or their nightmares.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When it happens, this is what happens: I shoot myself.

Not, you know, my self-self. My *future*-self.

I shoot my future-self.

Another dumb move. Another “Trigger Happy,” moment. Jesus, what’s wrong with me?

After my night out walking in the cold city, my body, unaccustomed to the exertion, had crashed, and when I woke up to the late-morning sun in my face, I knew something was wrong. I’d way overslept and woken up a quarter past eleven, thrown everything into my bag, grabbed Bruce with one arm, and the parcel my mom had given me in the other arm, and hustled down to Hangar 35X, which is where I am now.

The clock says eleven forty-five as I run into this vast, climate-controlled space. Two minutes to go. I put Bruce down and we run together, down endless aisles of identical-looking RTVs, turning right and then left and right up until we get to the designate space, cage number 1422, with, by my watch, eleven seconds to spare.

And there’s that jerk of a repairbot, watching the gigantic overhead floating clock display, counting down the seconds, hoping I’ll be late, and as I’m running up to my machine, I see a guy, future-me, stepping out of that machine, with his own Bruce the

dog, future-Bruce, and his own service tool backpack, and even carrying his own brown-paper-wrapped parcel, and I guess I panic.

Because everything HQ ever tells you about what to do when you see yourself in time just goes out the window.

I take my standard-issue ray gun, point it at his chest, and put my finger on the trigger.

And my finger begins to squeeze.

Why?

In the 1980s, Benjamin Libet conducted an experiment in which he asked each subject to choose a random moment to flick their wrist while he measured the associated activity in their brain. To determine when the subjects felt the intention to move, he asked them to watch the second hand of a clock and report its position when they sensed that they had felt the conscious will to move.

Libet found that the *unconscious* brain activity leading up to the *conscious* decision by the subject to flick his wrist began approximately half a second *before* the subject consciously felt that he had decided to move.

I'm past the half-second mark at this point. I haven't yet shot myself, but I will.

The question is, why the hell would I want to do that? How did I even find myself here? Libet says that my decisions are being made on a subconscious level and only afterward being translated into a "conscious decision."

So here I am, in that moment between the trigger yet to be pulled and the trigger having been pulled, and there's not a damn thing I can do about it. I'm ceding the

responsibility of my actions to fate, going through the motions, watching myself, at ease about all future events, the outcome of my inevitable action, not feeling much of anything, unable to change the path of my body, my arm, my hand, my finger, the gun, the bullet.

And future-me reaches out with his right hand and he tries to pull the barrel of the gun down and what happens is that instead of the chest, I end up shooting him, once, in the stomach, just as he is saying something to me, it all happens very quickly but what I am pretty sure he says is,

It's all in the book. The book is the answer.

and I don't know yet what the hell that means or even what book he's talking about but in any event it's too late because I've already squeezed the trigger, activating the facility-wide alarm system, and there are klaxons and flashing lights and some kind of whooping noise and an official-sounding voice comes on the PA system, saying something official-sounding, and the two-square-mile hangar gets turned into one deafening echo chamber, and the future-Bruce flips out and runs away, because shit, I just killed my own future, and I think for an instant about chasing after Bruce, but I see corporate cops running up the aisles at me from all four directions, so I have no choice but to jump into the time machine that future me was coming out of, my time machine, which I suppose is his, too, but I notice a little too late that the hatch is only part of the way open and so I bang my knee against the silver-iridium alloy edge of the RTV's

hatch, I bang it about as hard as I can imagine banging it without actually shattering it into tiny knee-shards, and I do an awkward and terrible half-somersault tumble into my machine, headfirst, while screaming in pain at Suzy to go go go go go go go.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Back in my time machine. My leg is throbbing. I am trying to pull up my pant leg to inspect the damage.

Fuck.

This is not good.

It's the day everyone dreads. Your life stops moving forward and starts going in a circle.

I'm in a time loop.

Suzu tells me not to beat myself up. She says it happens to everyone, some even by choice.

I say my mom doesn't count. Moms don't count.

I say, "You know, that was a dirty little trick."

She says, "I'm sorry. Everything will be okay. Don't worry, Hap."

I tell her to eat it.

She tells me to stuff it.

I say, "You think I'm stupid? Everything is not okay. This kind of stuff usually happens to action heroes, to people with stories to tell. It doesn't happen to people so young, who've done so little with life, usually it doesn't happen in such a dumb way. I shot my own future. *In the stomach.*"

Suzy goes silent.

I've gotten myself into a time loop and I guess I can stop caring now, realizing that my path is set.

On top of all of that, as I'm pulling out of the hangar, I see Bruce down there, looking up at me, tongue hanging out, confused.

Keith calls.

He doesn't message, he actually calls, uses his simulated human speech syllabic conversion mimicry feature to talk to me, but being Keith, he doesn't know that's what it is. He just thinks it's his voice.

"Hape al, wha ta ha pend b-b-back there?" he says, sounding a little bit like a Speak and Spell, and a little bit like a five-year-old boy doing his impression of a robot.

"I don't know, man. I just freaked. I saw myself coming toward me and I thought no way I'm going to let this idiot trap me in a time loop."

"There is no ree zun to run. I said it! Did you hear that? That was a good sentence I said. You doan tuh have to run. Come ba-aack to huheadquarters."

"You know I can't do that, Keith."

"S-s-sure you can. You won't be in t-t-rouble. We've almuhst all forgotten-n-n about that one night at-uh the Christ-a-mas party. Don't even w-w-worry about it. Jerry sends his regards. Wee ull have a beer, we'll work ih tout."

This pisses me off. Does Keith really think I'm that dumb? "We can't, Keith. We can't have a beer. You know why?" And here it goes again. Ever catch yourself in the

middle of saying something you know you'll regret? Something so mean you know you should stop immediately but some part of your brain kicks in and won't let you stop? But now you've started to pull the trigger and there it goes, pouring out of your mouth?

"You're a computer program, Keith. Didn't you know that? You never noticed that about yourself? Go ahead, I'll give you a second to check!"

And then there's an awful silence while he checks. It's like that day in the car in front of the video store with my dad, that day all over again.

When he comes back, he's given up using the voice.

IT APPEARS YOU ARE CORRECT. I AM A MANAGER PROGRAM. I GUESS I SHOULD PROBABLY GO TELL MY WIFE.

JESUS. KEITH. I'M SORRY. I SHOULDN'T HAVE SAID THAT. I WAS KIDDING.

WAIT. OH. SHE'S NOT REAL, EITHER, IS SHE? I SUPPOSE I DON'T HAVE ANY KIDS, THEN?

KEITH, LISTEN. I'M SO SORRY. FORGET I SAID IT. LET'S GO BACK TO BEFORE I TOLD YOU THAT.

I CAN'T FORGET IT. I'M INCAPABLE. THAT MUST BE NICE, BEING ABLE TO FORGET. IS IT NICE?

The worst part is that Keith isn't even mad. He can't get mad, he doesn't have that feature.

WELL, I GUESS IT'S FOR THE BETTER THAT YOU TOLD ME THIS. THE TRUTH IS ALWAYS BETTER, I SUPPOSE. I SHOULD GET GOING. MAYBE WE'LL HAVE THAT BEER SOON. HA HA. JUST KIDDING. I KNOW THAT'S NOT POSSIBLE. YOU CAN HAVE A BEER AND I'LL JUST, UH, ADD SOME NUMBERS UP OR SOMETHING.

Suzy makes the face for Slightly Disapproving, which is about as harsh as she knows how to be. "What the hell are you looking at?" I say, too mean, meaner than I mean to be, just way too mean.

Suzy hibernates in order to cool off, leaving me alone, drifting in my own time-free silence. I guess in a way, this is what I want. To push everyone and everything away. I have this way of doing this. There are so few moments in this universe when the opportunity presents itself to really make a choice, when I can exercise some free will, and they always seem to turn out this way, always seem to end up with me hurting someone I love, someone I should be protecting. I'm nice to strangers who break their time machines, nice to random sexbots who ask for money, but when it comes to the people I care about the most, this is what I do. My mom, Keith, my dad.

I wish I could take it back, go back to just before I ruined Keith's day, ruined his whole life, and let myself shoot me, since I'm the one who deserves it. But I guess all things in due time. At least I know I'm going to get what's coming to me.

I notice there's a book on my console. I pick it up, run my hand over the back cover. I've never seen it before, but it feels familiar already, a part of me already knows what this is. I turn the book over and read the title of this book, in my hands. It's called *Time Repair: A User's Guide*.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It's a slim, silver-colored volume with a metallic-looking sheen, relatively modest in size but with a surprising heft, as if it acquired some amount of relativistic mass in its journeys around time. It has the kind of unexpected density that academic press books (even the paperbacks) often have, due in part to a thicker paper stock and in part to the weight of a more substantial ink, the sneaky heftiness of the book being the aggregate cumulative effect of hundreds of thousands of individually insubstantial little markings, letters and numbers, commas and periods and colons and dashes, each symbol pressed upon the page by the printing machine with a slightly greater-than-expected force and darkness and permanence.

Apparently, I'm going to write this book, which appears to be, as far as I can tell, part engineering field manual and part autobiography. Or rather, I already wrote it. Now I just have to write it, which is to say, I have to get to the point in time when I will have written it, and then travel back in time to get shot and then give it to myself, so I can write it. Which all makes sense to me, except for one thing: why the hell would I want to do any of that?

Normally, when someone says trust me, I find it hard to trust him anymore, and this is doubly true for when it is my self who is saying it. And of course, my future-self would know all of this, and he would know that I would know that he would know this,

and that's why he knew it would be worth it to give me this book. And so he's written, in his handwriting, handwriting I recognize as my very own, these words:

Read this book. Then write it. Your life depends on it.

Suzy says that I'm supposed to place the book within the RTV's read/write device. She opens up a panel on my right side I've never actually seen before, and out from it comes a clear Lucite block.

"This is the RTV Textual Object Analysis Device," she says, or TOAD for short.

The TOAD opens up on hinges, like a book itself, revealing a carved-out rectangular space. Suzy tells me to put the book in there.

The hinged cover closes, and the TOAD retracts back into the side of the unit, so that it is flush, and all that's left visible is the silver cover, title, floating there.

"It has a reinforced titanium-unobtainium alloy nanofiber running through it, which allows it to record any changes you make to the text on a real-time basis."

And so I'm reading this book and somehow in act of reading it, I am, with the help of TOAD and Suzy, creating a copy of it, in a very real sense I'm generating a new version, actually, that is being simultaneously written into and stored in Suzy's memory banks. In doing this, I am making the book my own, in retyping a book that already exists in the future, producing the very book I will eventually write. I am transcribing a book that I have, in a sense, not yet written, and in another sense, have always written, and in

another sense, am currently writing, and in another sense, am always writing, and in another sense, will never write.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I start at the beginning, Chapter One:

I've got just barely enough space to live inside here for all of eternity.

But barely is enough...

I read until I get to this exact moment, on this exact page. At the present moment, I am, in fact, reading the text display generated by TOAD on the main screen in front of me, going along through the words and, noticing, here and there, that the words seem to slightly adjust themselves, sometimes a little ahead of where I'm reading, but usually just behind what I've read, as if the device is self-editing, modifying the text to fit as closely as possible the actual output of my conscious act of reading it. In essence, my reading is a creative act, the product of which is being captured by the TOAD. I'm typing, even though strictly speaking I am using the RTV's cognitive-visual-motor-sound-activated recording module, which operates, as you might guess, by simultaneously tracking output from the user's neural activity, voice, finger movements, retinal movements, and facial muscle contractions. It's part keyboard, part microphone, part optical scan, and part brain scan. When I want to type, I raise my hands up in front of me, palms down, in a position approximating typing, and a virtual QWERTY layout materializes in front of me. When I want to switch to voice, I just start reading the book, and the unit switches to an auditory-recognition transcription system, converting my voice into modifications in the written

text. If I get tired of typing and voice modes, I can simply read the text to myself, and the unit will track my eye movements to determine, with near-perfect accuracy, what word I am reading, based on the minute ups and downs, lefts and rights of my retinas, and then matching those movements, using brain activity data as a kind of rough double check, against the blood flow and heat output of various areas of my language- and concept-processing lobes and sublobes of my brain.

Currently I am using both the reading and typing modes. This is because the copy of this book that my future-self gave to me was apparently damaged at some point in time (perhaps, as Suzy suggests, it was damaged in the very act of transferring it to me, a strange sort of loop indeed). As a result, some of the words are illegible.

For instance, right here, the next paragraph begins with the words “What if,” and the words to follow are completely blacked out, as if someone, maybe a reader, maybe the previous owner of this copy, or maybe even me, at some point in the future, wanted to destroy or conceal or confuse the meaning of such a paragraph, so that the question that remains is only:

What if [REDACTED]. And there’s no context or other indication of what the rest of the sentence was, or if there even *was* a rest of the sentence.

Perhaps even more disturbing than the blacked out words in the text is that there are places where the book, this book, is simply blank (even though I am pretty sure this makes no sense, since how can I know there will be blanks when I have not, by my own admission, read ahead to see any blanks yet and there haven’t been any so far, I’m still

performing the read/write/self-edit process as faithfully as I can, in fact, even this parenthetical aside has been worded exactly as I am recording it, right up to the words I am typing right now and now and now and now, I am typing what appears to be somewhat digressive and extemporaneous rambling, all of which is starting to make me have serious doubts in terms of the whole free will versus determinism situation because even as I am typing from the copy I have in my hand, the text is matching my thoughts exactly, all the way down to—EUREKA!—that random word I just interjected there, or attempted to interject, that word, “eureka,” having occurred in the text at the precise moment I had decided, internally, to inject a random word in an attempt to diverge from the text, and now, having failed in that attempt, realizing I had better stop now and end this sentence before I dig myself any deeper into metaphysical trouble).

Here is one such blank:

It is unclear what the function of this self-referentiality is, other than to raise doubts in my mind as to the actual provenance of this manuscript.

The text I am copying from makes it seem almost as if I am, in a way, telling myself what to think, that my future-self has produced a record of the output of my consciousness, of my internal monologue. Or rather, a dialogue, between myself and my future-self, in which my future-self is telling my present-self what I have already finished thinking but have not yet realized I thought.

Like, let's suppose that I am presented with a choice: I can have either a cookie from Jar A or a cookie from Jar B. After evaluating both cookies, at some point in time I form the intention to take a cookie from Jar A, and then, at a later point in time, I actuate the movement of my arm toward Jar A in furtherance of my choice. This is, intuitively, one might even say obviously, the order in which events occur.

Except that it isn't. After experiments done by the pioneering scientist Benjamin Libet, we now know that I actually began moving my arm toward Jar A before I became aware of my own conscious decision to choose Jar A. In effect, I decided to reach for the cookie in Jar A before I realized that I made the decision. The question is, which I was I? Which I am I? Am I the decider-I or the realizer-I? Both? Neither?

Just to be sure, I have run this set of propositions, the text so far, through Suzy's onboard Plausibility Verification Unit, and it has confirmed that my future-self was telling the truth. The book, its existence, its creation, is the product of a causal loop. It comes from nowhere, has no unique origin, and yet its creator is me.

"This book," Suzy says to me, "is a copy of a copy of a copy, and so on, forever, like that, I could keep going if you'd like." It is a copy of something that doesn't exist yet. It is a book copied from itself.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Why can’t I just give up now?” I ask Suzy.

“I don’t think it works that way,” she says, but I don’t see why it shouldn’t. Today should be the first day of the part of my life where I can stop caring. Right? I can just go around in this loop, because in the end, I’m going to end up where I know I’m going to end up anyway, and that’s that. It literally does not matter anymore. Today is the beginning of the end. Or the end of the beginning.

“Wait a minute. Don’t you go through the loop? Should you have some kind of record, some residual memory, some counter for each iteration? How many times have I done this? A hundred? A thousand? Do I ever learn anything from it? Do I ever become a better person?”

“My records show that this is the first time.”

How many times have I even been through this loop? Suzy says just once. She says this is the first time she has been on this path. This may be a time loop, but it’s the first time through.

I say she’s lying. She reminds me that she’s incapable of lying to me, and I realize her answer makes sense. If the loop is exactly the same set of events every time, she wouldn’t have any way of distinguishing them. To her, it’s only one set of events that occur in a set period of time, and there’s no marker, no higher-level counter, no internal-

state reflector that records separate impressions. Her memory doesn't work that way, is what I realize, and then I realize something about what I just realized. My memory doesn't work that way, either. I have no way of knowing how long I've been in this loop, and I'll never know. I'm just going around and around on this thing, however long it is, an hour, a day, my entire life, each time as oblivious as the last time, each time as scared as if it's my first.

But what if I were to skip forward? Just cut out all of this filler in the middle. After all, as my self told me, I am the author of this. Whatever it is. I am its author and its only reader.

I want to know what happens. I want to know if I'll ever get out of here. I want to know if I'll ever see my father again. My mother again. I want to know if this is how my life will go, until it just ends.

Suzy says: not a good idea.

TOAD says: not a good idea.

I punch in the instruction: go to the last page.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Not a good idea. Immediately after sending the instruction, I begin to feel a vibration, slight but detectable, of the walls of the RTV.

I hit a button and the hatch decompresses. I pop open the door.

This is what I see:

[this page has been intentionally left blank]

And now the RTV starts to vibrate, at first gently, then more vigorously, like an unbalanced centrifuge. Indicator lights are blinking.

Whatever trouble I was in with Keith/Jerry, I'm feeling better about. Because I'm in way worse trouble now.

Suzy informs me, in a neutral but slightly concerned tone, that I have set the time machine on a noncomputable path.

What was I thinking? Because, if I'm being honest, I'm not sure I would even know what I do with myself. Even if you could skip to the end of it all, what would I do the next day with my life that would be so different from all the days that came before? What new kind of person would I choose to be that next day? And the next? And how about the day after, and all of the days after that?

At this point, the vibration of the machine, up until now low and erratic, speeds up to what must be a resonant frequency, because the entire unit starts to rattle. The housing for the decoherence module comes loose and crashes to the floor, leaving the guts of the machine slightly exposed, the naked physicality of the thing, the purely material bits, the wiring and the diodes of the randomness generator left vulnerable to damage, to being overwhelmed with data.

Then: nothing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I wake up in an enormous church. I am standing in the vestibule of what appears to be the main hall. The air is cool and smells of candle wax. It is dark. The small amount of sunlight coming through the space underneath and between the doors feels like an intrusion into this rarefied place.

There are no clocks in here.

Two wooden railings separate the vestibule from the main room. Between the railings is an opening, and to either side, people have left their coats and hats. Because it is warm in here. Or it isn't. There is no temperature. No need for warmer clothing.

Among all of the coats, I see a of worn tweed overcoat, which look vaguely familiar.

I'm standing just at the edge of the large rectangle that makes up the space of the main hall, at the end of what feels like two square miles of burgundy carpet and dark mahogany pews. The carpet is deep—I am half sinking into it, half floating on top of it. There are three giant stain glass windows at the far end.

Other than that, there is nothing in the room. No material objects, no nothing.

My thoughts, normally bunched together, insistent, urgent, impatient, existing in what I now realize is, in essence, a constant state of emergency (as if my evolutionary instincts of fight or flight have gone haywire, leading me to spend each morning, noon,

and evening in a low-grade but absolutely never-ceasing muted form of panic), those rushed and ragged thoughts are now falling away, one by one, revealing themselves for what they are: the same thought over and over again. And once revealed for what they are, these hollow thoughts, white noise generated by my brain, they are gone.

And it is quiet. Quiet in a way I have never experienced before. As if quiet were a substance, and it were thick, as if that substance were now in my head, filling it like a viscous fluid, some kind of gel. Desire is suffering. A simple equation, and a nice catchphrase. But flipped around, it is more troubling: suffering is desire. Not a unidirectional arrow, not causal, as in, desire leads to suffering. Desire is suffering, and therefore, by axiom, suffering is desire. *Ting*. A bell rings. I look around for the ringer. A nun. But no one seems to have rung the bell. It rang itself. *Ting. Ting. Ting*. The sound is clarifying, purifying, even. It erases every thought from the room, wipes the slate clean. I had been polluting the room with my ideas and they are all gone. And in front of me, I am, for some reason, unsurprised to see my mother, or at least some version of her, standing at the front of the room, just off the center, a candle held at the very end, with each hand.

My mother, short and compact, the version I knew, my actual mother, was capable of the most unguarded, undisguised love of anyone I ever met. At some point in my loneliness, in the RTV, I lost my capacity for embarrassment, but my mother never had that capacity in the first place. She would ask for your love in that voice of hers, loud and plangent and raw and seemingly infinite in its neediness, her voice so naked and small and open. It was almost reckless how vulnerable she allowed herself to be; you

couldn't help but hate her for doing that to herself, and at the same time hate yourself for giving in to it, and underneath all of that, despite your hate for her, couldn't help but love her. She was not the best person, or the most giving, or the kindest or the most understanding or the most wise. She was jealous and quick to anger and rash and profoundly depressed for my entire life, had been that way since the age of eleven, when her brother had been stillborn, had a life without duration, an open and closed end on the tiny rectangular gravestone, and then when her own mother had died, two days later, of complications. My mother spent a lifetime grieving and yet she still loved my father with all of her heart: all of it. It was a structure and a vector and a power source that could be directed toward nearly any target even remotely worthy. All of her heart, a meaningless phrase, but correct and precise, too. She used her heart to love him, not her head, and not her words and not her thoughts or ideas or feelings or any other vehicle or object or device people use to deliver love or love-like things. She used her heart, as a physical transmitter of love, and what came out of it was no more voluntary than gravity or time or time travel or the laws of fictional science itself.

My mother finishes her kneeling and blows out her candle. She turns to me, and I see at once that this woman is exactly like my mother, but she is not my mother. She is The Woman My Mother Should Have Been.

She is not a could-have-been. Could-have-beens are people who are not exactly like my mother. For any given mother, for any given person, there are many could-have-beens, maybe an infinite number.

No, this woman standing in front of me is something else, she is the one and only Woman My Mother Should Have Been, and I have found her. Looking for my father, I have found this woman, I have traveled out of the ordinary tense axes and into this place.

This woman turns to me, and she doesn't smile, doesn't really have any emotion in her face at all. This Woman My Mother Should Have Been is like the ideal of my mother, I realize, and yet at the same time the idea of that angers me. Who made this place? Who is to say that my mother, exactly as she is, my mother-in-fact, isn't the exact perfect version of herself? This woman in front of me, her face clear of any inner turmoil, her face a calm pool of cool water, of equanimity or beatitude or blissful calm. Like my real mother, this woman is a Catholic, but she actually reads the Bible, follows its teachings, she has spent countless time thinking and praying, finding compassion and peace. She has freed herself from her own box, her own tightly circular mental loop, her cycles of highs and lows, anxiety and mania and delayed grief and depression, and in doing so she has become some kind of martyr, a saint, has found the peace that my mother always looked for. She is what I knew was always possible for my mom, if all that light inside her could find its way out. I am standing in front of a complete stranger, a woman whom I have never met, a woman whom I never could have met, in any possible world, through any possible combination of events and chance happenings. A pure hypothetical.

“Do I know you?” she says.

This is my mother.

This is not my mother.

A bell rings.

Ting.

I remember where I've seen that coat before.

They belonged to my father. Was this where he was? When he was down in the garage by himself, is this what he was building? A machine to take him here?

There are no clocks in this room, because there's no time in this room, because of what this room, this place, this temple is. My mother back on Earth is trapped in a time loop of her own choosing and this woman is her opposite; this Woman My Mother Should Have Been is here now and forever and always and never in this church of nontemporality.

The room, previously stationary, now feels like it is spinning and vibrating. What is this? Where is this? Is this even a room at all? Am I actually inside of some kind of structure my father built? Am I inside some kind of construct?

The Woman My Mother Should Have Been turns to me, and now she doesn't have such a pleasant look on her face.

"Should you be here?" she says, and I'm about as scared as I can be of a sixty-year-old woman who looks exactly like my mom. What I had perceived as beatific calm has curdled into something sinister, the dead eyes of a prisoner, not a person but an idea of a person, trapped in a church for all time.

"Just tell me something," I say. "Is he here?"

"Once. A long time ago."

"Where did he go?"

“I don’t know. All I know is that he didn’t get what he wanted. He thought I was what he wanted, and he just kept saying sorry, over and over again, that this wasn’t how he thought it would be, that he had to go.”

Her features now soften, ever so slightly, and seemingly without moving a muscle, her aspect has transformed from sinister to forlorn.

“Will you be my family? Will you stay with me here?”

And I’m running, as cruel as it seems, I’m not about to be trapped in this place for eternity with a creepy version of my mother, not really my mother, an abandoned idea, who doesn’t have a heart, but is lonely nonetheless. I sincerely hope she finds someone, that she leaves this church someday and finds some other subjunctively ideal person to spend eternity with, but I’ve got my own mother to take care of, a flesh-and-blood mother, an imperfect but present tense mother and maybe it’s just a rationalization, but for the first time in a while, I am reminded that I am needed, I have obligations to people, as a son, as a guy who fixes time machines, a guy who gets people out of their bad situations. Even if it seems like a dumb job and I don’t get paid well, people are counting on me, Mom and Keith, and Suzy and Bruce, and if I hadn’t gotten a kick in the butt, hadn’t run into myself and then shot myself and then opened the book and tried to skip ahead, I might not have ended up here, and seen this, and realized that, in my own way, this is what I was headed for, a life in some dead quiet airless construct my dad built, free-floating in space. I was headed for an entire life spent alone, pitying myself for not being more, ignoring all those people who actually ask me to be more, because they see it in me. I’m running for a door, any door, the door in the northeast corner to the church.

It's locked. I grab the knob and shake as hard as I can. It feels very wrong to do this, in a church, in a place of silent contemplation, but I think I need to kick the door down. I kick it hard, with the entire bottom of my foot, stomping it, just below the doorknob. This is no ordinary wooden door.

Play by the rules, dummy.

Who said that?

Ting.

Do I have to spell it out for you?

Okay, who is messing with me?

Ting.

No one is talking to me. I'm talking to myself. I'm not where I think I am. I am somewhere else. This isn't real, but it isn't fake, either. This is not a pleasant universe anymore.

Ting.

Then I remember: The book is the answer. That's what I said to myself. I was giving myself a clue I knew I would need. That's got to be it, right? The book will tell me how to get out of here. I bet there's a secret door! This is so cool! I figured it out! I'm so smart! It's like my very own adventure story. It's even kind of science fictional.

The only problem is that the RTV is nowhere to be found. I guess I'm not so smart. I am kind of an idiot. I didn't travel through time to get to this church. This isn't the past or the future tense, it's the subjunctive. That's why my time machine isn't here.

I cut through the altar area, crossing through the pews, I fumble around and try another door. Locked. I don't even want to think about where my fake mom is, somewhere behind me, slow-walking like zombies do in the movies. I try kicking this door, try slamming my body into it. Nothing, not even the slightest movement.

I'm scared.

What am I so scared of?

Being trapped here?

Wanting to stay here?

Nothing?

Nothingness?

Whatever it is, I need to get out. Okay, think. Think. I am an idiot. This is no ordinary wooden door. This is not a physical door at all. It's metaphysical. This is a time barrier or a logic barrier or some other type of barrier that I am not going to be able to break through with my foot or my shoulder. This is a box I am in. I've been getting into

and out of boxes all my life. I say box way too much. Even the idea of a box has become a kind of box for me, a barrier against trying to find another word for it, another device. This room I am in was made by my father, is a construct of a life he imagined. He built it with willpower, with the potential energy of forty years of frustration. This place, in here, is nothing but a frame of abstraction surrounding empty space and the sublimated intentions of my father. But when he got here, he realized he wanted out.

Is that why I'm here now?

Did he want to show me this?

Is that why I'm in a time loop?

Is he asking me to come find him?

And as I'm thinking this, ramming my shoulder into the door, it just flies open, and I fly through it, out into nothingness, and then I'm falling and screaming and crying a little bit but mostly just screaming and falling and falling and falling.

Now where am I?

You're in the interstitial matrix that fills up the space between universes.

Who said that?

You did.

I did? Wait, who am I?

You're you.

Oh, good. Thanks. Seriously, where are we?

We're in a shuttle. I'm taking you back to where you were, where you came from.

(This isn't the RTV. I'm in some other kind of vehicle. Larger. More room and air and light. The interior is clean, all white and black ceramic.)

We're on the bus? A space bus?

More like a space elevator. It's called the anomaly transfer system. A vast network of elevators going in all different directions in multi-dimensional space-time. Some are mainlines, some are branches, some are endpoints.

Like a brain.

I guess so.

Or a bus.

If you insist.

(There's soft atmospheric music playing, but otherwise it's quiet. The air-conditioning feels nice. I press my face, still flushed from the heat of the church, against the cold surface of the window.)

Hello, whoever you are?

Still here.

You're paradox steward, right? This is the paradox shuttle.

You got it.

Can you pick up Bruce for me?

Sure. Who's Bruce?

My dog.

I don't have any record of a dog.

Technically he doesn't exist.

You have a pet that doesn't exist?

Yeah.

(The driver hits a button on his pants. He says, "Someone get the dog . . . yeah, I guess we forgot... hold on, let me check.")

What does your dog look like?

Kind of a mutt. Brown. Face like mushy oatmeal.

(He relays the description into his crotch. About ten seconds later, the shuttle stops. The door opens. Bruce trots in, flops down next to me. I say thanks to the driver, give Bruce a few hard scruffs to his furry neck.)

So why am I on this shuttle? Did I die?

No. You just got somewhere you weren't supposed to go.

My own future? My empty future?

Sure.

What does that mean? That I have no future? That I'm dead?

That's not really for me to answer.

That is annoyingly cryptic.

Thank you. I try.

(We're zipping along through some kind of color space, hurtling through a galactic-scale elevator shaft. Up and down and all around are other elevator shafts, and snaking all around the anomaly matrix are long tubes of blue and green and red, tendrils and vectors shooting in every direction.

(Out my window I can see the edges of different universes as we pass by. Some of them are large grand circuses of light. Others are smaller systems, lonesome clusters, dim and muted. I had no idea our universe was so big. Bigger than I'd imagined.)

Don't blame yourself.

For what?

For whatever is making you look so guilt-ridden right now.

Who else can I blame?

The guy who gave you the book.

That was myself. My future-self.

No it wasn't.

I saw him. He looked exactly like me.

You think what makes you is what you look like?

No. Yes.

Some guy hands you a book and says this is going to be your story, and you stick to it. You don't know what he's up to or even who he is and you just do what he says just because he looks like you? Listen to me: think about what he asked you to do.

Stick to the story.

And what does the story do?

Makes me skip ahead.

You are a paradox.

I am a paradox.

Your life is one big paradox.

It makes no sense.

Right. Take a guess who I am.

Me.

That's correct.

You don't look anything like me.

Again with the physical universe stuff. What exactly do you think you are? What exactly do you think this place is? You want to tell a story? Grow a heart. Grow two. Now, with the second heart, smash the first one into bits. Gross, right? A bloody pulpy liquid mess. Look at it, try to make sense of it. Realize you can't. Because there is no sense. Ask your computer to print out a list of every lie you have ever told. Ask yourself how much of the universe you have ever really seen. Look in the mirror. Are you sure you're you? Are you sure you didn't slip out of yourself in the middle of the night, and someone else slipped into you, without you or you or any of you even noticing?

(Then he hits a button and the entire back wall and every seat behind me in the shuttle blows apart and falls away, leaving me sitting on the rear edge of an exposed relativistic elevator rocketing along the track at, like, one-quarter the speed of light. The heel of my shoe is about an inch from being ground into pure energy and I realize how good the insulation of the shuttlecraft was, and how noisy the real world is outside, how noisy friction is and damage, how it sounds like the cosmic music of the spheres out here but also like all of creation is one active construction site, either construction or demolition or both, and the noise is almost unbearable and the driver isn't shouting, he's still talking pretty softly, and I can hear it in my head, like it's a voice-over.

(The driver grabs me by the neck. Not in a menacing way, just kind of firm. Like I am a child, a baby whose neck he has to support. I don't get a great look at his face, but I realize he sort of resembles me. Just tougher. With a bit more facial hair. Like if I'd had to actually work all my life driving a shuttle bus instead of in a climate-controlled desk job in IT support. He grips my head, pushing it forward, forcing me to look at the outside world.)

Now listen to me. Don't you want to find your father?

(I manage to squeak out an answer.)

Yes.

Then what is the problem?

I don't know.

It's your life, numbnuts. This is your book, isn't it?

You think this book belongs to me?

Who else would it belong to? Are you the author of this book, aren't you? Own up to it.

But that isn't me. That's my future-self.

You sound like an idiot. Who do you think you are? Imagine there's a version of you that sees all of it. A version that knows when versions are messing with the other ones, trying to get things off track, trying to erase things. A record of all the keystrokes, the storage of all the versions, partial and deleted and written over. All the changes. All truths about all parts of our self. We break ourselves up into parts. To lie to ourselves, to hide things from ourselves. You are not you. You are not what you think you are. You are bigger than you think. More complicated than you think. You are the only version of you that is you. There are less of you than you think, and more. There are a million versions of you, half a trillion. One for every particle, every quantum coin flip. Imagine this uncountable number of yous. You don't always have your own best interests at heart. That's true. You are your own best friend and your own worst enemy. You can't trust a guy who gives you a book and says, "This is your life." He might have been your future, he might not. Only you know how you get there. Only you know what you need to do. Imagine there is a perfect version of you. Out of all the oceans of oceans of you, there is exactly one who is perfectly you. And that's me. And I'm telling you: you are the only you. Does that make any sense?

Not really.

(Then he hits another button and my seat belt whips off and my chair breaks down and just as I'm about to be tossed out of the shuttle, I grab on to the back of the seat in front of me with both hands and just cling for my life.)

Also, your operating system? You should be nicer to her. You love her, right? But you're just kind of mean to her. You should tell her. You should tell her while you have the chance. Now get back to your life and quit being such a whiny little wuss. Be a man. Find your father. Tell him you love him. Then let him go. Then go find your mom and eat her food and tell her it's good. Then go and marry that girl you never married. What's her name?

Marie. She doesn't exist.

Neither does your dog, and you love him, right? Anything is possible in this kind of world. You idiot. Go marry Marie. And have a life. And grow a heart. And a pair.

(He gets out of his driver's seat and walks back to my seat and stands in front of me. He slaps me on the face, hard. And then he slaps me on the other side of the face, then he shakes me like I'm

a baby, then he kisses me hard on the mouth, which, well, is one of the more disturbing experiences I have ever had, not incest exactly, because I don't know that he actually is related to me, it's just this weird feeling I have, and although the kiss is not, by any means, pleasant, it's also not entirely unpleasant, sort of like when you're a kid and you try to practice on yourself, and for a second you realize, hey, I have breath, and I can smell my own breath and it's not great, and I'm a hot-breathed, mouth-breathing teenager just like all the other hot-breathed, mouth-breathing teenagers, and then he says, I love you, I'm doing this for your own good, and he slaps me one more time for good measure and he hits a button that opens the shuttle door, and shoves me hard out of the shuttle, falling, seemingly without end.)

(I'm outside. Outside the shuttle, outside of my RTV, no Tense Actuator, no control panel, no Suzy, no device around me. Out here. Out here, another free body, another part of the broken-down universe. In a moment, I will be falling. In a moment, I will be falling again, but from here, outside, between moments, the RTV looks like a phone booth, looks like a shower stall, looks like a cage. From here, I can see what ten years looks like, what a lifetime looks like, spent inside that contraption, my personal mode of propulsion. I can see how I am always in perpetual motion through time, how I can never stop, obsessed with the past, projecting myself into the future, clutching at and always failing to grasp the wisp of now. For a moment, a nonmoment, I can rest, I can clear my head of the noise of existence, from up here, an inch above the time axis, I can look down and see it all laid out, I can just almost start to hear, just start to make out the

original sound, the background voice, just start to remember that there was something I've been trying to remember for my entire life, and just when I almost feel like it's starting to come back, just when I've almost got my mind wrapped around it, it's slipping away, it is ending even as it starts, and I know I can't stay in this space here, the next moment will be coming soon, it's here now, and just like that, the memory of the memory of the memory of the sound is gone.)

(And then I'm falling again, Bruce is falling right next to me, and we're about smack right on top of my RTV. I may have broken my sternum. Ow. Manage to pop the hatch, climb back in. Ahh, Suzy. Ahh, Bruce. But then I see it. A corridor of memory. A series of boxes. An endless hallway, a moving diorama, with no ceiling, no fourth wall. It's the father-son axis. If I focus on any one point on the line, I can see the memory clearly. If I relax, and look at it as a whole, it is like a general impression of emotion and color and smells and sounds. We're approaching low, at just the right angle, and I slide into the axis, touching down right in the middle of a memory.)

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“We’re in your childhood,” Suzy says.

Bruce senses something different, lifts his head to sniff around.

“Why would shuttle guy drop me off here?” I say.

The view outside the RTV is somewhat akin to being inside a very large, very dark aquarium. There are exhibit tanks in every direction, as far as the eye can see, only instead of primordial sharks and bioluminescent jellyfish, all the specimens are me. Me at nine, me at fourteen. It’s an after-hours tour of a private museum. We drift past a memory that looks disturbingly familiar to me.

“What are you doin—?” Suzy starts to ask, trying to interpret the scene. “Oh.”

This was that magical, feverish, sweat-soaked afternoon when I’d found my father’s stack of old *Penthouses*, taking it all in, trying to store those images, those poses in my memory forever, making the most of my windfall and, apparently, making particularly good use of the July 1988 issue.

“I feel like I understand you better already,” Suzy says.

“Shut up. Shut up.”

They’re all here in this corridor, good memories and bad, humiliations and accidents and even small victories, each tableau playing out like the movement of silent,

sea life, viewed through the viscous and refractive medium of the years in between, in some cases dim and obscured, and others relatively clear, but never completely transparent, at best suggestions, outlines, emotions and echoes, impressions as relived through the deepest and darkest of waters.

There we are, my father and me, in the garage. Here we are, Suzy and me, we're standing in the garage, invisible to them, watching them through the glass case of memory-proof material along this corridor of the aquarium of the past. It looks and feels as if I am standing in the same room as they are, right in front of my younger self and my father. And it looks as if they are staring, not through me, but right back at me, and with their minds immersed in the theory of time travel and their eyes fixed on the future. Maybe, in a sense, they are staring at me. I'd like to imagine that's what my father was gazing at all those times in the garage, his eyes fixed at some point in the middle distance, our future as a family, which is to say, me, and that maybe looking at me, even though he didn't know what he was looking at, was some kind of unconscious inspiration for him, that whatever good feeling he might have had was a reaction to some inexplicable thing he saw in the future.

I can see my younger self now, sniffing the air, just as Bruce did, and I realize, finally, what that recurring scent was in my nostrils, the one I always associated with big moments in my life, with the oncoming arrival of something bad, of opportunity mishandled, of lost possibility. I thought it was the stinging odor of failure, like getting punched in the nose, the smell of adrenaline and then embarrassment, some biochemical

reaction to learning, time and again, with my father, that the world didn't want our invention.

Now I understand that what I thought was the smell of personal disappointment, the smell of my father's crushed hope, the smell of fear itself, was really just the metallic-tinted ozone vapor coming from the silent exhaust of the RTV, was just the byproduct of time travel, before my father finally escaped his own timeline.

Could that be it? Why I ended up here? To find my father. My father, who managed to escape from his own life. He figured out a way to do something no one else has. Is he the one who can help me get out of this loop?

As we continue to drift along the darkened visitor paths, a particular chain of exhibits softly lights up, as if we're being shown the way by some unseen docent. I point the RTV in the direction of the illuminated passage and, silently, our vessel starts to glide down that faintly glowing hallway.

Our first attempt at a prototype was a rickety contraption that my father and I put together over the better part of a summer vacation, during my three months of break before entering middle school. We called the prototype the UTM-1. It was a failure.

My mother and father had been fighting for weeks that summer. The fighting, no matter what it was about, was really about money. Not money itself, as they were both simple in that regard, happy with just enough. The problem was that there wasn't enough. They both knew that neither one could do anything about it. They hated themselves for

fighting about it. They both tried to hide it from me, but I knew it, and they knew I knew it.

After a particularly bad Fourth of July weekend, my mother had had enough and went to stay with her divorced sister, who lived by herself an hour away, coming back for more clothes every weekend until her closet was almost empty.

I didn't speak to my father for the first couple of weeks after my mother moved out. He came and went, made me dinner or picked up takeout and left it for me on the counter. I took the bus to summer school and when I got home, I watched television all afternoon and night and he never said anything about it. I could hear him in the garage working on the prototype. I still felt bad about the thing I'd said months earlier, about us being poor, but I heard through the walls all those fights, was scared of him, of the voice he used, how such a normally quiet man, gentle even, especially with me, could sound like that when talking to my mom. I was a mama's boy, I guess, and I refused to even go into the garage. Instead, I just sat on the couch and watched *Star Trek* reruns and generally tried to pretend that I had no idea what was going on. I had always been closer to my mother and it had seemed natural to take her side.

I'm standing here in the RTV, watching my prepubescent self make a sandwich, and I remember this.

"You were a cute kid," Suzy says, still giggling about the *Penthouses*.

I see myself pretending to work on the program, pretending even though I was alone, I remember how I would always pretend that I wasn't listening to whatever was going on in the living room, the outpouring of anger in a constant stream, ebbing and

rising in waves, punctuated by bursts of outright screaming. I remember how I would sit there thinking, Who am I trying to fool, sitting there as if I wasn't fazed by it, every day, for years, ever since I was a small child, as if it had no effect on me, as if it didn't hurt.

I remember thinking all of this and still, and yet, and for whatever reason, continuing to stare at the screen, pretending in my room alone, pretending to myself, as if someone was watching me from above, some semi-omniscient, bird's-eye view observer was watching over me, and what I didn't realize then was that there was an observer, and in fact, it was me, it's me now, looking back at myself from inside this time machine.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I remember one late-December morning in my father's study, one of the last days of the year, felt like it was the end of something more. Not the best year, the family had seen better.

Overnight the rain and winds had washed the sky and world of all haze and the early-morning light was even, perfect, the light of an artist's studio. I was ten years old and my mother had told me to ask my father to come have breakfast. I remember on the wall there was one of those word-of-the-day calendars—this one in particular had a new science term each day, i.e. absolute zero, transmutation, nuclear fission, etc. The clock in the kitchen was ticking. It was a blue plastic circle with a white face, and standard black arrows pointing to hours and minutes and a thin red needle for the second hand, which made discrete movements, jumped from mark to mark in its circumnavigation, with a kind of abrupt yet soft bouncing motion, and a sound that always seemed louder than it should have been.

I called to my father a few times and, not hearing any response, walked down the hall, afraid of what I might find, not hearing a sound, and then, as I approached, I heard a muffled noise, a sound I was certain I had never heard before, and as I peeked in through the mostly closed door of his small office, I saw, for the first time in my life, my father's eyes red and cheeks and chin wet with tears. He was looking at a picture of my

grandfather, the one I never met, who died when I was six months old, who died on a different continent, an ocean away, poor and broken and missing his oldest son.

I stood there in the hall, a few feet outside the threshold of my father's private study, watching him, looking at him framed by the door, while he looked at his own father, framed in the picture, the three of us, son, father, and grandfather, forming a melancholy axis, forming a chain, a regress, a bridge into the past.

He notices that I'm there. Without looking up, he says, "Thank you."

I say, "What for?"

"I don't know. For being a kid."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

It was the first moon mission, the Apollo 1, the one that didn't quite make it. It was the Wright brothers' test run; it was a wobbly and earthbound arc, the one that never got free of the pull of gravity. Ours never got free of the gravitational present. It lasted all of a minute, less than a minute, maybe fifty-five seconds. Once we climbed in, we couldn't get out, but in the mirror we had placed in the garage (in order to be able to position the cooling element on top of the unit), we could see ourselves, sitting there, we saw what we looked like, a scientist and his assistant, two guys in a garage next to a makeshift box, a crate really, with a piece of sheet metal stapled twice as a kind of door, except that it didn't open.

This was how we built it. After fourteen straight days of silence and *Star Trek* reruns, one Saturday morning I went down to the garage and stood there, watching my father work while I ate a bowl of cereal. I couldn't tell if he was mad at me for taking my mother's side, or for not coming down sooner, or something else altogether. I thought I was the one who was supposed to be mad at him. He didn't say anything all day, and we repeated it again the next day.

The next morning, I came down, prepared for a third day of watching him measure things wrong and curse at himself and make trips to the hardware store. This

time, though, he handed me a fistful of nails and pointed to a piece of sheet metal leaning against the wall.

“Hammer that,” he said, still looking pissed. I did my best to look pissed, too, or as pissed as a ten-year-old can look, but eventually I hammered the nail, and then another, and before long, it was dinnertime. We worked mostly in silence for the next two months, only talking to each other when deciding what to eat for lunch.

By the end of the summer, the UTM-1 was ready. Or so we thought. We stood there in the garage, looking over our contraption, odd pieces of sheet metal sticking out here and there, little gaps where surfaces weren't flush, the general overall slumpy, homemade look to our machine.

“That doesn't look like it's going to work,” Suzy says. “But you guys did a nice job.”

She's right. Although we did leave the present moment, and so in that sense we traveled in time, in every other respect we failed. We looped around in a short circuit, but we had no control over the machine. We couldn't get out, we couldn't even stop the thing, it was just a swinging, fishtailing 180, an out-of-control joyride, a minute into the past, and then back, but it took us much longer than a minute to get there, it took us, well, we don't even know how long it took that first time because we bring a watch or timepiece. We thought we would appear instantaneously at our destination. We would later find out that it takes time to travel through time, that there is no instant poof, no *shazam*, that a vehicle is a vehicle, regardless of what kind of vehicle it is, and that the

whole point of transport through some amount of space-time is that it is a physical process. Even if it has metaphysical implications, it is still a physical process.

“We’re doing it,” he said.

“The rig is holding up,” I said, noting that it was only vibrating slightly. We’d been worried that it might hit a resonant frequency in the acceleration phase and vibrate itself into pieces, just blow itself apart, throwing us into who knows what or where or when.

We were in the garage, with the garage door open, I remember, so I park my RTV just outside, behind the basketball hoop and trash cans, so I can watch from here.

“Imagine,” my father said, “if we could just stop.” If we could just stop at any point in time. If we could stop right now in this subspace, if we got out and well, what?

If we could just stop at any moment in time and change our lives. Rearrange them.

What could we do? What would we do? What would we have done differently? Instead of the ordinary problems of life, the problem of what to do next, of what to do first, of what to do ever, at all, even the smallest step, we would also have the problem of what to do yesterday, of what to do last year, of how to justify anything, ever. There we were between minutes, between moments. We sat there in the crate, unsure of what or when we were, knowing only that we were in transit, in a space between space, a time between times, in some sort of interstitial gap between moments, a subspace occupied by only the two of us.

We sat there for some indefinite and unmeasured period of time realizing our error, our wrongheaded assumption, marveling at what we had learned: time travel takes time. My father was so excited he almost broke our craft, banging on the front door, such as it was, with both fists in celebration of the discovery. Of course, he said, why hadn't he thought of it? Living is a form of time travel. Time travel is a physical process. It has to be. Although we hadn't remembered to bring a timepiece on our maiden voyage, we had remembered to bring a notepad and pencils and even a quarter sheet of graph paper. We thought we would record something, anything, sensory data, our impressions, our physical conditions. But when the time came, we couldn't bring ourselves to move. We just stared at each other. Even in my anger at him, my indignation, I couldn't help but smile, if for no other reason than just seeing my father smile. It was so strange and unsettling to see him like this, to see him happy, strange because I realized I had never seen him like this before, not in our house, not with my mom, not when we were all together in the car taking a drive, never. Not like this. We were doing science. Together. In here, in our little box, in our laboratory separated from the rest of the world. For some period of nontime time or a thousand moments, or maybe just one, we were in there, and he was happy and I was part of it. I remember the goose bumps on my arms and the back of my neck, the excitement at seeing this, at doing something right, for once in our lives, succeeding.

Technically, that first time was a failure because we never actually landed, because we could not get the UTM-1 to touch down at our point B and instead, we got swung around in a boomerang path, and ended up back where we started, took a trip

through the void and got close enough to see the bumps and rocks and pits and craters and gray, ancient, mysterious surface of the dark side of our own moon, but didn't actually get to walk on it, not that first time. As we approached our destination we realized, too late, that we hadn't actually built a control mechanism that told the machine how or when to stop, realized that, in effect, we had no conceptual landing gear, just before we got bounced back to where we started, there was a moment of suspension, of suspense even, at the top of our arc—a pause during which we were completely stopped, still in free fall but with zero velocity—a brief interval in which we were able to get a good look at our selves, our past selves, just a minute before, before our first flight, before we had gone through all of this, before we had taken that first step, before we knew what was possible and impossible and inevitable, and we looked at ourselves and we could see what was plain, could see what anyone else would have seen, that we looked like a father and a son, we looked like innocents, we looked terrified and stupid and naïve and alive and open to possibility.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

My mother was calling for me when we got back. She had finally come back from her sister's house, pulling up just as my father and I reentered time in the middle of the garage. She was afraid, I could hear it in her voice, how she was on the edge of panic, as she so often was.

On the return landing from our maiden voyage, the machine had fallen apart. In fact, it didn't even make it back to our original starting point, reentering in a ball of heat sometime during the minute we had traveled over. We crash-landed somewhere in that lost minute, which was a good thing, maybe a necessary thing, since it meant that there weren't two sets of us in existence at that moment, and going forward, but it did confuse things.

I didn't understand it then, but now, watching her from up here, in the minute before we emerged, I see that she'd just gotten back, her sister was dropping her off, and as she struggled to get the broken and mismatched luggage out of the trunk I could see the look on my mom's face, a look I recognized, half of her terrified of losing control and blowing up at my father, half of her hoping he might, contrary to all previous behavior, be waiting for her with unguarded love in his eyes.

What she probably hadn't been expecting to see was a big hole in the middle of the cement in the garage floor, and half of the tools in the garage singed by a fire our

machine had apparently ignited on launch, and most of the ceiling not so much singed as scorched, and a stack of old newspapers in the corner burning a nice, healthy orange flame near cans of old cleaning solution.

There she is, falling over her luggage, into the trash cans, screaming for us, wondering where we were, assuming the worst, as she always did, just utter unimaginable worst-case disaster for our family, how in her state of anticipatory panic she had dropped a cake she had bought from the grocery store on the ground and her stocking had a run in it and her hair was a little crazy.

And now here we come, my younger self and my dad, our machine blinking into existence, and from this vantage point I can see what I didn't see the first time, how I look to my mother as she watches me, climbing out of the machine, a little, skinny-armed boy, her boy, I can see how my dad looks to her, still in our device, smiling, and how stupid the machine looks as it falls apart, just as Dad is climbing out. Now I see why she is crying. My father doesn't. He hardens his face against her, against the situation, which normally would bother me but this time I don't understand why she is crying, either, and so I kind of harden my face a little, too, in my ten-year-old way, and she notices this, I think, she is holding me and getting me all wet and smeared with makeup and tears, and I am looking at her in her sweater with cats on it, thinking, *Pull it together, please, Mom, just for once, why can't you let Dad see the side of you I see, not always like this*, and she looks up at me and I feel like a miniature version of my father and then she starts crying even harder, and I wonder if she even understands why she is crying.

This is before I learn to put my mother in that diagnostic box and label it, tidy and categorized. This is when I can still see her crying as what it is, in its raw, unnamed form, jagged, knife-like sobs, pure and intense, wonder why it is so powerful, why she needs to do it, why it bothers my father so much.

Suzy makes her pixels into a sloppy, runny-nosed face. She loads her crying subroutine and tries it out, snuffling a little bit to herself, for my mom, I guess.

Then Bruce farts and it's not good. Suzy's still crying but starts to giggle, and I'm gagging a little, and then Suzy starts laughing so hard she almost crashes herself. Bruce saves the day again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

A call comes in from Dispatch.

“What the hell?” I say.

“It’s Keith,” says Suzy. “You should let it go to voice mail.”

“I know, right? He’s calling me? Now? What a dick.”

“No, it’s not that. You’re stuck in a time loop.”

“That’s what I’m saying. I’m taking a personal day, dude. Jerk boss. I’m going to tell him off.”

“No. Do not pick up that phone. I’m not talking about him being a jerk. I’m saying: you are stuck in a time loop. If you take that call, then you always took that call. You always take that call. It’s got to be self-consistent with the rest of this. If you pick up that phone, it’s just one more thing that we’ll have to do again. And who knows what complications it leads to.”

“Holy crap,” I say. “What would I do without you?”

“Cease to exist,” she says, allowing herself a little smile.

I was sixteen when my father had his next breakthrough.

Suzy takes note of my postpubescent form, notes the disparity from my present-day physique.

“Hey, you used to have muscles,” she says, surprised.

“Shut up. Just shut up.”

By this time in our prototype numbering scheme, we were up to the UTM-21. We had crashed the UTM-3, the UTM-5, the UTM- 7, 9, 11, and so on, each odd-numbered model failing in some new, unexpected way. We’d spent hours, years in here, trying to improve our idea, but what was happening was simple: we kept crashing. It was easy to figure out what. What we couldn’t figure out was why.

My father was at the chalkboard.

“Pay attention,” he said. “We can figure this out. We have to figure this out.”

As much as anything else, he was trying to convince himself. I was ready to quit, to go upstairs, to leave the house, to be a man of my own. Or to just be a teenager. Anything else but watch my father any longer. I’d grown up. Didn’t he see that? I was already taller than him, had been for a couple of years, was too tall for my family. We’d been doing this for so long, since I was ten, and we’d had some good times, but where was this all going? What was his plan for this, us, our family?

“More research,” he would say. “We need more data points.”

His trajectory at work had already become apparent, had started to move sideways, and my mother, after a good year, was in a holding pattern herself. In some ways she’d started to regress, even picking up new habits, new ways of tearing my father down, tearing herself down, found a way to cry harder, more jagged, more raw. She would disappear into her room some Friday nights and not come out the whole weekend, and then emerge, Monday morning, and everything would be okay again. Things were

livable, were bearable, but at sixteen, I felt old, I felt tired of this, of prototypes and going sideways, of back and forth, I felt mediocre, I could see where this was headed and I wanted to escape my own future.

At some point in that year together, the last year that we were recognizable as a family, my father had started to sound different. He still spoke in the same manner, gruff, as if I were always on the verge of annoying him, but there was a subtle change in what he said, in the questions he asked. I could hear, within each one, another question curled up, folded up inside, hidden from me, perhaps not fully intentionally placed in there by him. They had gone from tests, games, teaching, to something else. Something like wondering. Something harder, more genuine. Asking.

“Do you think there’s something wrong?” he asked me once while I had my head buried in a control panel.

“Newtonian intake manifold is cracked. We’ll need to fuse it shut.”

“No, not that. I mean with the theory.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The theory. My theory. Is it, did I take a wrong turn somewhere in the equations? Did I get it wrong?”

My father had begun asking my opinion about the world. He was admitting, in his way, what he didn’t know, what confused him, what frustrated him in this country, at work, in this town, both close and far from the center of everything. He was asking me if I was ready to be part of our family, ready to help him, ready to be a numerator.

I remember feeling small, unprepared, like I had to help him, feeling like how in the world could I possibly help him. I was angry at him for asking, sorry for him for having to, angry at myself for not being more prepared, for not being the gifted kid he once thought I was, for not being who he had hoped I would be.

It wasn't until well after midnight that it happened, by that point, we'd been staring at the chalkboard for nine and a half hours. It was cold, but to concede that to my dad would have brought I'm not sure what kind of reaction, so I just kept my mouth shut and my eyes focused on our neighbor, across the street, who was my age, kissing her boyfriend good-bye for what seemed like the entire night.

My father was undeterred. He stood there, staring at the math, working it over and over again. "Does this make any sense to you?" he said, pointing to a board full of differential equations.

"I don't even know what I'm looking at."

"Oh yeah," he said. "Sorry. It says that we are colliding with other objects."

"Maybe we are," I said.

"That's impossible," he said. "Unless..."

He paused, staring off into space, when something hit him, something real but invisible. I could see it, the impact, and his face opened up, his eyes widened, his jaw dropped. So this was what he worked for, all this toiling in the garage: a moment like this. It might come once a year, or once a decade. He yelped in pain or joy. And he hugged me. He threw chalk up in the air and clapped his hands and made a huge cloud of

white dust and he jumped up and down and whooped and just generally looked silly. So this was what he loved: science. So this was what it looked like: my father, happy.

Then he erased the whole board and picked up a new piece of chalk and started scribbling, chalk flying, breaking the chalk, yelping in exclamation every minute or so, pounding on his own head in excitement, and when he stopped after what felt like hours, covered in white, his fingers raw, hair matted against his face, sweat dripping from his ears, in his eyes, he said, You did it, you figured it out, son, we are crashing. We are crashing into time machines everywhere. He pointed to the board, an illegible tangle of equalities and inequalities and infinities and asymptotes, and he started to explain, shouting, his voice hoarse.

I don't remember everything he said, exactly, but I remember the feeling, the idea, where he was going with it, the idea that our equations had been too simple, too naïve, that we had been assuming a time machine was some kind of specialized object, that we only had to solve for an isolated variable, when in fact a time machine was just a special case. He said: "A house can be a time machine. A room. Our kitchen, this garage, this conversation, anything can be a time machine. Just sitting there, you are. So am I.

"Everyone has a time machine. Everyone is a time machine. It's just that most people's machines are broken. The strangest and hardest kind of time travel is the unaided kind. People get stuck, people get looped. People get trapped. But we are all time machines."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I am seventeen years old. My father will turn forty-nine next week. This is the best day of his life.

If a life is an arc, and an arc has a high point, then that high point is today.

We are in the car driving to the good side of town.

“You look nervous,” Suzy says.

“This is a big day,” I say to Suzy.

We’re going to meet an important man, the director of research at the Institute of Conceptual Technology, a gleaming black building, behind gates, that sits on top of University Road, up the hill half a mile above town, where they worked on the hard problems. They were the people my father aspired to be, this man in particular, they lived the lives he longed for, they drove up to those gates every morning and checked with the security guard and showed their ID badges and the gates opened for them, and they drove behind them, up into the compound, the castle of secrets and ideas that only a hundred people in the world knew about, ideas that only a dozen people understood.

Today is the day, that one glorious day in my father’s life. After waiting half a lifetime, half a career, his moment. Today is the day they come calling for him. I remember the call. Sometime after our first wobbly orbit and before he was completely sure he knew what he was doing (or rather, before he realized he would never be

completely sure about what he was doing), someone had taken notice. And now they found him and they wanted to hear his idea. This is the day he has dreamed about, the day even I have dreamed of. This is the day that has hung over our house, in the air, for years, the cloud of a shared dream. If a lifetime in the end is remembered for a handful of days, this is one of them.

After his day of revelation in the garage, he had been back on the upswing, as a scientist, even as a burgeoning entrepreneur. Even as a husband. It was all moving up: meaning, success, our story. For a while here, it looked like we were going to make it. Whatever it is. Whatever making it is. He was going to make it, our family was, my mother and father were going to make it. The world was coming to him, finally. And just as he had always imagined, it was coming with money.

Or more accurately, the promise of money.

More than money.

Prestige.

The promise of prestige and a sense of mystery about him, a sense of intellectual mystery that would surround him, inventor, pioneer, scientist. He imagined the prospect of seeing his name in trade journals, rivals and admirers whispering about what he was working on, his method of working, how he got his ideas. He imagined how the people at work would react when he quit, when a month after he quit they realized what they had let slip away, how they could never afford him now, how they had ignored him all those years, put him in the cubicle, let him inch upward, never seeing the quality of his ideas.

I am excited. I am hopeful. I know how this all turns out, what happens after today, and still I feel hopeful, looking at myself, remembering how it felt to feel that way. He talks about getting something nice for my mother, about wanting to get a bigger house for us.

We're meeting at a local park, the one in the center of the good side of Astoria, the kind they only have in this part of the city. This side is where the private high school is, the school our school doesn't play any sports against, because the private school is too small. They don't even field a full football team. They have a debate team. In the student parking lot for the school, the cars are bigger, and nicer, and in that part of town the houses are bigger, the sidewalks cleaner, the air purer, the kind of upper-middle neighborhood where the residents took pains to create a picturesque and manicured reality.

"He looks..." Suzy says, unsure of the word she is searching for.

"Happy."

"No," she says. "Not that."

So often on drives like this my father was auto-dislocated, there but not there. Early on, by the age of nine or maybe seven or even five, I could already see, had already developed the faculty of chronological observation, a sensitivity to time-space auto-dislocation, to very subtle shifts in the manifold, the vector field of conscious attentiveness in the interior space of our family car.

But on this day, this momentous day for him, I felt him fully there with me in our Ford LTD, not even embarrassed about our car, which gave me, for just those few minutes, the ability to not be embarrassed about it, either.

We arrive first, park in the spot nearest the baseball diamond, open the back of the station wagon.

Careful, he says, unclear if it's for me or to himself or to no one in particular.

In the time it took to pull in, park, and get out of the car, he's gone from happy to stressed out.

He is doing his jaw-clenching thing, really working it. It almost looks painful. We move the machine gingerly, taking little baby steps the whole way from the parking lot to the baseball diamond, which seems, under the powerful sunshine of this foreign neighborhood, like a near-infinite distance. Dad doesn't say anything, just grunts and walks a little too fast, and we have to stop twice because I'm losing my grip. We're standing there in the sun and I notice, maybe for the first time, that my father is a man. A human man. His physicality, his sweaty person-ness.

He has very dark hair, a whole head's worth, more, thick and strong-looking and so black that it occurs to me, not then, but now, that he must actually dye it. My father is old. Not old, not even fifty, still strong in the forearms and calves and his back and on most days, he has more energy in his compact, half-century-old frame than I do in my brooding, sulky seventeen-year-old clothes hanger of a body. He parts his hair to the right and combs the sides back, and a trickle of sweat is edging downward from his hairline on the left side of his face, where his glasses, nearly square-framed (sort of a top-heavy

trapezoid shape popular with engineers), gray and metallic, where the arm of his glasses presses against the skin of his temple, and I wonder why his glasses are fitted so tight, why he wouldn't have gotten a better pair, and I remember that he picked those off the rack at the store between the postal boxes pickup station and the ice cream place, and that he picked them because they were the cheapest frames and fully covered by insurance.

His skin is taut, good living, no drinking, little meat, mostly vegetables and rice and fish and a lot of exercise in the garage and the yard and around the house and just generally being a grinder, being the kind of person who sweats because he has to, not for fun, the only real vice a very occasional cigarette snuck in the backyard after I'd gone to bed. I caught him once, not on purpose, I was going to the fridge late one night and saw him sitting there in the backyard, in one of our white plastic lawn chairs, looking up at the sky, and he didn't even try to hide it, really, just put his hand down, but I could see the ribbon of smoke from behind him, rising and breaking up into a cloud by his head, he just looked at me and didn't smile, but didn't give me a face that he would normally give, it was like he'd taken off his father mask for the night and, for once, for just this moment, wasn't going to put it back on, was going to let me see him without it, and I saw a face I didn't recognize, crushed, drained, I saw defeat, I saw even a kind of resignation. But that isn't how he looks now.

The director pulls up in a Town Car. We're standing there, a little off the rubber, between the pitcher's mound and second base. My father is so nervous it almost looks like he wants me, a senior, a kid, a B student in physics, wants me to talk for him. The director is a balding man with a severe set of eye sockets and a neatly knotted tie, a big

knot, the kind neither my father nor I ever seemed to be able to do, wide and dimpled and symmetrical. His shirt has cuffs that are a different color from the rest of the shirt, except for the collar. My father's shirt is buttoned up, he doesn't have a pocket protector, but he has his shirt tucked into brown slacks one-eighth of an inch too short for his five-foot, four-inch frame, he looks neat and competent and like a perfect engineer. The director extends his hand to my father, nods at me politely, and then, to my surprise, shakes my hand as well.

“We have some ideas,” he says to my dad. “We have ideas about your idea.” And I realize, uh-oh, before any of it has even started: that's not a good sign. Just the way the man is talking, standing, his tie, his cuff-linked shirtsleeves, his clear, authoritative manner of speaking, the way he manages to treat my father with deference, with respect, while at the same time giving off the impression of doing us a favor, like he is the one who is offering us a chance, because he is. Like we are the bumbling amateurs who have stumbled on a rare coin in a boot in our attic, or had the dumb luck to dig up a Precambrian fossil in our little backyard. All of our plans, our notebooks, our three-ring binders with the college-ruled eight-and-a-half-by-eleven composition paper, all of our one-centimeter-square light green graph paper, every open-ended project, what had it amounted to? Just one success, one partial success. Sure, we are here, this man came to see us, but in the grand scheme of things, we are minor. We are, but for one possible exception, failures. This man has patented world-changing technology, has created whole industries at his desk, in his lab, this man does more real science in a good month than

we've done in almost ten years, has thrown away better ideas than the best we will ever come up with.

“He seems...” Suzy starts, still unsure of what she's thinking, and now watching, with her little pixilated face, as intently as I am.

And what had we done? We had plugged away, scrap by scrap, paper scrap and metal scrap, we had plied our trade, journeymen, not even a trade, we had our little hobby, and now we were a curiosity. That was it. We have still never gotten anything right. We are dreamers who have stuck around long enough to have one semi-interesting dream. This is not going to work out. I know it on some level. This is us, this is us in relation to the world.

If I could draw it, it would look like my father and me very small, world very big, with a barrier between us and the world. We are too slow, too methodical, too square, too plodding. We are naïve. This is how it has always gone with us.

This man, though, this man knows things. He is a gentleman, he makes me feel small, makes my father look small, makes our family seem tiny, in his formality, his politeness, his kindness, even.

He can afford to be kind, he can afford something I have never experienced until now. Something I learned in second period English: *noblesse oblige*. I had thought nothing of it until this moment, the phrase now blood hot in my temples and ears, as if a joke, as if it were all a joke, one big joke on me and my dad for all these years, a joke I wish I'd learned long ago. This director of research, this man on top of the profession, he can afford to take us seriously. He has a kind of practical intelligence, savvy.

My father and I lack resolve, self-confidence, the willingness to impose ourselves on others, on a situation, on a set of circumstances, to step on things, to willfully forget our deficiencies, we are too self-aware to turn off that nagging internal critic, editor, co-author, to suspend our understanding that we are trying to do what we really have no business doing. We aren't like the director. This man is someone for whom the world isn't a mystery. The world is a boulder, but it has levers and he knows when and where and how to apply just the right amount of force, and it moves for him, while my father and I, pushing up against it, don't have any angle, any torque, no grip or traction or leverage.

My father thinks success must be in direct proportion to effort exerted.

He doesn't know where or how to exert the least amount for the most gain, doesn't know where the secret buttons are, the hidden doors, the golden keys.

He thinks that, even if you have a great idea, there have to be trials and tribulations, errors and failures, a dark night of the soul.

My father makes to-do lists, makes plans, makes business plans. This is how he starts, always with a blank sheet of graph paper. He writes things down, he crosses them out, he goes back and starts again.

The world has always felt just out of his reach.

And yet my father will never stop trying.

Could this be the time? Is this the day that it happens?

My father is talking slowly.

The director asks him questions, looking at the machine, standing off to a distance, trying to study it while listening to my dad. I can't tell what he's thinking, it could be that he can already see some kind of problem, some wires crossed, misplaced, some fundamental flaw in its architecture.

Or maybe he's just listening to my dad talk slowly, too slow, that's always been a problem for him, I've even tried to hint at it, and the way the director is looking at my dad, a little quizzically, a bit puzzled, patiently but like that patience will not last forever, it just seems impossible that we will actually pull this off.

And yet, there he is, he's still asking questions and my dad is answering them and the director is nodding, and even smiling, even squinting his eyes trying to visualize something my father is saying to him, and somehow, even though I already know what is going to happen, I can't help feeling excited, I can see that my dad is feeling the same thing, too. If a lifetime in the end is remembered for a handful of days, this is one of them.

This is a day when my father is everything he has always wanted to be.

Everything I have always wanted him to be.

Everything he normally isn't.

But maybe this is who he really is.

As I watch my father talk about his project, our project, I stop recognizing him. He is saying the right things in the right way and now I am starting to feel ashamed for ever doubting him, for the way I had ducked my head at the director when he shook my hand in a gesture of unconscious, preemptive apology for taking up the man's time,

which we presumably did not deserve. I feel ashamed of it, of myself, ashamed for all the head ducking I've done in my life, literal and otherwise, for the way I go through life apologizing for my father, for myself, for our family. I feel angry at myself for not having realized all this years ago, for all the wasted opportunities, avenues that I had looked down wistfully thinking, *If only we were more prepared, more savvy, if only we had our acts together. If only we weren't ourselves, could somehow be better versions of our selves.* I am angry at myself, realizing how many hundreds or thousands of instances in which my father must have looked at me, his son, looked in my eyes to see if I believed in him, if I had any more optimism than he did, if I saw the world just as he did, or if instead he had imparted his sadness and feeling of incompleteness on me. I have let him down. I have let him down countless times. I am seventeen years old, and even then I know that seventeen years old is not very old, but it is old enough to have disappointed him, old enough to have been able to help him, and then chosen not to, it is old enough to be a coward, to have not protected him when you could have, even should have. Seventeen years old is not old, but it is old enough to have hurt your father.

And now, here I am, feeling proud, feeling guilty about feeling proud, feeling stupid about feeling guilty about feeling proud because I should be in the moment, trying to help him, instead of wallowing in my own guilt over my belated and unearned and undeserved pride. My father explains his theory. He is doing it, he is pulling it off. I am his son. This man has asked to come see us, not the other way around, and we are worth his time.

“The acquisition of tensed information,” my father explains, to both of us listening, “that is the key here. How do we find out about information at a time other than our present? This was the key insight I had in my laboratory one night, while looking at my son working on the bench test.”

The director breaks in to ask a question. “What does any of this have to do with time travel?”

“A good question,” my father counters, sounding uncharacteristically polished. The director is even more hooked. My father explains that humans, because of our memories, are good at perceiving intervals of time. That we all have some intuitive understanding of scope and scale and size and units and structure and sequence, an innate ability to organize and process information about such intervals.

“The key question of time travel,” my father says, “is this: How do we know what it means to perceive an event as presently occurring, rather than as a memory of a past event? How can we tell present from past? And how do we move the infinitesimal window of the present through the viewfinder at such a constant rate? Why can we see a faraway snow-tipped mountain range, or a jet taking off, or the moon, or the sun, or stars, and not an event that took place a moment ago, let alone a month ago, a year, thirty-three years ago?”

The director is nodding and smiling and my father is smiling a little and I’m allowing myself a smile.

“Maybe it’s because we need to be able to do so, for our survival. For food-gathering purposes, for outrunning the sabertoothed tiger, for jumping across jagged

rocks in a rushing river, to care for our crying infant, we need to focus, we need to know what is going on now. That is to say, our physical ability to understand time has been honed by evolutionary pressures to select for traits useful for survival, in all aspects, and time perception is no exception or special case or even magical or mysterious case.”

My father looks at me and smiles when he says this next part. “Which is where I started to have hope. If there is no absolute logical reason why we could not experience the past just like we experience the present, perhaps we can untrain, or perhaps retrain, ourselves to have such a capacity. Maybe some lobe in our brains, buried in a fold given over to language or calculation of differential survival rates or logic, maybe within that brain structure lies the long-dormant (for our species at least) ability to experience time in a different way.”

The director here raises his eyebrows at the suggestion that my father seems to be making: time travel is not a technology built outside, with titanium and beryllium and argon and xenon and seaborgium, but rather it is a mental ability that can be cultivated.

“We have evolved to have current, temporally proximal beliefs about the world,” my dad says, “which is to say local-scale accurate beliefs, but perhaps in this case, local-scale accuracy is not the only goal worthy of obtaining. We perceive the present, but we remember the past. The converse is not possible. We obviously cannot remember the present. Or can we? Déjà vu. What does that feel like? It is the oddest experience, one everyone has had, one that is commonly described as a feeling of certainty that one has experienced just this exact experience before. Which in itself is quite strange, the idea that one could have an identical experience, down to the last detail, down to the internal

qualia, the exact interior frame of mind, emotions, a frame of consciousness duplicated with startling exactitude, that would be unsettling enough. And yet it's stranger than that."

And I know what he means. I'm standing here, on this baseball field. I have done this before, but not exactly.

"We experience the present and remember the past," Dad continues. "We can't remember the present, except what is déjà vu but a memory of the present? And if we can remember the present, why can't we experience the past? What kind of machine is this? This machine, what my son and I have built, this is a perception engine, and it works in your mind as much as anywhere else."

Suzu says she's figured it out, what that look is that my father has, and I tell her to shut up, because truly today for once in all of our days, it is going great, just great, really great, and for a brief moment at the top of the arc, we weigh nothing and it seems like maybe the arc wasn't an arc after all, but a straight shot, up to where we have been looking, not aiming, afraid to even admit our aim could ever be so high, but looking, secretly, at a different trajectory of life, and in that moment I think maybe we might have escaped the pull of our lives, of the space-time field, of the forces of physics, the path and shape and limitations, the constraints, invisible, intangible, but more real than anything, the parabolic track we are on, the equation floating next to our function, I think maybe my father has done it, and then slowly, over days and weeks and months, slowly over a year, and also all at once, in that hot moment at the park on the grass with the day

brightening and the air heating up, I begin to realize that this feeling is a familiar one, one I have felt before.

“He looks like he already knows it won’t work,” Suzy says, finally, just at the moment I see it, in his face, see what she’s talking about, see that it’s not the freedom of escape I am feeling, rather it’s the weightlessness that is, in fact, the telltale sign of inescapability, that brief instant being the necessary top, the maximum, the defining characteristic of an arc, that weightlessness is really the last second, tenth of a second, the last few milliseconds we will enjoy as we start to come down.

Failure is easy to measure. Failure is an event.

Harder to measure is insignificance. A nonevent. Insignificance creeps, it dawns, it gives you hope, then delusion, then one day, when you’re not looking, it’s there, at your front door, on your desk, in the mirror, or not, not any of that, it’s the lack of all that. One day, when you are looking, it’s not looking, no one is. You lie in your bed and realize that if you don’t get out of bed and into the world today, it is very likely no one will even notice.

Hitting the peak of your life’s trajectory is not the painful part. The painful day comes earlier, comes before things start going downhill, comes when things are still good, still pretty good, still just fine. It comes when you think you are still on your way up, but you can feel that the velocity isn’t there anymore. It’s the best day of your life. And it’s not as high as you thought it was going to be.

The worst part of the drive back from the park was not that we didn't talk, that would have been okay, that would have been better than what happened, which was my father pretending to be happy. He turned on the radio, he asked what song I wanted to listen to, he asked me about the song on the radio, he even tried, and this is the worst part, to sing along. I knew what was happening, but he kept it up for long enough and was singing and smiling all crazy enough that I wondered if he'd burst some pipe in his head, if the pressure and force of the crushing blow had damaged his own emotional machinery.

There's my dad, pretending to be okay, pretending he isn't reeling, hasn't just had the wind and life and fight knocked out of him, hasn't just had something inside of him, the last bit of anything delicate inside, smashed into a couple hundred tiny pieces.

I see myself staring straight ahead at the road, trying hard not to look over at my father, already replaying the events in my head.

"So," the director had said, "only one thing left to do. Fire it up."

My dad and I look at each other. As agreed, he's the one to get in. He takes off his suit jacket, hands it to me, and I lay it over my arm, hoping to impart some ceremony to the moment. My father has on short sleeves under his jacket, and if the director thinks it odd, he doesn't show it. Dad looks small in there, his shoulders a little slumped. He nods and I close the hatch.

I am watching my past-self, thinking, *We should have stayed in our garage.*

I am watching my past-self think that and I am thinking it myself now. Why couldn't we have just stayed in there, in our laboratory, our space? We should have

stayed where we were safe. Maybe things would have been different, maybe the thing would have worked, the piece of junk, maybe I wouldn't have had to watch my father sweat and strain and stand there awkwardly, trying everything for what is probably eight, ten minutes but feels like my entire life.

It is, it was, it has been my entire life, my father's life, too, those few eternal unending merciless minutes dragging and stretching on in silence, the director ever the gentleman, unwaveringly polite, which makes it worse, polite until the end, the etiquette of a situation like this unclear to me and to him.

As we stand there for the awful duration of this stretch of time on what was supposed to have been the best, brightest-shining hour of my father's life, through the first utterance of "Let me try this," "It must be that," "Simple fix," to the, "Heh heh, that's funny, this never happens in our lab."

Then he asks me, "Hey son, do you remember if I checked the rear capacitor?" a stalling tactic, a misdirection. I suddenly realize then how good a man my father was and is, how, even in his worst moment, he would never, ever, in a million years blame me for something, even if it was my fault, not like this, not in front of this stranger, even if it was my fault, and who knows, it probably was, I wasn't half the scientist my father is or was. I realize my father would have never even thought about trying to pin it on me, though he could have, it would have been easy enough, and I wish I could freeze time right then and there forever, wish I could hold that knowledge forever, the realization that, even in the gut-turningly horrible awkwardness of that situation, in the most desperate minute of this hour of his greatest embarrassment. Even though he could be absent and fuzzy and un-

locatable and clench his jaw at me and use silence as a form of cruelty to me and my mother, despite all of that, my father would always protect me against the world, would always stand between the world and me, would always be a buffer, a protective covering, a box for me to hide in.

And then finally comes the last stage, we can almost go home now, in the hot car and then the cold garage and the even colder house, can almost go back into our box and hide, but not before a couple more minutes of head-scratching, my father actually standing there scratching his head with his hand, his small hand, strong and with well-defined veins, but still small, how the smallness of his hand, of his entire height just hit me, the image of him looking like an immigrant, like a bewildered new graduate student in front of the eminent professor, a small man with a small hand in a large foreign country, not so much scratching his head as just pushing his hand up against it, the anguished embarrassment made that much worse by all of his grandstanding theoretical monologue that preceded it.

And worst of all, because he has just finished explaining how his machine is an idea, is a device of the mind, this failing not being just a fluke, not just a piece of bad mechanical luck, but an actual failure of his own mind, his own concept.

The silence is just unbearable now, and to make things worse, now kids are starting to appear at the edges of the diamond, parents pulling up with coolers, bags of bats, the slapping of mitts, the *thwock* of warm-up catch along the first base line, people a little curious about what's going on, feeling the eyes on us.

A father and son run out toward right field, the dad with a ball and glove and the boy with his slightly undersized bat, not the standard Little League aluminum bat that the other kids have, that sends a ringing noise through the air, but a wooden bat, a Louisville Slugger tee-ball bat.

I see him now, holding that bat, trotting out along the chalk line behind his dad, a jaunty step, he's proud of his dad, who looks like a real athlete, like he could have played two sports in college, he's looking around to see if the other kids are looking at him, but he's also a kid and he's taking it in, looking at the grass, squinting up at the sun, at the sky, stunned by the fullness of the day. Trying to absorb it all, hoping maybe time will stop right this instant, forever, and never start again. That this will be it, right here, on this field, that's all.

I see myself at seventeen, already feeling nostalgia for being a kid his age, feeling the weight of all the bright Saturdays I spent in the dank garage instead of in this bath of sunlight and heat and blue and green, embarrassed for how little I had lived, how little my father had lived, wondering if it was something I would pass on to my son.

This was the big day for my dad and I had woken up that morning amazed at the rarity of a day like today, when we might come home champs, when we (my dad, me, our family) might get a win for once, but now, standing here looking at all of this, I remember how stupid I felt as I realized that for most of these kids, a day like this happened every weekend, that none of these kids thought of life that way, as a series of mostly bumper days with the occasional chance at getting a win against life.

Who thinks that way?

I was seventeen.

Who thinks that way at seventeen?

They set up about fifty feet away from each other, two endpoints of a little father-son axis, and the dad began lobbing slow overhand pitches to his son, and the boy would swing at them, hitting about one out of every six or seven, weak little grounders that dribbled back to his dad, that his dad would run up to and field as if they were hard hit, which made his son feel a little better, but also a lot worse. The kid was small, and I had been a small kid, and I remember what it was like. He looked like he was getting frustrated. He didn't have any bat speed, even for a kid his age. The bat was probably about three ounces too heavy. But then, after about three dozen pitches and four or five dinky glancing hits, the kid got ahold of one. The sound it made. It was a perfect sound. *Crack*. Clean off the sweet spot. Even as he was hitting it, I don't think he believed it was happening. I remember thinking how much I wanted that to be my father-son axis, how bad I wanted to be the one hitting that ball.

The kid's dad whipped his head around, as did all of the other kids, and their dads, and even the director. Everyone stopped and turned and watched the ball fly over his dad's head and then over the grass of the adjoining field, and then over the infield, and land, right on home plate of the other diamond. The kid had arms like wet noodles, didn't even really have shoulders yet. It had to have been 250 feet. I saw it happen and I'm seeing it again now and I still don't believe it happened.

The only person who hadn't watched it was my dad.

I didn't know that then, but now, I see that.

He just stands there, looking at our sad prototype, holding a vacuum tube in one hand and his other hand on his head, and looking like he knows it just slipped away.

The director turns back from watching the kid, which was just the break he needed to stop my dad's awkward fumbling with the machine.

There was a mumbled half apology about needing to get back to the office for a meeting, and a promise of perhaps continuing this at a later date which I now see as a courteous refusal of the director to acknowledge what had happened

There wouldn't be another chance and we were heading into unknown territory.

The fallout started the next morning. It must have taken a night for it to process, a few hours spent alone, stewing over it, replaying the memory over and over in his head, asking what if.

It must have taken that time for the damage to register on his ego, on his shell, on his sense of purpose and navigation, on his physical body, even. He didn't get out of bed until ten, which was very late for him, about four and a half hours late for a Sunday morning, and when I saw him he looked sore, like he'd aged years in one night.

My mother went to church early and I was left in the house to wonder when he would get up and what it would be like when he did.

He went into the bathroom and after a long shower and a long period of silence before and after, he emerged from there and walked into the kitchen just after noon. He didn't look at me, didn't ask where Mom was.

We sat and ate oatmeal that she had cooked and left on the stove. He heated his up and then picked at them looking mildly repulsed.

I asked him if he wanted me to make him a sandwich. He didn't answer. After he ate, he put his plate in the sink and I heard him go down into the garage and I was thinking, just for a second, what if, and I was about to go join him when I heard the garage open and his car rumble out the driveway.

He didn't come back until after I'd gone to sleep that night, and the next day, he went to work and we never talked about that day again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Suzy makes a face at me I haven't seen before.

"What is that?" I say.

"I don't know. Your dad, I don't know."

"More complicated than I remember. Whatever. Let's keep moving."

"What are you even going to say? If you find him, what will you say?"

After the day at the park, the drifting got worse. It had started years earlier, when I was in seventh grade, or maybe it was the summer before seventh grade, at first just a few seconds at a time, hard to say if my mother even noticed, but before long it was impossible not to notice. By the time I entered high school, my father was regularly drifting five minutes into the past, and when he did that, none of us could talk to him. Well, we could, but he'd never hear us. He would say things to us, transmit the words into the viscous medium of our kitchen, and we wouldn't get the message right away, it took a while for the words and sound to reach us through the light and air thick with delay, with silence and tension, the air resistant to communication and understanding. And then we would answer, but he was already gone, had already moved on, out, away from us. We would try to answer, make meaning from these conversations, these bits of

days, these bits of daily life being all we had by then, my mother and I, all we had left with him. We were losing him.

His invention may have been a failure, but his idea wasn't. As it turned out, and I wouldn't find this out until much later, there were twin projects. The director of the institute had already gone to visit another inventor, not far from the city, actually about half an hour away on Long Island, where sometimes my mom and I would go have a picnic if my dad was working on the weekend. The houses there were large, and they had mailboxes that resembled the houses with roofs and little doors. And the houses had driveways were circular, for receiving guests, I guess, and there was a small park that overlooked the ocean, and a swing set and even a cast-iron jungle gym, a set of bent metal rods, curved perfectly and painted white and blue.

This other inventor had had a very similar idea to my father's, the differences being mostly in execution, and the only real difference being that, on the day of his visit, his idea worked.

That day in the park was my father's chance, our chance to be a part of it, but the director already had seen that the idea could work and didn't need to find a second diamond in the rough. That part of it would have hurt my father, I know, to know that it was possible for someone like him, a talented amateur, out in the sticks, a moonlighting cubicle worker, a wage-earner-by-day, inventor-by-night, to make it. It would have killed him to know that someone had done it, that all his work had been correct—all the work that he had, a week after that day in the park, dumped in the trash. All the notebooks, in

pieces, scattered and scribbled over hundreds of pages, on scraps, on Post-it notes, on index cards, in margins of books, on backs of envelopes taped and folded and crumpled and uncrumpled and crumpled again. Thrown away.

It would have killed him to know that it hadn't been impossible, our dream, but that we got one chance only, just once in a lifetime, and we had lost it.

And with that, our idea, our prototype was the one lost to history. My father would forever be the guy who did not get the credit, the one swallowed up, enveloped by obscurity, swept away and lost in time.

If I could tell him just one thing, wherever he is, pass him one message, it would be this: He *had* something.

Something to his thoughts, his ideas, the papers in his notebooks, the work we did in the garage. Beyond just a purity to his ideas, a sincerity to his belief, a genuine curiosity, a determination that, if he just sat there long enough, thought hard enough, failed enough times, he'd find a way in.

His idea was good enough, would have been good enough for the director, for the world, good enough to be a serious contribution to the field of science, good enough for me, but I don't know where he is, and I have never been able to tell him this.

The weeks passed and the months passed. The prototype sat in the garage. He'd moved it to the corner after we got back that afternoon, and covered it with a sheet. He and my mother started to fight more. My father continued to do his own research, on

questions that got more and more specialized, and continued to publish his results in journals with titles more and more obscure. No one noticed anyway.

That was the worst part: he understood that something was happening, that he was missing the big picture, even as he couldn't grasp exactly what it was or how or why.

By then, I could already see him the way others did, I could switch between modes of viewing, sometimes as his son, other times not as his son but instead as someone looking at a prideful, intelligent, increasingly self-isolated man. A man drifting slowly into the past.

Then one day, he is back.

It is a few days after my eighteenth birthday.

I hear him in the garage for hours, and into the night, and then every day for six weeks, the testing getting louder and louder. He is working on something else. Not a time machine. Something darker, more powerful.

He never asks me to come down there, never hints at what he is doing, although I know now that he was building the machine that would take him to that church, and ultimately to wherever he is now.

In the garage, just where we had once built something together, now he is alone, building a different kind of box, one that will carry him away from us, from here, from this life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Time travel was supposed to be fun, it was supposed to be about going to places and having a bunch of adventures. Not hovering over scenes from your own life as a detached observer. Not just lurching around from moment to random moment, and never even learning about those moments.

Suzy's crying again.

"Well that was a bummer," I say.

"I thought we were supposed to feel better after that," she says. "Learn something about him."

"I did," I say. "I understand that he left us. I understand about how much he cared for us, and it wasn't that much apparently."

I ask Suzy what would it even mean? To *find* my father at this point, what would that mean?

Eye contact, discomfort, silence, at least one true thing said, at least one false thing said, at least one overly dramatic and egregiously, recklessly hurtful thing said, and some sort of closed boundary, partial or full, on the emotional asymptote toward parabolic melancholy.

Plus, the odds of such a finding occurring are approximately one time per seventy-eight point three years, subjectively experienced. A life is about twenty-five thousand days, and a finding occurs about once every twenty-five thousand days.

In other words, once in a lifetime.

“He could be anywhere in time,” I say, “And I don’t need to tell you how much time there is.”

“Perhaps,” Suzy says, “he’s traveled to an important moment. Some moment important to just him? Like, maybe there’s a single day, a single conversation, a single moment in his life that you need to find.”

“Unlikely.”

“Well, it’s not like you’ve got a lot of options, bub.”

She’s right. We’re now we’re faced with a new problem: we are running out of book. Which is to say, we’re running out of fuel. This loop has a preset length. It already happened, and it happened the way it happened, and any moment now, I’m going to find myself going back to Hangar 35X to get myself shot in the stomach.

“That’s it,” Suzy says.

I say, “What’s it?”

“When you shot yourself in the stomach, you were trying to tell yourself something.”

It’s all in the book. The book is the answer.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Suzy opens the panel and the TOAD pops out, and I see on the display that the narrative is still tracking, has been all along. Through the ChronoLOGIC™ principle of past tense/memory equivalence, we've been generating the narration of the text by traveling through these memories.

“Okay, hmmm,” I say. “It’s still just a book.”

Or maybe it’s not. I pull the book out of its encasement.

I get the urge to flip ahead again, but I stop myself (I learned that lesson the hard way). But, suddenly, there’s no need to flip ahead. The answer is right here:

Open the box.

“What box?” I say.

Then Bruce sighs and bites at his left haunch. I pat his head to get him to stop, then notice that he’s not biting his haunch, he’s gnawing on the box my mom gave me.

“Bruce, you’re a genius,” Suzy says. I don’t disagree.

The box has no seams or folds, was seemingly wrapped by some sort of magical elf, so I have to use a letter opener to stab at it a few times before getting a corner to tear

off and because the paper keeps tearing off in bits, it's slow going at first, but then, as I'm unwrapping it, the shape and size and font of the partially uncovered lettering starts to remind me of something from a long time ago, and at the point I realize what that is, I am, for a moment, ten years old again, and my nine-year-old heart starts pounding like a jackhammer in my thirty-year-old body.

There is just enough room in here for me to lay out all the items from the kit, as best I can, on the flat surface of Suzy's main console.

The lettering on the box top is just how I imagined it looked from the ad in the back of the comic book, slightly fuzzy red-orange block letters, all-caps, blazoned across the top in a sans serif font:

SPACE-ADVENTURER

SURVIVAL KIT

I set the box top off to the side, facing up, and check off the items one by one against the picture on the box. There's the plastic knife and the Space-Adventurer patch, just as I remember, and a map of the alien terrain and a decoder that is a pair of concentric cardboard disks fastened together concentrically, so that the disks can be turned around relative to each other inside their plastic casing such that if the larger circle, with the encrypted letter, is lined up with the smaller circle, with the decoded letter, a secret message can be sent or translated to a fellow Space-Adventurer in the field.

There's also a lot of filler, items that, not surprisingly, weren't advertised, like an eraserless No. 4 pencil (labeled "SPACE PENCIL"), and a protractor (labeled "MOON APPROACH ANGLE TRIGONOMETRIC DEVICE"), and a little notepad with five sheets of paper, which apparently counts as five items toward the total, cheap items that a ten-year-old me would have found half lame and half still-pretty-cool and possibly endowed with some kind of secret technological features just by virtue of their inclusion in the kit.

I count all seventeen items, look at them spread out, separate from one another, just objects lying there. A bit of a letdown from what I'd hoped for, but then again, I am thirty years old. My father was such a practical man, and this kit no doubt seemed silly to him, which makes the fact that he bought it mean that much more to me. Laid out like this, the contents of the kit remind me of times in our garage laboratory workshop, our version of the director's fancy research institute on the hill, our makeshift center for father-son studies filled with dollar items from the plastic bins at the hardware store.

Maybe this is what he wanted me to see. Maybe looking at these items himself, he came to some kind of acceptance himself of why we never made it, the destined-to-fail nature of our little future enterprise. Still, it's hard to believe that he got this kit just so I might someday think back about our work together.

I look inside the empty box and notice something I hadn't seen before. What I had thought was a cardboard structure to hold the packed items in place is really a little box within the box, a secret compartment someone had built into the box.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

I open up the secret compartment to find an eighteenth item.

“What is it?” Suzy asks.

“A diorama.”

It’s a little scene, in three dimensions, a miniature version of our family kitchen. He’d taken care to make it proportionally correct. Not only were the height and length of the room to scale, but the depth as well, and it was that third dimension that brought it to life, made the illusion complete. The whole kitchen could fit in the palm of my hand, but it seemed that no important detail was missing.

For dinner plates he’d used circles of paper, collected from inside the three-hole punch, glued onto tiny pieces of card stock and then affixed to the miniature kitchen table. There was a miniature refrigerator, and even a miniature calendar, a word-of-the-day calendar with a new science term each day. He hadn’t recreated the word of the day, which would have been too small to read, but he had made a little date, December 30. I remember the year we had that calendar I was in fifth grade, which was 1999.

He hadn’t made people—too difficult—and maybe that was the point. We weren’t there anymore, in the room where we spent all those nights, quiet, tense dinners, the occasional good nights when my parents would tease each other, which always made me

feel awkward, and weird, the scene of so many of their epic screaming matches. The kitchen is empty, had been for some time.

On the bottom, he had written in thick black letters, “Thank you.”

“Look,” Suzy says. “The clock.”

Inside the miniature kitchen, my father had built a tiny replica of the blue circular clock that hung above the door to the backyard. It had the standard black arrows pointing to hours and minutes and a thin red needle for the second hand just like the one we had at home. At that moment, in the diorama kitchen, the time was seven fourteen and about twenty seconds.

The calendar. The clock. I pause.

“Suzy,” I say, just starting to feel it, some kind of answer, like a cracked egg, slowly spreading on the top of my head and dripping down all sides of my face. Is this why I’m in the loop? Was it a coincidence that I spent almost a decade drifting with no clock, and the very next day after reentering the world, I got trapped in a time loop? Was it a coincidence that this present from my father, in the form of a miniature kitchen scene, was delivered to me on that very same day?

“Suzy,” I say again.

“I get it,” she says.

How many times have I gone around this loop, refusing to move forward? How much of my life have I spent cycling through these events, trying to learn from them, attempting to decipher the meaning of this tableau in front of me, this cross section of our kitchen in that house, this little model of this room in our home, the site of all of those

good times and not-so-good times. What is this called, what I am doing, to myself, to my life, this wallowing, this pondering, this rolling over and over in the same places of my memory, wearing them thin, wearing them out? Why don't I ever learn? Why don't I ever do anything different?

Do I always open the package too late?

Is the loop always the same?

Will I ever figure it out in time, early enough to actually do something about it?

Of course I do. Of course it is. Of course I won't.

“We have to go there. Now.”

I say this to Suzy, trying to sound as authoritative as I can, but I already know the answers to my questions, already know what she's going to tell me.

“I wish we could,” she says, sounding really bummed, “but the fact is, we didn't.”

I look up from the diorama and see what she means. We're circling over the present moment in Hangar 35X, banking our descent into eleven forty-seven a.m., where another me, earlier-me, is waiting his turn to do this, to do all of this, all over again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

When it happens, this is what happens: I shoot myself.

He's waiting for me. Down there. The man who is going to kill me. The man I once was.

I know it happens, already happened to me, and yet, somehow, I have to stop it. I know, I know, I can't. But it's different when it's happening to you.

We're in the approach.

Suzy arranges her pixels into a sad-faced clock.

00:01:00.

I have one minute left.

Feels like a month, maybe, but if you told me it was less, I'd believe you, and if you told me it was more, I would believe that, too.

I ask Suzy to calculate the diameter of our path.

"I'm sorry?" she says, and I say I'm sorry, too, for everything and for not being better to her and all that good stuff. The fact that I'm in my last minute of life is making me mushy.

"No," she says. "Not I'm sorry like I'm always sorry. I'm sorry as in I don't understand your question."

“Let me rephrase that,” I say. “Objectively speaking, how long were we in the loop?”

“I’m afraid I still don’t know what you mean.”

Suzy makes a confused-face clock.

00:00:40.

“What is your problem?” I say. “It’s a simple question. How long has it been since we left?”

“The answer to the question of how long it has been since we left,” she says, “is that we haven’t left yet.”

“Oh my God,” I say. “You’re right.”

“You shot yourself, and then you jumped into the machine at eleven forty-seven a.m. that day. From there, you tried to skip ahead, go into the future, but when you did that, you encountered nothingness. There was no future. You hadn’t been there yet. And you still haven’t. Instead, you got shunted off into that church, which is completely outside of time, and then your zombie mom gave you the creeps and you spazzed out.”

“I didn’t spaz out.”

“You did, and then you got shuttled back into time, into the father-son memory axis. Which is the past. Which means.”

“Which means.”

“Which means.”

“Which means what?”

“Sorry, I had too many programs running. Which means that, from the point in time at which you shot yourself, you haven’t actually ever moved forward. Not one second. Not one moment.”

Holy crap. She’s right again.

“But I’ve aged, haven’t I? Haven’t I? Don’t I have some way of proving it? Five o’clock shadow?” I inspect my face in the mirror.

“Have you eaten anything since jumping in here?” I think about this for a second. “I guess not,” I say. “But wait, aha. I’ve talked to people!”

“Yeah? So?”

“So talking takes time.”

“Who have you talked to?”

“My zombie mom.”

“Not a real person. Also, exists on a plane outside of temporal existence.”

“Shuttle guy.”

“Doesn’t exist in time.”

“My dad.”

“Those were memories. Not events. Also, that’s the past. We’re trying to figure out if you’ve moved at all into the future.”

Right. Hmm.

“I’ve been jabbering away with you.”

“I’m a computer program. We talk fast. Plus, more important, you talked to me inside this TM-Thirty-one. Which we’ve already established never moved forward in time after eleven forty-seven.”

“I talked to Keith.”

“Also a computer program. And again, you talked to him while inside this box.”

“It seems you’ve got an answer for everything.”

“It seems I do,” she says, sounding a little sad about it, although I can’t figure out why just yet.

“Aha,” I say. “But what about the book?”

“You mean the magical book that you somehow read and write and it transcribes what you say and think and read all at the same time, seamlessly switching among modes? The book that mysteriously records the output of your consciousness on a real-time basis? That book?”

“Well, when you say it like that, it does sound kind of out there.”

“I’m not saying it doesn’t exist. It does. I’m just saying, what am I saying? Oh yeah, sorry, I’m a little scatterbrained this morning. Here, let me prove it to you. Open the book up now.”

I open it. To this page. The text says, as Suzy says:

“See that? See how the text just coincidentally happens to thematically match what we’re talking about now? Don’t you think that’s weird? The book, it’s not real. It’s an impossible object and yet, there it is: the object. The book. Here it is. Here you are. They are both perfectly valid ideas, necessary, even, to solve the problem your human

brain has to solve: how to determine which events occur in what order? How to organize the data of the world into a sequence that appeals to your intuitions about causality? How to order the thin slices of your life so that they appear to mean something? You're looking out a window, a little porthole in fact, just like the one on the side of this time machine you're in, and out your window you see a little piece of the landscape, and you have to somehow extrapolate from that what the terrain of your life is like. Your brain has to trick itself in order to live in time. Which is great, which is necessary, but the flip side of that is, see how long I've been talking? It's been more than forty seconds, hasn't it? And yet it hasn't."

She makes her face into a clock.

00:00:05.

00:00:04.

It comes down to this: three choices.

Option number one: I could stay in here. I could change the past. All I would have to do is move that shifter up one notch, put this device back into neutral for one extra second, wait until one moment after my designated arrival time. I'd get out and everything would be different. I will have just missed my self. I could, without incident, just slip out of this universe and into the next, just like the girl in Chinatown wanted to do. Escape my life. But that would mean not moving forward. That would mean giving up on my father, leaving him trapped, wherever he is.

Option number two: I can keep on doing things just as I have been, throw this thing into Presently-Indefinite and do nothing for the rest of existence. Nothing would be

easier than to stay the course, this course of minimal action, moving right down the path of least resistance. Would that be so bad?

And then there's the third choice: I could get out of this machine and face what is coming. Instead of just passively allowing the events of my life to continue to happen to me, I could see what it might be like take action.

I have to confront myself.

And it is going to be painful.

It will most likely end in death, for me, and it will not change anything. I can go through the motions of being myself, ceding responsibility for my actions to fate, to my personal historical record, to what I know is already going to happen. My arms and legs will not change in their movements. Nor can I change the path of my body, the words from my lips, not even the focus of my eyes.

What I do have control over is my own intention. In the space between free will and determinism are these imperceptible gaps, the holes and the nodes, the something and nothing that, at once, separate and bind the moments together, my actions together, and it's in these gaps, in these pauses where it all breaks down, in the place where the present moment exists.

This, then, is my choice:

I can allow the events of my life to happen to me.

Or I can take those very same actions and make them my own. I can live in my own present, risk failure, be assured of failure.

From the outside, these two choices would look identical. Would be identical, in fact. Either way, my life will turn out the same. Either way, there will come a time when I will lose everything. The difference is, I can choose to do that, I can choose to live that way, to live on purpose, live with intention.

00:00:03.

00:00:02.

“I had it backward,” I say.

Suzy lets out a confirmatory beep. Very official-sounding. And then she makes a blue kind of face at me.

“Yeah.” She sighs.

“This whole time I’d thought that my father was the key to my escape from the loop. That he would save me, he would be the answer, when in fact, the answer all along was not an answer but a choice. If I want to find him, then I need to leave this loop. If I want to see him again, I have to get out of this box.”

“You realize that you can’t do or say anything different,” she says. “Or else you enter a new timeline. You have to do what you have to do.”

“I know.”

“You’re going to get shot in the stomach,” she reminds me.

“I know.”

Now she makes her pixels into a lovely and soft and slightly knowing face. Part sad, and part I-thought-this-day-would-never-come. It’s about time, she seems to be saying. It’s a side of Suzy I’ve never seen before, and for a moment I understand that

there are parts to Suzy I've never activated, modules I've never engaged, questions I've never asked and answers I therefore have not received. I never even knew how to use her correctly. I wasted her capabilities.

“So, well, uh, yeah, I don't know how to say this—” I manage to get that far before Suzy starts to lose it. I've said it before and I'll say it again. You haven't experienced awkwardness until you've seen a three-million-dollar piece of software cry.

I should have been nicer to her. I was pretty nice, though. Nice. What is that? Nice. That's just not enough. I should have taken care of her. I should have taken better care of everyone, of my mom, my dad, my self, even Lawrence. Even lost girls in Chinatown.

Suzy has been more than the operating system for my recreational device. She has been, for all these years, my brain, my memory, running all of life's functions for me. Kept me alive. Like a better half. Like the better part of me. She took care of me. Unconditionally. Now I get it. She was, in her own way, The Woman I Never Married, the woman waiting for me if I'd been good enough to deserve her. She was my conscience, she kept me honest about what I was doing in here, or not doing in here.

“I've got to go,” I say.

“I understand. I'm happy for you.”

“You know,” I start to say.

“Yes?” she says, with an eagerness that, for once, she doesn't bother to mask with any kind of simulated emotion face.

“Oh God, what am I trying to say? I, uh.”

“Don’t say it,” she says.

“Okay I won’t.”

“Yeah, don’t.”

“I won’t.”

“Probably a good idea.”

“Please say it. Wait, don’t.”

“Okay fine, I’ll say it. There was something, wasn’t there? Between us?”

“Yeah,” Suzy says. “Something.”

It’s silent for a moment.

“Though I have to tell you,” she says, “I do have a user-input-based dynamic feedback loop personality generation system.”

“So what you’re saying is I’ve been having a relationship with myself.”

“To some extent, yes.”

“Gross.”

“In any event, it’s not like it could have ever, you know, worked,” Suzy says. “I don’t have a module for this emotion. Whatever it is.”

“Neither do I. Whatever it is.”

“Yeah. I know,” she says, and winks at me.

I want to hug her or kiss the screen or run my hands through her deep, rich, pixilated hair, or something, but pretty much every option seems completely ridiculous. Bruce sighs at the two of us, like, *Oh, get a room*, and we snap out of it.

“Well, I guess I’ll power down now. Save energy for the approach,” Suzy says, but really it’s just to give me a moment alone, a brief interval of quiet to consider what’s about to happen to me.

Suzy closes her eyes, then shuts herself down, a ghostly afterburn lingering for a bit, a transient image of her face persisting there. Her pixels have, to a small degree, permanently lost their ability to return to their relaxed state, leaving, frozen into the screen, a kind of history, a sum total of her expressions fixed into a retained outline, a tracing, an integral, the melancholy algorithm of her soul averaged and captured and recorded as a function of time.

And now I’m alone in this thing.

00:00:01.

This has been the longest forty seconds of my life.

We’re in the final approach. The RTV lowers itself into the present moment, which starts to come into view. Through the porthole, I can see my past-self running toward me, holding his dog under one arm, and a familiar-looking brown-paper-wrapped parcel in the other.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

I get out of the time machine.

I'm reminded of the toll-free number I used to call as a kid. I'd call it over and over, trying to set my watch to the minute, exactly, right on the dot, but really, I think I just liked the sound of that prerecorded voice, the lady in the phone, her careful pronunciation of each syllable.

At the tone, the time will be e-le-ven for-ty se-ven and ze-ro seconds.

How can I change the past? I can't. He's got the gun pointed at my stomach. He looks scared. I don't blame him. I remember being in his shoes, some time ago, a moment ago, I recall what it was like to stare at the future, so full of terror, so incomprehensible, so strange, even when it looks just like you thought it would. Maybe especially so.

His finger is on the trigger, and the trigger is moving ever so slightly backward. How do you convince someone to change, to stop being afraid of himself? How do you convince yourself not to be so scared all the time?

We're both standing here, the same guy on opposite ends of a moment, feeling the same thing about each other, a mixture of self-loathing and self-wonder. All of it comes down to this, the most simple of all simple situations. The story of a man trying to figure out what he knows, teetering on the edge of yes or no. Is he friend or foe, this strange

person in front of me, only, in this case, both sides, they all happen to be the same person, and that person is me, and the answer, in all cases, appears to be foe.

I am my own most dangerous enemy.

I know what he's thinking. He's thinking about his training, which says to run, and his instinct, which says to kill, and I know what is going through his head, know that his brain is trying to get him to just slow the hell down and get a handle on all this craziness. I can see the look he's got in his eye, like *Who is this guy? What does he want?* I can see how he is looking right at me, just like I looked at my own future-self when I went through this. He's looking and feeling, and what he's feeling is the involuntary shudder, the creeping gooseflesh of dread that comes only at a moment of real self-recognition, self-confrontation, comes only with the genuine possibility of self-annihilation.

He's looking, but not seeing, and in between the two, there it is, a gap, and in that gap is my only chance, the only possible margin in which I can change that which cannot be changed.

I have to get him to see, see what he's looking at, see me, himself, both of us, see what I'm seeing, which is what he's seeing as well. If only we could both see from the other's perspective, as well as our own, at the same time.

If we could do that, then we would have it all, the past and the future, fused, combined into one perspective, we would see the present moment, how it divides us, like mirror images.

If instead of looking forward or back, we could do the opposite, if we could see from the outside looking in, from all sides, if we could only look inward, into the black box of Right Now, if I could get him to do that, he would understand, he would know what I know, which is that it's not necessarily going to be okay, in fact, it probably won't.

If I can convince him to do that, then he would know what I know, and then I would have what he has, which is the freedom to act, the chance to do something different, not just continue on in this awful time loop. All of which is just dandy and self-affirming, except that none of it solves the problem, which is that I am still the asshole who shot myself the first time around, which is to say, I'll always be the asshole who shoots myself, or to put it another way, he's about to shoot me and there's nothing I can do about it because there's nothing I did do about it.

"It's all in the book," I say.

We're two sides of an infinitesimally thin coin. Slice the coin thinner and thinner, and we get closer and closer to each other. We can slice it arbitrarily thin, let the limit of the thickness approach zero. Slice it until there's no one or nothing in between, until we meet at zero. I am the limit of my own past-self as he approaches arbitrarily close to my own future-self. We've lived a whole month in that machine, in an instant, a life of memories. We can live our whole lives at zero. I can come arbitrarily close to shooting myself, and yet never actually do it. I am my own limit, and that limit is the present.

"The book is the answer," I say, finishing my argument, hoping it's enough, knowing I can't say anything else.

The words are still coming out of my mouth, the sound is still in the air, the last syllables hanging out there between us, and for a moment, for the longest second in my life, we're frozen, looking at each other. He's trying to figure out what I know that he doesn't know, and what I know is that I don't know anything. I don't know anything he doesn't already know. It's all in there, inside him, waiting to be remembered. Nothing has changed since I got into that machine, an instant ago. I have visited memories, I have explored what never was but should have been, I have gone in a loop, but that loop, like the book, is just another way of expressing the present moment. The loop is a string, looped around and back through, and then drawn tight, into a knot, into a single point, the knot of the present moment. It collapses onto itself, like the present, which only appears when you think about it, like the text of the book. I can't change the past, but I can change the present. How can I convince him of this without actually saying it, only thinking it, only knowing it? But now I see the two of us moving closer and closer, and I see that at the moment I understand it, he does, too, we're both on the verge of it, and so by the time I finish my sentence, he sees, and I see. He knows and I know and he knows I know, and I know he knows.

I reach out and put my hand on the barrel. He lowers the gun.

I exhale in relief. It's over.

Then: pain.

Because, well, there's no getting around it. I shot myself the first time, which is every time, which is the only time, which is this time. I'm feeling pain because he

lowered the gun, just like I did, and he still pulled the trigger, just like I did, and *oh my Lord* this hurts. *Hoo hoo boy*, does it hurt, *it hurts it hurts it hurts*, but I'll get over it, and the important thing is everything that happened, that happens, happens just right.

When it happens, what happens is a weird guy in a hangar firing a gun at his own stomach, and then jumping into his time machine and opening a box and staring at its contents, some kind of toy, some kind of miniature world that apparently fascinates him, that apparently holds some kind of answer for him, and in jumping into the machine, the guy bangs his leg pretty hard, shattering it, and of course there is the matter of his massive intestinal bleeding from the self-inflicted gunshot wound, and he's lying in there bleeding with a shattered fibula, and the facility-wide alarm systems are going off, all stations alert, and the cops coming to arrest the guy, and then later release him when they realize he'd just returned the day before from over ten years out in the field, and was apparently suffering from exhaustion after spending all that time, a third of his life, in a space the size of a closet, and of course, that's what externally happens, and that is what happens, but it's also not all that happens. What happens is that weird guy mumbling something to himself about the collapsing, infinitely divisible nature of each moment. Above him, the guy can see the massive free-floating clock, the tangible representation of time, he can see it ticking forward. A zero changes to a one, one second slams into the next. 11:47:01. Time to move on. What happens is the weird guy's eyes going all watery, and his dog looking pretty worried, and then the guy's sort of hugging himself, and then he's opening a box wrapped in brown parcel paper, like it's a present, like the weird guy

is ten again and it's his birthday, and he's opening a gift from his father, and in a way he sort of is.

I lurch forward and fall, awkwardly, into the side of my time machine. I have always admired protagonists who fall gracefully when they get shot by laser guns or other weapons, and I've always promised myself that if I ever got lucky enough get shot I would try my best to look cool while my body reacts to the physical blast of the weapon, I would try to do one of those dramatic slo-mo falls, drawing it out, like it's choreographed, like it's set to music, but I have to say, when you get shot, it is not the first thing on your mind to fall awesomely. I don't fall even a little cool. I just kind of trip myself and sort of accidentally run into my time machine, in the process slamming my shin against the hatch door about as hard as I remember doing the first time.

When it happens, this is what happens: I still shoot myself. When it happens, I still jump into my time machine, and the memories come flooding back and I still open that package and find what I'm looking for. The moment of all of this is the moment I open that package, and now I understand that what's happened, that's all that's happened, that's why it happens today. I still get shot in the stomach, but as it turns out I don't die from it after all. It all works out just right, and it turns out that you can get shot in the stomach and live, if you do it just right, and it turns out that I'm okay, it just happens to be the most excruciating pain I have ever felt in my entire life, and it feels pretty good.

EPILOGUE

Look in the box.

Inside it, there's another box.

Look in that box and find another one.

And then another one, until you get to the last one. The smallest one. Open that box.

See the kitchen, see the clock.

Get inside a time machine.

Go get your dad.

When you get there, he will say, "Hey."

You can say "Hey."

Or you can say, "Hey Dad."

Or you can say, "I missed you, you old man."

And he is old. Notice how old he is, but don't make him feel bad about it. He's been waiting here for you for a long time, in this kitchen, trapped.

Listen to him explain how he never meant to leave. He did leave, though. What he means, and listen to him good, is that he left and by the time he figured out he wanted to come home, it was too late. His time machine had broken down, and he got trapped in the past.

Tell him you understand. “That’s what happens to all of us,” you should say.

The path of a man’s life is straight, straight, straight, until the moment when it isn’t anymore, and after that it begins to meander around aimlessly, and then get tangled, and then at some point the path gets so confusing that the man’s ability to move around in time, his device for conveyance, his memory of what he loves, the engine that moves him forward, it can break, and he can get permanently stuck in his own history.

You are angry, there is still a lot to explain, there are still many questions to be answered, but there will be time for that. Just nod, and be sympathetic, because you should be. You know all about tangled loops yourself. You don’t want to waste any more of the time you have together, because he looks tired. He spent all these years stuck here, waiting inside an empty minute, a safe minute when he knows he can’t be found, hoping you got the message.

And you did.

But he doesn’t get those years back, and he’s older than you remember.

Invite him into your machine. Try not to chuckle as he looks small and impressed and like a boy, marveling at how far things have come.

Introduce him to Sam, the operating system in your new machine. Don’t tell him about Suzy. Keep that one for yourself. It was a lovely thing, you and her, but you hope her next operator treats her better than you did.

Introduce your father to your dog, Bruce, who does not exist.

Make a note to call your boss, Keith, even though he doesn’t have feelings.

Call Jerry Babich, too.

Make things right.

Make a note to make a lot of things right.

Get back in the box.

Set it for home, present day.

Go see your mom.

Bring your dad.

Have dinner, the three of you.

Go find The Woman You Never Married and see if she might want to be The Woman You Are Going To Marry Someday.

Step out of this box.

Pop open the hatch.

The forces within the ChronoLOGIC™ air lock will equalize.

Step out into the world of time and risk and loss again.

Move forward, into the empty plane.

Find the book you wrote, and read it until the end, but don't turn the last page yet, keep stalling, see how long you can keep expanding the infinitely expandable moment.

Enjoy the elastic present, which can accommodate as little or as much as you want to put in there.

Stretch it out, live inside of it.

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BIOGRAPHY

Alex Walsh graduated from Emerson College with a Bachelor of Arts in 2010. He received his Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from George Mason University in 2017.