

T W I L I G H T T I M E

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

THE PART OF the machine they strapped me to looked too much like an electric chair. A sudden, violent urge to resist came over me as the two proctors buckled me down and fastened the electrodes to my scalp. Not that it would have done me much good. The machine and I were in a steel cage and the cage was in the middle of a maximum security prison.

“Okay?” Thornberg asked me. His thinning hair was damp with sweat and a patch of it glistened on his forehead.

“Sure,” I said. “Why not?”

He turned some switches. I couldn’t hear anything happen, but this wasn’t *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein* and sparks weren’t supposed to be climbing the bars of the cage.

Then a jolt of power hit me and I couldn’t open my mouth to tell Thornberg to cut the thing off. My eyes filmed over and I started to see images in the mist. A distant, calmer part of my brain realized that Thornberg had cut in the encephalograph tapes.

We’d been working on them for weeks, refining the images detail by detail, and now all the pieces came together. Not just the steep hills and narrow streets of the town, not just the gym and the crepe-paper streamers and Buddy Holly singing, but the whole era: the flying saucer movies, the cars like rocket ships, rolled-up blue jeans and flannel shirts and P.F. Flyer tennis shoes, yo-yos, the candy wagon at noon recess, William Lundigan and Tom Corbett and Johnny Horton. They all melted together, the world events and the TV shows, the facts and the fiction and the imaginings, and for just one second they made a coherent, tangible universe.

And then I kicked and threw out my arms because I was falling.

IFELL THE WAY I did in dreams, trying to jerk myself awake, but the fall went on and on. I opened my eyes and saw a quiet blue, as if the sky had turned to water and I was drifting down through it. I hit on my hands and knees and felt the dirt under my fingers turn hard and grainy, felt the sun burn into my back.

Off to the left sat a line of low, gray-green hills. The ground where I crouched was covered with tough bullhead weeds and the sky overhead was the clear, hot blue of an Arizona summer.

The San Carlos Mountains, I thought. He did it. I’m back.

From the angle of the sun it looked to be late after, noon. I’d landed outside the city to avoid materializing inside a crowd or a solid wall. I sucked the good clean air into my lungs and danced a couple of steps across the sand. All I wanted was to get into town and make sure the rest of it was there, that it was all really happening.

I found the highway a few hundred yards to the south. Lee Ann was a tight feeling in my chest as I headed for town at a fast walk. My eyes were so full of the mountains and the open sky that I didn’t notice the thing in the road until

I was almost on top of it.

The pavement was not just broken, but scarred, cut by a huge, melted trench. Something had boiled the asphalt up in two knee-high waves and left it frozen in mid-air. The sand around it looked like a giant tire track in icy mud, a jagged surface of glassy whites and browns.

The strangest part was that for a couple of seconds I didn't realize that anything was wrong. My memories had become such a hash that the San Carlos Reservation had turned into a desert from a Sunday afternoon *Science Fiction Theater* and any minute I expected to see Caltiki or a giant scorpion come over the next rise.

I knelt to touch the asphalt ridge. Nothing in the real 1961, the one in the history books, could do this to a road.

A distant rumbling made me look up. A truck was coming out of the east, and it was swollen with the outlandish bumps and curves of the middle fifties. I jogged toward it, waving one arm, and it pulled up beside me.

The driver was an aging Apache in faded jeans and a T-shirt. "Ya-ta-hey, friend," he said. "Goin' to Globe?"

"Yeah," I said, out of breath. "But I need to tell you. The road's ... tom up, just ahead."

"Got the road again, did they? Damn gover'ment. Always got to do their tests on Indian land. You want a lift?"

"Yeah," I said, "Yeah, I do. Thanks."

I got in and he threw the truck in gear with a sound like a bag of cans rolling downhill. I tried to remember the last time I'd seen a gearshift on the steering column.

"My name's Big Charlie," he said.

"Travis," I said. The cab of the truck smelled like Wildroot Creme Oil, and a magazine photo of Marilyn Monroe stared at me from the open glove compartment. A rabbit's foot hung off the keys in the ignition and I had to remind myself that life was cheap in the sixties, even the lives of seals and leopards and rabbits.

A hysterical DJ on the radio shouted, "k-z-o-w, kay-z o w! Rockin' and rollin' Gila County with Ozzie and Harriet's favorite son..." The voice drowned in an ocean of reverb and out of it swam the sweet tenor of Ricky Nelson, singing "Travelin' Man."

Somehow the music made it all real and I had to look into the wind to keep the water out of my eyes. Up ahead of us in Globe was a 15-year-old kid listening to the same song, starting to get ready for his end-of-the-school-year dance. At that dance he was going to meet a girl named LeeAnn Patterson and fall in love with her. And he was never going to get over her.

Never.

Big Charlie eased the pickup off the road and found a place to cross the strip of melted glass. When the song finished, the radio erupted in a flare of trumpets. "This is Saturday, May the 27th, and this is Kay-Zowzowzow NEWS!" Big Charlie turned the volume down with an automatic flip of the wrist, but I didn't care. The date was right, and I could have rattled off the headlines as well as the DJ could. Thornberg had made me do my homework.

Khrushchev and Kennedy were headed for test-ban talks in Vienna. Freedom Riders were being jailed in Mississippi, and the Communists were stepping up their assault on Laos. Eichmann was on trial in Jerusalem, and Alan Shepard was still being honored for his space flight of three weeks before.

On the local scene, six teenagers were dead over in Stafford, part of the rising Memorial Day Death Toll. Rumors were going around about a strike against Kennicott Copper, whose strip mines employed about half of Globe's work force.

Eddie Sachs was going to be in the pole position when they ran the 500 on Tuesday. The Angels had taken the Tigers, and the Giants had edged the Cubs in 13.

A decade of peace and quiet and short hair was winding down; a time when people knew their place and stayed in it. For ten years nobody had wanted anything but a new car and a bigger TV set. Now all that was about to change. In a little over a year the Cuban missile crisis would send thousands of people into their back yards to dig bomb shelters, and "advisors" would start pouring into Southeast Asia. In another year the president would be dead.

All that I knew. What I didn't know was why there was a huge melted scar across the desert.

Suddenly the truck's brakes squealed and I jerked back to attention. My eyes focused on the road ahead and saw a little boy straddling the white line, waving frantically.

The truck slewed to the left and stopped dead. A girl of 12 or 13 stood up from a patch of mesquite and stared at us like she wanted to run away. She had a good six years on the boy, but when he ran back to her it seemed to calm her down.

"Hey," Big Charlie shouted, leaning out his window. "What do you kids think you're doing?"

The boy was tugging on the girl's arm, saying, "It's okay! They're both okay, I'm sure, I'm really sure!"

The boy pulled her gently toward the driver's window of the truck. "Can you help us, mister?"

"What's wrong? What's the big idea of standing out there in the middle of the road like that? You could have got killed."

The boy backed away and the girl stepped in.

"We...we were running away from home." She looked down at the boy as if she needed confirmation, and if I hadn't known before that she was lying, I knew it then. "We...changed our minds. Can you take us back, mister? Just as far as town? Please?"

Big Charlie thought it over for a minute and seemed to come up with the same answer as me. Whatever they'd done probably wasn't that serious, and they were bound to be better off in town than hitchhiking in the middle of the desert.

"In the back," he said. "And watch what you're doing!"

They scrambled over the side of the pickup, their sneakers banging on the side walls. I turned to look at them as we pulled away and they were huddled by the tailgate, arms around each other, their eyes squeezed shut.

I wondered what they were running from. They looked like they hadn't eaten in a couple of days, and their clothes were torn and dirty. And what in God's name had the boy meant when he said we were "okay?"

Don't worry about it, I told myself. Don't get involved. You haven't got time to get mixed up in somebody else's problems. You're not going to be here that long.

We passed Glen's Market at the foot of Skyline Drive, the one with the heavy wooden screen door that said "Rainbo is good bread" and the rich

smells of doughnuts and bubble gum and citrus fruit.

"Where do you want to get off?" Big Charlie asked me.

"Downtown, anywhere." The highway had curved past Globe's three motels and now the grade school was coming up on the right. The Toastmaster Cafe, and its big Wurlitzer jukebox with the colored tube of bubbles around the side, was just across the street. Overhead was the concrete walkway used to get from one to the other. It seemed a lot closer to the ground than it used to, even though I'd tried to prepare myself for things being smaller than I remembered.

Number 207 on the Toastmaster's Wurlitzer was "True Love Ways" by Buddy Holly. I could almost hear those thick, syrupy violins and the hollow moan of King Curtis' saxophone as we turned the corner and pulled up in front of Upton's.

"This okay?" Big Charlie asked.

"Fine." I was thinking about the smell of pencil shavings and the one piece of gum that was always stuck in the drain of the water fountain at the high school across the street. I got out of the truck. "I really appreciate it."

"Not to worry," Big Charlie said, and the pickup rattled away down Main.

The counter inside Upton's swung out in a wide U, dotted with red plastic-covered stools. The chrome and the white linoleum made it look more like an operating room than a place to eat, but it passed for atmosphere at the time.

"Help you?" said the kid behind the counter.

His name was Curtis and he lived up the street from my parents' house. He was a lot younger than I remembered him and he could have done with a shampoo. It was all I could do not to call him by name and order a Suicide. The Suicide was Curtis' own invention, and he made it by playing the chrome spigots behind the counter like they were piano keys.

"Just coffee," I said.

Five of the tables along the south wall were occupied, two of them by clean, cut families at dinner. Dinner tonight was a hamburger or the 89 cent Daily Special: fried chicken, three vegetables, tea or coffee. The women's dresses hung to mid-calf and most of the male children had flat-top haircuts that showed a strip of close-shaven skull in the middle. Everybody seemed to be smoking. A woman around the corner from me had bought the Jackie Kennedy look all the way, down to the red pill, box hat and the upswept hair. Two seats away from her a kid in a T-shirt and a leather jacket was flipping noisily through the metal-edged pages in the jukebox console.

When I looked up, the two kids from the highway were sitting next to me. The girl was getting some stares. Her face was streaked with dirt and her shirt was thin enough to make it obvious that she should have been wearing a training bra under it.

"My name's Carolyn," she said. "This is Jeremy."

She put her arm around the boy, who smiled and picked at his fingernails.

"I'm Travis. Is he your brother?"

"Yes," the girl said, at the same time that the boy said, "No."

I shook my head. "This isn't going to get us anywhere."

"What do you want to know for, anyway?" the girl asked.

"I don't really care. You're following me, remember?"

Curtis was standing by the brand-new Seeburg box in the corner. He must have gotten tired of waiting for the kid in the motorcycle jacket to make up his mind. He pushed some buttons, a record dropped, and the room filled with

violins. The bass thumped, a stick touched a cymbal, and Ray Charles started singing “Georgia.”

“Why do you keep doing that?”

“Doing what?”

“Rubbing your hair that way. Like it feels funny. “

I jerked my hands away from my ragged prison hair, cut. Ray was singing about his dreams. “The road,” he sang, “leads back to you...”

I knew that he was talking to me. My road had brought me back here, to see Curtis standing in front of the jukebox, to the music hanging changeless in the air, to LeeAnn. Even if Brother Ray and Hoagy Carmichael had never imagined a road made of Thornberg’s anti-particles.

“Stop that,” the girl said, and for a second I thought she was talking to me. Then I saw that Jeremy was staring down at the countertop, chewing on the ridge of flesh between his thumb and forefinger. Blood started to trickle out of the front of his mouth. The sight of it put the music out of my head and left me scared and confused.

I hadn’t looked at him closely before, but now that I did I saw scabs all over his arms and spots of dried, chocolate’ colored blood on his T-shirt. His eyes were rolling back in his head and he looked like he was going to go backwards off the stool.

Carolyn slapped him across the mouth, knocking his hand away. He started to moan, louder than the jukebox, loud enough to turn heads across the room.

“I have to get him out of here,” the girl said, pulling him to his feet.

“He needs a doctor,” I said. “Let me...”

“No,” she said. “Stay out of it.”

I flinched and she ran for the door, tugging Jeremy after her. They were halfway across the floor when the door swung open.

A man in loose slacks and a sport shirt stood in the doorway, staring at them. The little boy looked like he’d just seen the giant wasp in *The Monster from Green Hell*. His jaw dropped open and he started to shake. I could see the scream building from all the way across the room.

Before he could cut loose with it, Carolyn dragged him past the man and out into the street. The man stood there for a second with a puzzled half-smile on his face, then shrugged and looked around for a seat.

When my stomach started jumping I thought at first that I was just reacting to all the confusion. Then I remembered what Thornberg had said about phase shifting, and I knew I only had about a minute before the charge that had sent me back wore off.

I left a quarter on the counter and went to the men’s room in back. The smell of the deodorant cake in the urinal almost made me sick as I leaned against the wall. I felt drunk and dizzy and there seemed to be two of everything. Then the floor went out from under me and I was falling again.

I sailed back up toward the future like a fish on the end of a line.

I SPENT TWO DAYS in debriefing. Thornberg got to ask the questions, but there was always a proctor or two around, videotaping everything.

From Thornberg’s end everything had looked fine. One second I’d been there, the next I’d just winked out. I was gone a little over an hour, then I popped back in, dizzy but conscious, and all my vital signs had been good.

Thornberg’s excitement showed me for the first time how personally he was involved. He seemed frankly envious, and I suddenly realized that he didn’t

just want the experiment to work, he wanted to be able to go back himself.

I was too caught up in my own questions to worry very long about Thornberg. My common sense told me everything that had happened to me had been real, but my rational mind was still having trouble. Who were those two kids, and what were they running from? What could have torn up the highway that way?

The proctors liked it a lot less than I did. “We’ve been through the government files,” one of them said on the second day. “No experiments on the San Carlos Reservation. Nothing even in development that could have caused it.”

“So how do you explain it?” Thornberg asked.

“Hallucination,” the proctor said. “The whole experience was completely subjective and internal.”

“No,” Thornberg said. “Out of the question. We saw his body disappear.”

The proctor stood up. “I think we’d better suspend this whole thing until this is cleared up.”

“No!” Thornberg got between the proctor and the door. “We’ve got to have more data. We have to send him back again.”

The proctor shook his head. The gesture didn’t put the slightest wrinkle in his maroon double knit uniform.

“You can’t stop me, you know,” Thornberg said. “You’ll have to get an executive order.”

“I’ll get it,” the proctor said, and stepped around him.

When the door was closed Thornberg turned to me. “Then we send you back first. Now.”

I LANDED BACK where I’d come from, leaning against the dingy walls of the rest room for support. My head cleared, and the last two days could have been no more than a fever dream caused by bad coffee on an empty stomach.

I started back into the restaurant. The jukebox was playing “Sink the Bismarck” by Johnny Horton. Horton was a big local favorite and he’d died just a few months before, in a car crash in Texas.

The man in the sport shirt, the one that had scared Jeremy so badly, was sitting in a booth with a cheeseburger. I stood for a second in the shadows of the hall, way and watched him. He looked ordinary to me—short, curly hair, no sideburns, no facial hair. His shirt was one of those short-sleeved African prints in muted oranges and blues that wanted to be loud but couldn’t quite bring it off. Sunglasses peeked out of the shirt pocket.

He looked like a tourist. But why would there be any tourists in Globe, Arizona, in 1961?

And then I saw his fingers.

His right hand was tucked under his left elbow and the fingers were moving in short, precise gestures against his side. I’d seen hands move like that before, keying data into a computer by touch.

Cut it out, I told myself. So the guy’s got a nervous habit. It’s none of your business.

I picked up my copy of the newspaper from the counter and tore off the masthead, including the date. If the proctors wanted some proof, I’d try to oblige. I folded the strip of newsprint and put it in my back pocket, dropping the rest of the paper in the trash.

Once on the street I saw men all around me in short-sleeved shirts buttoned

to the neck. Long, rectangular cars covered with chrome and sharp angles cruised the streets like patient sharks. TV sets blinked at me from the window of the furniture store, their screens cramped and nearly circular. I stopped and watched a toothpaste ad with an invisible shield in it and remembered the craze for secret ingredients.

That 15-year-old kid across town had a theory about secret ingredients. He believed they were codes, and that aliens from space were using them to take over the Earth. GL70: Town Secure. AT-7: Send More Saucers. He dreamed at night about great domed ships gliding over the desert.

I thought about the scar in the highway and the man in the restaurant and got another chill. This one turned my whole body cold.

My feet carried me down the street and stopped in front of the National News Stand. The door was locked, but through the window I could see the line of comics: *Sea Devils* and *Showcase* and *Rip Hunter, Time Master*. My father made me stop buying *Rip Hunter* because it was ruining my sense of reality; every time Rip and his crew went back in time they found aliens there, tampering with human history.

Aliens.

A spin rack by the door was full of science-fiction paperbacks. The short fat Ace Doubles were crammed in next to the taller Ballantines with the weird, abstract covers. Right at the top, in a pocket all to itself, was Ruppelt's *Report on Unidentified Flying Objects*.

Flying saucers.

Further back, where I could barely see it in the dimness of the store, was the rack of men's magazines. When the old man with the cigar that ran the place wasn't paying attention I used to go back and thumb through them, but I never found quite what I was looking for.

The store was like an unassembled Revell model kit of my childhood. All the pieces were there, the superheroes and the aliens and the unobtainable women, and if I could just fit them together the right way I might be able to make sense of it. In a lifetime I might have done it, but I only had another hour.

I felt too much like an aging delinquent in the T-shirt I was wearing, so I bought a fresh shirt at the dime store across the street and changed in their rest room. I thought for a second about time paradoxes as I threw the old one away, then decided to hell with it.

The dime store clock said seven-thirty and the dance should have started at seven. Enough of a crowd should have accumulated for me to become another faceless parent in the background. I started uphill toward the high school and was sweating by the time I got there. But that was okay. You could still sweat in 1961, and your clothes could still wrinkle.

All the doors to the gym were open and Japanese lanterns hung inside the doors. From across the asphalt playground I could hear the heavy, thumping bass of "Little Darlin'" by the Diamonds.

I went inside. A banner across the far end of the gym read "Look for a Star" in crude, glittering letters. Across thirty years I remembered the sappy lyrics to the song that had been forced on us as our theme. Four-pointed stars, sprayed with gold paint, dangled from the girders, and the lanterns over the punch bowls had Saturn rings stapled to them.

Most of the teachers stood in a clump. I recognized Mrs. Smith's hooked nose and long jaw; she'd cried when she found the drawing of her as a witch.

Mr. Miller, next to her, was still wearing the goatee that he would be forced to shave off the next fall because it made him look “like a beatnik.”

About half the kids in my class were already there.

Bobby Arias, class president, and Myron Cessarini, track star and sex symbol, were quietly breaking hearts at their own end of the gym. Over by the opposite wall was Marsha Something-or-other, the one that threw up all over the floor in sixth grade, with the wings on her glasses and waxen skin.

But no sign of LeeAnn or the 15-year-old Travis. I went outside to get away from the heat and the close, sweat-sock smell of the place. Coals of cigarettes glowed where a few of the adults were taking advantage of the growing darkness. I sniffed the clean air and tried to think of reasons why I didn't want to stay right where I was for the rest of my life.

Lots of reasons. Racism. Sexism. People throwing trash on highways and dumping sewage in the creeks and not even knowing it was wrong. No sex. Not on TV, not in the movies, especially not in real life. Nice girls didn't. Curfews. Dress codes. Gas-guzzling cars.

Still, I thought. Still...

Somebody was tugging at my sleeve.

“Hey, mister,” said a little boy's voice. “Hey.”

I winced at the sound of it. “What are you following me for? What do you want from me?”

“We need help,” Carolyn said. “If they catch us they'll kill us.”

“Who will?”

“Them,” Jeremy said.

He wasn't pointing at anybody. Giant ants? I wondered. “I don't understand. What is it you want me to do?”

The girl shrugged and turned her face away from me. I could see tears glistening in her eyes. Jeremy sat crosslegged on the asphalt in front of me and reached out to hold onto one of Carolyn's ankles. With my back to the wall of the gym I felt hemmed in by them, emotionally and physically.

Some obscure sense of guilt kept me asking questions. “What's wrong with Jeremy? What happened in that restaurant?”

“My father says he has some kind of eppa...eppa...”

“Epilepsy?”

“Yeah. And he gets it whenever he gets too close to them.”

“Was that one of them in the restaurant?”

“Yes. “

Fingers moving against his side, empty-eyed, sunglasses. Reporting on me? “Who are they?”

The girl shook her head. For a second I saw past her hollow eyes and dirty brown hair, had just a glimpse of the woman she might be if she hung on long enough. “You won't believe me,” she said. “You'll think I'm crazy. “

“I'm starting to think that anyway.”

“What if I said they were from space? What would you say then?” In the last of the light her eyes had a hard gray sheen.

Oh God, I thought. *Invaders from Mars*. What's happening to my past?

“See?” she said. “I warned you.”

“What about your parents? Can't they help you?”

“My father. . .” She stopped, swallowed, started again. “My father was all I had. They killed him. Jeremy's parents too. He's from California and they had him in one of their ships but he got away. That's where he got the...epilepsy.

From what they did to him. My father...my father and me found him wandering around San Carlos and brought him back to the store.”

That told me where I'd seen her before. Her father ran a rock shop out on the edge of the Apache reservation. My folks had taken me out there once to see the peridots, the green crystals that only turn up in extinct volcanic craters around San Carlos and somewhere in South America. I'd noticed her because I'd just gotten to the age where I was noticing girls, but we had shied away from actually speaking to each other.

She was wearing a big peridot ring, probably her father's, on the index finger of her right hand. “If they killed your father,” I said, “why didn't you call the police?”

“I did. But when the policeman came, he was...one of them. Jeremy ran off into the desert and I ran after him. Now they're looking for both of us.”

No matter how uncomfortable I felt, I had to believe that her story was just a fantasy. I had to make myself believe it. But even if I'd been sure she was hallucinating, what could I do for her? She needed a family and a psychiatrist and I couldn't be either one in the time I had left. I took some money out of my wallet.

“Look,” I said. “Here's twenty bucks. Go take a bus to Phoenix or somewhere. Call an aunt or a grandfather or somebody you know you can trust and get them to help you out. Okay?”

She knew she'd lost me. I could see it in her eyes.

She wadded up the bill and held it in her fist. “They know who you are,” she said.

“What?”

“They saw us with you. They'll be looking for you, now, too.”

My heart slowed back to something like normal.

“That's okay. I'll risk it.”

I watched them until they faded into the darkness.

“In the Still of the Night” by the Five Satins was playing in the gym and I wanted to go in and listen to it. I wanted to forget what the girl had told me and see what I'd come to see and get out of there.

I took about two steps before my stomach cramped, driving me back against the wall of the gym.

“No,” I whispered, “Not yet. Not now. Please.”

I was wasting my breath. In less than a minute the dizziness came over me and everything fell away.

THE PROCTORS WEREN'T too happy about my coming back in a different shirt. They didn't care too much for the newspaper masthead either, but they had their executive order and they decided it was all academic anyhow.

They threw me in my cell and refused to let me talk to Thornberg. This time the proctors debriefed me, and I told them as little as I thought I could get away with. One of them might have been the one that had threatened me after the last trip, but I couldn't be sure. Between the uniforms and the dark glasses they had an unnerving similarity.

Dark glasses, I thought. Sunglasses. I remembered fingers moving against a bright sport shirt.

Cut it out, I thought. You're letting your imagination go crazy. Don't get sucked into somebody else's fantasy.

Finally they left me alone and I wondered if the experiment was really over. Thornberg would probably not live through the disappointment. To have worked so hard and then lose it all, to never get to use his own machine...

And what about me? I thought. To have gotten so close to seeing Lee Ann only to miss her by a few seconds?

Memories came rushing back, out of control. The first time we'd made love, in the back of my parents' Chevy II station wagon with the seat folded down. Our first winter at Arizona State, LeeAnn in a mini, skirt and rag coat that hung to her ankles, wrapped in yards of fake fur. Politics and marches, graduation and marriage, the underground newspaper in Phoenix in the late sixties. Our first house, LeeAnn's thirtieth birthday, the flowers and the cheap red wine...

And then the day the Proctors' Amendment passed the House. Politics and marches again, me reluctant at first, but LeeAnn outraged and dedicated, young again in the space of a few days. The first victories, Colorado voting against ratification, Texas leaning our way. People starting to wonder if the proctors really would be better than their local police, even in Houston.

And then one by one we were getting killed or crippled or lost in the basements of jails. They told me the day they arrested me that LeeAnn had died trying to construct a bomb, for God's sake, when she had never even touched any kind of weapon.

I never got a trial, because the proctors were now the Law. No charges, no lawyers, just a cell and a lot of memories.

Time moved on.

As much as I hated the proctors, I knew better than to blame them. They hadn't elected themselves; the citizens of the United States had listened to their televisions and voted them in, so it was their fault too. But mostly it was time's fault. Time had passed. Times had changed. So I sat in a jail cell and thought about what it had been like to be 15 years old, before I had any idea of what time could do.

That was where Thornberg found me. He needed somebody with a memory of a specific time and place that was so strong that his machines could focus on it and follow the time lines back to it. Because it was dangerous, his funding agency had sent him to the prisons to look for volunteers, and when he saw how I tested out he wanted me. I don't think the proctors had taken him seriously until the first test had worked, and once it did they seemed to panic.

What were they afraid of? What did they have to lose? Were they afraid I was going to escape through a hole in time?

Or were they afraid I was going to learn something they didn't want anybody to know?

I was still thinking about it late that night when I heard my cell door open. It was Thornberg.

"How did you get in here?" I whispered.

"Never mind. The question is, do you want to go again? Tonight? Right now?"

We headed straight for the lab and I changed into my traveling clothes. Thornberg was nervous, talking the whole time he strapped me in.

"What I don't understand," he said, "is how you can have a past that's not the same as my past. Why does yours have tracks in the desert and flying saucers?"

“How should I know?” I said. “Maybe everybody’s past is different. People never remember things the same way as anybody else. Maybe they are different. What are those waves your machine uses?”

“Retrograde probability waves.”

“Retrograde because they move backwards in time, right? But couldn’t they branch off, just like regular probability waves? Your machine uses my brain waves to sort through all those probabilities, so it would have to take me to whatever I thought the past was, right?”

Thornberg was interested. He’d gone back to his console, but he wasn’t reaching for the controls. “If that’s true, why is there no record of your melted track in the desert?”

“The different pasts all lead to the same place, the present. I guess there could be other pasts that lead to other presents, that ‘Many Worlds’ theory you were telling me about. In my past the proctors don’t want any record of the mess their spaceships made, so they just covered it up. In yours, you never knew of any spaceships. But they lead to the same thing, with the proctors in power.”

“You have a lot of imagination.”

“Yeah. I do. Imagine this, then. Suppose I change something? Made it so my past hooked onto a different future? Just like switching a train onto another track. You said every decision we make creates a whole new universe.”

“No,” Thornberg said. “Out of the question. Do you have any idea of the risk? At the end of the hour you’d be pulled back here anyway.”

Or into another future, I thought, but I didn’t say it. “All right. Calm down. If we’re going to do this we’d better get started.”

Thornberg just stared at me for a few seconds, and I could see how frightened he was. My only question was whether he was afraid for me or afraid I’d go off into some other future and leave him stuck in this one.

I never got the answer because his hand snaked out and started pushing the buttons.

SEEING MYSELF WALK into the gym was as immediate as a glance in the mirror and as distant as looking at an old photograph. I wanted to go over to myself and say, straighten up for God’s sake, and turn your collar down. But even so I could see myself through my 15-year-old eyes and know that the slouch and the clothes and the haircut were the only ways I could say the things I didn’t have words for then.

The kid had three-inch cuffs in his blue jeans, and the light jacket he wore over his T-shirt wasn’t red, like James Dean’s jacket in *Rebel Without a Cause*, but only because a red jacket would have been somebody else’s uniform and not his own. His hair was too long for a flat top and not long enough for a D A , but five minutes didn’t go by without him running a comb through it at least a couple of times.

Somebody put “Twilight Time” by the Platters on the record player. The overhead lights went out and two deep blue spots swept over the dancers. Martin and Dickie, the kid’s best friends, were off to his left, talking behind their hands and bumping each other with their shoulders. The kid just stood there and stared into the crowd around the bleachers, and at the few daring couples out on the gym floor, intently, like he was trying to find somebody.

So was I.

Tony Williams sang about falling in love all over again, “as I did then.”

And she walked in.

For thirty years I'd been haunted by this memory. It was strong enough to get me out of prison, to send me back in Thornberg's machine, and now I was standing just across a high school gym from her.

And she was just a girl. Just a 15-year-old girl.

Skinny and shy and awkward, her first night in a new town, talked into coming to this dance by her mother and the principal of the school, both of them afraid she would go all summer without making any friends.

And then her mother said something to her that made her laugh and her head dropped down and the long red hair fell over her face and it wasn't just a girl anymore, it was LeeAnn, and I felt like somebody had just put a fist into my throat.

I turned my back on her and stood in the doorway, letting the hot night air work on my eyes until I could see again.

Something moved, just out of the range of the lanterns. Carolyn and the boy again, I thought. I didn't want to see them, didn't even want to think about them anymore. Hadn't I done enough? What more did they want from me?

I was turning back to look at LeeAnn when a flash of color across the gym distracted me. The man from Upton's, the one in the sport shirt, darted through the crowd, fingers working against his left side.

A voice behind me said, "Come outside and we'll talk." The delivery was as deep and smooth as a TV announcer's.

I turned. Two of them filled the doorway, tall, non-descript, their eyes and mouths so hard it looked like their facial nerves had been cut. They would have made terrific proctors.

Admit it, I told myself. You want to believe it. If the proctors come from out there somewhere, that lets you off the hook. It lets everybody off. Sure TV rots people's brains and fast food makes people fat and gives them heart attacks, but it's not our fault. We're just being manipulated by creatures of vastly superior technology.

"Outside," one of them said. "Let's go."

But suppose you really did want to take over the world. Where would you start? Level Washington with your laser cannons? Why not just take over a few ad agencies? Tell people they want to buy lots of polyester, throw your weight behind mindless situation comedies. In a few years people don't care what they watch, or what they eat, or what they wear, and after a while they don't care about anything else either. You've got everything, without having to fire a shot.

Except maybe a few in the desert, just to keep in practice.

"What do you want from me?" I asked, letting them maneuver me out onto the playground. "What's going on?"

The one in the lead showed me a pistol. It looked a lot like a squirt gun I used to have except that the end of the barrel was hollow and the thing had a heavy, chromed sense of menace about it. "The Others want to talk to you."

"Others? What Others?"

"They're waiting in the ship. Outside town." Either this is real, I thought, or it isn't. If I could bring back a shirt and a piece of newspaper then it was probably real, or at least real enough to get me killed.

I decided to be scared.

"Fine," I said. "Let's talk. What do you want to talk about?"

“Over there,” said the one with the gun.

I had just looked to see where he was pointing when a wail came out of the darkness. It sounded like it had been building up inside of something that wasn't strong enough to hold it and it had just blown its way free.

Jeremy.

“What's that?” whispered the one with the pistol.

“It's that kid, I think,” said the other one.

“Well, shut him up, for God's sake.”

The second alien disappeared into the shadows just as Jeremy screamed. The one with the gun looked around involuntarily and I went for him.

We hit the asphalt and rolled. I felt one knee tear out of my pants, just like in the old days. The alien was bigger and stronger than I was and he came out on top. He was pounding at me with his left hand, trying to get the gun around to use it on me. I grabbed his right wrist with both hands and yanked his elbow down into the pavement. The gun rattled in his grip and I slammed the elbow again. This time the gun came loose and skittered away into the darkness.

With both hands free he really opened up on me. I tried to cover up, but I didn't have enough hands, and he got a good one into my ribs. Everything turned white for a second and he started on my face and head.

I thought maybe I should have let him keep the gun. That way it would at least have been quick. In a few more seconds he was going to kill me with his bare hands anyway.

Just like they'd killed LeeAnn.

I went a little berserk, but all it got me was a knee in the gut. I was finished.

A sound whipped through the air above me. I saw a flash of pink light and then the alien fell off of me.

I rolled onto my side and pulled my knees up to my chest. I was still fighting for breath when my eyes cleared enough to see Carolyn a few feet away, still holding the gun straight out in front of her, a stunned look on her face. Jeremy sounded like pieces of his throat were coming loose, and a shadow flashed in the corner of my vision.

“Carolyn,” I said, and she came unstuck, firing the pistol again. I saw the second alien fall as Jeremy's scream cut off in mid-air,

I got onto my hands and knees. In the distance, like some kind of cosmic soundtrack, I could hear Brenda Lee singing “I'm Sorry” in the gym. The music echoed flatly off the asphalt.

“You okay, mister?” Carolyn asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Okay.” For once I was glad to see her.

A hand laser, I thought. A junior version of the thing on their ship that had cut that line through the desert. Like it or not, the aliens were as real as anything else in this version of 1961. Whether this was really my past or just some kind of metaphor, the aliens were a part of it.

Jeremy staggered over and threw his arms around Carolyn's waist. Even in the dimness of the playground I could see that her eyes were dry and clear. She looked at the gun in her hand. “This changes things,” she said. “This changes everything.”

The words echoed in my mind. I thought of Thornberg and his Many Worlds. The smallest thing, he'd said, can change the entire universe. In time.

“Back at the dance,” I said. “There's more of...them.” I couldn't bring myself to say “aliens.”

“That’s okay,” she said. “We’ll take care of it.”

“Take care of it? But you’re just...” I tried to stand up and didn’t make it.

Gently she pushed Jeremy aside and knelt down next to me. “You’re hurt,” she said. “There’s nothing you can do to help anyway.” She took the peridot ring off her index finger and slipped it onto the little finger of my left hand. “Here,” she said. “This is for the twenty dollars you gave me. We’ll use it to find some people to help us. To fight. To change things. They’re just getting started and it’s not too late. We can change things.”

She stood up, started to walk away, and then looked back over her shoulder.

“You’ll see,” she said. She was gone.

I lay there a while and looked at the stars. I hadn’t seen that many stars in the night sky in a long time. When I tried to stand up again I made it, and got to the drinking fountain behind the baseball diamond.

The same piece of gum was in the drain. I smiled and cleaned myself up as best I could.

I stayed in the shadows just outside the door of the gym and watched for a while. I couldn’t see the third alien.

She did it, I thought. She did it and she’s going to keep on doing it. And if she’s very lucky and very strong, maybe . . .

No, I told myself. Don’t even think about it. Don’t get your hopes up. She’s just a girl and this may turn out to only be a dream.

LeeAnn stood at the punchbowl, talking to a kid in rolled-up jeans and a tan jacket. The record player hissed and then Buddy Holly started “True Love Ways.” The strings answered him, high and rich, infinitely sad.

The kid shuffled his feet and jerked his head at the dance floor. LeeAnn nodded and they walked into the crowd. He took her awkwardly in his arms and they slowly moved away until I couldn’t see them anymore.

I CAME BACK to some kind of deserted warehouse. The cage was gone. So was the jail and so were the proctors.

After the first couple of days I didn’t have much trouble finding my way around. Most of my friends were still the same, and they told me they were used to my being a little quiet and disoriented. They told me I’d been that way off and on since my wife LeeAnn died in a car wreck two years before.

Thirty years were missing out of my new life, and I spent a lot of time at my computer, calling up history texts and old magazines and doing a little detective work on the side. I learned about a scientist named Thornberg at NASA, but he never answered the letter I wrote him.

The past and the future invent each other; Thornberg taught me that, and the past I invented has given me a future without LeeAnn. But somewhere in this new future of mine there should be a woman named Carolyn, born in Arizona in the late forties, maybe a year or two younger than me. I don’t know exactly what I’m going to say to her when I find her, or whether she’ll even believe me, but I think she’ll recognize her ring.

LeeAnn is dead and Buddy Holly is dead, but people are walking the streets, free to make their own mistakes again. The sky overhead is filled with ships building a strange and wonderful future, and, in time, anything seems possible.

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