

## EFFECT & CAUSE

by Kenneth George Godwin

Strange how human beings are undeterred by futility. Take the old guy there behind the counter, elbows resting on ancient grease stains, eyes half-closed as he scans days-old sports pages, the grill cold and silent behind him. He's only moved once since I came in, just to pour me a cup of thick, bitter, oily liquid he claims is coffee. There are only two other people in here, an old man off in the corner, wedged between the cigarette machine and a window so coated with grime the world beyond is reduced to a murky haze; and a woman, indeterminate, slumped across the table in one of the booths, her heavy breathing fracturing intermittently in a series of short, harsh snorts.

So why does the guy behind the counter hold on? The diner lies in the middle of a vast nothing, all the factories and assembly plants long-since closed and collapsing into decay. There's no living to be made here, but here he is nonetheless.

Not that I'm one to criticize, of course; I'm here for probably the most futile reason of all, looking to find a way to change something which I know can't be changed, but which has become unbearable to live with. Certain things are inevitable, and that inevitability instills the deepest sense of futility in the one who cannot accept it. Now, here, more than two decades after it all began, I simply can't accept it any longer ... if I don't at least attempt to alter what is past, I'll go mad and this life, unbearable now, will become impossible.

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Where the hell is he? I've been here half an hour already and I know I look out of place ... even out here, the authorities still patrol occasionally and I know that, if pressed, I have no good reason for being here ... no justifiable reason ...

But that's not really the problem: waiting gives me too much time to think, too much time to dwell on the futility of my plan ... to ponder all the reasons, some perhaps genuine, some no doubt false, for embarking on this ridiculous scheme. Am I going back from guilt over my part in what has happened, not to me but to the world itself? How much responsibility do I bear for the collapse of the society I was born into? Too much, I fear. Perhaps there might be some way after all to alleviate all of that. And yet, I know, know deeply, that my real reasons are far more selfish ... it's my personal loss that cuts so deeply, the longing to gain back what I so stupidly squandered.

"More?"

The thin, cracked voice shocks me out of my deepening reverie. The counter man, having at last exhausted himself with ancient game results, now stands across from me, raw skeletal hand gripping the coffee pot poised above my barely touched mug. I nod, more because it seems the only option than because I actually want any more of the foul liquid. He tips the pot, spilling more on the filthy counter than into the mug, then moves

stiffly away, making towards the other two customers.

I stare at the spreading stain in front of me, its surface glistening with the multi-coloured sheen of an oil slick, its darkness harbouring the possibility of an infinite range of hues ... and suddenly I recall Compton's lecture, the one which triggered something within me which, looking back, now seems so inevitable.

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"Time," Compton began that day in the lecture hall, "is a particle stream flowing inexorably in one direction. Like a river, it may encounter rocks and the stream divide ... resulting in those quantum splits which endlessly multiply the number of possible universes. But always the stream flows in that one direction, downhill if you like from the point of origin. But as with any stream, it may be possible to move within it, across or against the flow, depending on the amount of energy one can muster. Theoretically, one could swim against the current and move back along the stream to some past moment, or to accelerate one's movement downstream into some future time. So, theoretically, time travel is possible. But what would that mean for the individual?

"Quantum physics, of course, posits a multiverse, a constantly branching tree of unending possibility in which every act, every moment of decision and collision may have countless outcomes, each outcome giving birth to a new universe in consequence. Suppose then that it were possible to move backwards and forwards along the threads of possibility ... could one go back to a particular juncture and elect to take the left fork this time, rather than the right? But surely a 'you' has already taken that other fork, perfectly embedded in that other strand of existence. The 'you' that you know and feel yourself to be is utterly implicated in the strand which carried you originally; how can you escape that which you created and which created you?

"Let me posit an alternate idea then, one which does not negate the quantum multiverse, but which rather bears on the place of the individual's consciousness within it. This I call the 'Steady-State Theory of Time'. For each individual consciousness, time is a fixed entity, from beginning to end, because *it has to be* ... any consciousness cut adrift in the sea of quantum possibility would evaporate instantly: consciousness requires continuity. And so let us posit a traveller in time, one who slides back along the line of experience to some earlier period. The Steady-State Theory proposes that what this individual will discover is that, once he or she arrives at a moment in the past, he or she will always already have been a part of that moment. And thus will be powerless to 'change the past' because whatever he or she does back there is something which he or she has always already done back there. In essence, the line cannot be changed from what it has always been, because it has always been thus."

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Allison, of course, was in her studio in the loft of the Fine Arts Building on the far

side of the campus when I went to tell her excitedly about the idea which had come to me during Compton's lecture. She was in the midst of her initial "sculpted canvas" period, creating large works which combined figures in relief with painted surfaces which sometimes coincided with, sometimes contradicted the sculptures. She looked beautiful as usual, halfway up a short ladder and applying paint with a speed and vigour which always amazed me. I paused near the door for a moment and watched the image rapidly taking shape, but despite her concentration, she sensed the excitement I was trying to contain and glanced around to smile.

She tilted her head quizzically as she came down to greet me and I began talking, rapidly and no doubt confusingly, about Compton's theory and the spark it had ignited. Later, over several cups of coffee, I managed to make myself a little more coherent and told her that, if time were inviolate as Compton proposed, why couldn't we in effect take holidays in the past? What an advantage this would be for academics of every discipline, no longer having to rely on hearsay and incomplete records to try to understand history, the evolution of human thought!

She was bemused, of course, and while I talked, her hands sketched on the pad in front of her as if they had consciousnesses of their own. At one point, when I paused for breath, she held up a caricature of me racing madly along a track formed into a Moebius strip, apparently doomed to run forever and yet never arrive. The flow of words dried up and I looked into her dark eyes questioningly.

"A lovely idea," she said, "but aren't you forgetting the most important thing?"  
"Yes?"

"How do you propose to effect this miraculous new research method?"

I smiled, feeling more relaxed – as I always did in her presence when her practical mind reached out to ground me. And then I told her of Compton's research deep beneath the physics building in the university's cyclotron, the work he was doing with the "faster than light" quantum particles which seemed to arrive at location B before they had left location A, that in effect moved for a brief moment backwards in time. My idea was to follow this line of research to begin delineating the nature of the time stream itself and to look for the requisite mechanism and energy source to enable an object – a person – to move within the stream, rather than be moved by it.

She patted my hand with the affectionate condescension of a parent acknowledging a bright child's ridiculous idea without wanting to discourage the spark of creativity.

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"Life ..."

I glance up, startled, to find the old man from the corner leaning against the counter next to me. His coarse hand rests lightly on the back of my own lying almost lifeless on the counter in front of me. His head hangs down as if weighted with age and I can't see his face clearly, but there is something about him, an odd echo of familiarity.

With his other hand, he grips the edge of the counter with such force that his knuckles gleam white like naked bone.

“Life,” he repeats, his voice low and rasping, “is little more than the steady accumulation of disappointments and losses.”

I stare at him silently, waiting, then glance towards the door, across the murky windows. If my guide appears now, he might be scared off. I was instructed to come alone ...

“We have to accept that fact,” the old man says, “and learn to enjoy the moment. Not look back. Not desire to change what’s already done and can’t be changed ...”

My eyes snap back to the down-turned face; I can feel cold sweat beneath my arms, a tightness in my chest that makes breathing difficult.

“What?” There is little force behind the word; my whole body seems to be draining of energy. “What did you say?”

“You have no reason to believe me,” the old man says and there’s a kind of sadness in his tone, a daunting awareness of futility. “But I know and if you listen to me, you’ll be spared a great deal of pain ...”

“Get away from me!” The words erupt from deep inside, their volume startling me. The counter man looks up from his post by the ancient cash register and the sleeping woman stirs briefly with a muffled cry. I push away from the counter and move towards the door, almost willing it to open and reveal the man I’m waiting for. I lean against the frame, crumbling paint gritty beneath my palm. The waste ground outside is empty and lifeless. I lean forward, allowing my weight to press into the wall, my eyes closing ...

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For two years I immersed myself in a dream, the world around me seeming to open up with infinite layers of possibility; for two years I applied myself under the watchful, indulgent eye of Compton, feeling myself inching minutely but surely towards an end which seemed so certain and irrefutable that nothing else mattered ...

Nothing else ...

In that first year, Allison had her first major gallery show ... and I missed the opening because I lost myself in a new phase of the experiment that day. After that, I began to miss other things too ... a meal we had planned together, a weekend trip away from the city ... and yet, when we were together we were happy ... I think we were happy: we talked of ideas and plans and the shape the future might take. But we were together less and less and then one day she wasn’t there when I did manage to show up at some event, I no longer remember what, which we had planned to attend together.

I realized then that her own career, the art she immersed herself in, was more important to her than our relationship and this realization, in retrospect, seemed to justify my throwing myself more furiously into my own work. It was not long after that that a mutual acquaintance informed me that Allison was seeing someone else, an older man with the time and inclination to devote himself to her interests. From that point,

nothing else mattered to me except for the design of the engine which could propel me into the time stream ...

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The years passed quickly and there seemed little opportunity to consider what I might have lost: I gained my PhD, I became Compton's fully equal partner, I became well-known for a series of radical papers ... and once in a while I heard, or read, of Allison's progress as one of the country's most respected and influential artists, her work increasingly a critique of what she termed the dictatorship of technology.

Perhaps six years had passed by the time the prototype had been built and tested (in itself a tricky proposition – tracking the movement of an inanimate object through time required some ingenious experimental design) and then just a year later, with the fact of time travel indisputably established, there was the Nobel for Compton and myself and a massive infusion of corporate and government funding to push the process to the next level: the sending of a human subject through time.

After a careful and rigorous series of experiments had established with reasonable certainty that Compton's Steady-State Theory of time was accurate, the floodgates were opened. With all the funding available to us, we rapidly refined the apparatus until our time machine was both compact and inexpensive to operate. The era of time tourism had begun. The craze was incredibly popular, not just with researchers and academics, but with the public who gained access through the rapidly multiplying private companies which used the principles I had discovered to develop their own machines.

It was perhaps two or three years before the next trend became fully apparent. Time emigrants, they were called ... people who had opted for a one-way trip. It was merely fodder for the news magazines and op-ed pages for a while; but then ever-increasing expressions of concern in the halls of various governments caused a rethinking, of the fad itself at first, but then of the whole issue of time travel. Because it had become apparent that there was a steady and powerful drain on every developed nation's economic productivity as more and more of the brightest and most adventurous citizens were abandoning ship for other times. The psychology of the phenomenon became a hotly debated topic, the increasingly powerful desire to abandon a time fraught with seemingly insoluble social and environmental problems, to escape to an alternate time where one would no longer need to feel personal responsibility for the mess humanity had made of the world.

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And who more than I bore that responsibility now? Who more than I could possibly desire to escape what the world was so rapidly becoming? It was as this all reached crisis point that I found myself longing to turn back the clock of my own life, to slide back to the beginning and make a different choice: I thought more and more of

Allison and the way I had abandoned the relationship which at one time had been the most important element of my life. I didn't have the nerve to seek her out, because I knew that her own work had evolved into a fierce indictment of everything I had set in motion. All I could do was rue the loss and work with the authorities as best I could to find a solution to the social crisis time travel had wrought.

Even Compton turned against me and what I had created under his influence, going before the U.N. to speak a ringing indictment.

"The danger," he said, "doesn't lie in a threat to some other time – the past is past – if you travel there now, then you were there back then and whatever you might do has always already been done.

"The danger as we can see now is to the present, the threat of neglect, for given the choice and the opportunity, how many of us would not want to flee the wearying problems we face every day in keeping the world running? – having the means to fly into another time, wouldn't we take it and let our own world sink into oblivion?

"But we simply cannot allow this! Time travel must be seen for what it truly is: the greatest crime against society any individual can commit, and those who provide the means must be seen as criminals to rank with the worst perpetrators of genocide in history!"

For several years, efforts were made to discourage the social rats from abandoning ship; new legislation made it more difficult to make a one-way trip, but still many found ways to circumvent the rules. The principles of democracy and freedom crumbled as governments enacted more and more draconian regulations, eventually using force to close down company after company, to dismantle the apparatus, to make the very idea of travelling through time illegal.

In time, all the machines were dismantled as penalties grew more and more severe for violations of the no-travel laws. But the damage seemed all but irreversible; it was as if the majority of the population had simply given up ... everyone knew that, in principle, there was a way to escape and such knowledge destroyed the will to carry on. Every developed, industrial nation sank rapidly into decline, all sense of meaning drained away.

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As for me, I thought longingly of my own past, of what might have been if I had stayed with Allison and settled, satisfied, for the academic life I had initially embarked upon.

And just recently, a glimmer of hope: I heard rumours that there still existed a machine, a secret black market gateway to other times which could be accessed for a price. And I thought: what if ... what if ...?

What if I went back, back to those initial moments when I made my fatal choice. What if I entered the past and found Allison and discouraged her from leaving my younger self; what if she *didn't* find that other man and drift away from my younger

self? With her deep beliefs in the importance of human beings and human contact, her distrust of rampant technological development, she would make that younger me see the dangers inherent in what I was doing and I would find new lines of research and, more importantly, invest myself more deeply in her than in my work. If only ... if only I could prevent her from leaving me ...

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“You can’t change anything ...”

The old man leans closer and I can smell him, the staleness of age, of hopelessness ... the musty odour of futility.

“Remember that what has happened has always happened ... you can’t change anything ...”

“But I have to try ...” The words emerge as little more than a moan.

“Perhaps there is a way,” he hisses, the whispered words brushing against the skin of my cheek. “Do nothing ...”

I pull away from the frightful intimacy he is imposing, stumbling slightly as he reaches for me.

It is at this moment that the door rattles open and I turn to see the dark-haired man I have been waiting for. I almost rush at him, away from the old man still reaching for me. The man in the doorway scowls and turns aside, stepping back into the watery sunlight of the morning. I gasp at the air outside, tasting cool and fresh after the thick ancient miasma of the diner.

“I thought you weren’t coming,” I gasp.

He flicks a look at me, already striding away.

“I said come alone.”

“I am alone ...” I gesture back at the diner. “I’ve never seen him before ... please ... I’ve brought the money ...”

He stops and turns to face me, his eyes narrowed with distrust. His glance darts past me for a moment and I look around; the old man is standing in the doorway, watching.

“He’s just a bum,” I say, “looking for money ...”

He looks at me again, considering. Finally gives a sharp nod.

“This way.”

And he leads me across the wasteland towards the crumbling ruins of a building long since abandoned. As we pass among the roofless walls, the piles of weathered rubble, I feel something which until then I had interpreted as anticipation; I realize now that it is fear. I don’t know if I can trust this man; he knows that I’m carrying a great deal of money ... how easy just to kill me here and take it. Perhaps there is no machine ...

“Wait here,” he says in the shadows of a high wall, and quickly darts away.

I wait for an endless, undefined moment, thinking at last that I should just run from this plan ... who knows better than I that nothing can truly be changed? And yet if

I don't try, I'll surely go mad ...

"Come!"

He shoves me from behind and I stumbled on the uneven ground. Then he's in front of me, hurrying deeper into the ruins.

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In the shadows of a ruined factory, he leads me to a steel door inclined at a forty-five degree angle, like the entrance to a storm cellar. There must be surveillance cameras nearby because, as we approach, at some signal I don't see, the door swings upwards with the low grinding of a motor. I follow him down the steps inside and we move quickly along a tunnel lined with pipes and cables, lit dimly by bulbs in small wire cages. Around me, through the layers of concrete I can feel rather than hear the low pulse of machinery.

Finally, before another heavy door, we are met by a man who looks coolly at me through wire-framed glasses.

"You bring the money?" he asks.

I nod and he holds out his hand. I reach inside my jacket and pull out the thick envelope, testing almost unconsciously to see that the second envelope is still there in my pocket. I pass it over and he tears it open, glances inside, and nods. He opens the door and I follow him inside, my guide turning away and disappearing back along the corridor.

The room has an air of familiarity, the computer arrays along the right-hand wall, the pod to the left built like a custom modification into the side of the particle acceleration chamber. A strange feeling hits me: this is mine, I created it ... yet now it belongs to these people, officially criminals, who use it to generate illicit profits.

"You done this before?" the man with glasses asks as three others tend to their work stations.

I shake my head; no point in sharing my sense of irony with him. I conceived of this machine twenty years ago, and millions have since stepped inside to escape this world for another ... yet I myself have never before travelled through time.

The man flips open a file and quickly scans the forms inside.

"You'll experience a degree of disorientation when you arrive which normally lasts no more than a couple of hours ..." He reads one sheet a little more closely.

"Perhaps a bit longer in your case, since you're going back to a time you've already experienced ... we've found it's actually easier to enter an entirely unfamiliar time, than one you already know."

I nod ... I wrote papers on the psychology of all this many years ago.

"It's none of our business why you're going, but I should warn you that you'd best try to avoid running into yourself back there ... the disorientation could be catastrophic."

Again I nod.



“We can pinpoint your arrival fairly accurately, to within, say, a few days of the target you’ve asked for ... once you’re there, you’re on your own.” Eyes flicking over the papers. “No plans to come back?”

I shake my head. “One-way ticket.” If I succeed, this world will no longer exist for me to return to; and if I fail, there is nothing in this decaying carcass to draw me back ...

“Okay. You’ll have to remove all metal objects ... including your pants if you’ve got a metal zipper ...”

“It’s okay,” I say, “I came prepared ... no metal, no watch ...”

“Fine.” He turns to the other technicians. “Ready to roll?”

They all give him the thumbs up and he walks me over to the pod and swings the door open. Inside there is nothing but a molded, form-fitting pocket into which I settle.

“Breathe normally,” he says and I realize how tense I’ve become. I force myself to relax and let my eyes slide shut as he swings the door towards me, sealing me into a very slightly luminescent darkness.

I wait.

And what seems like a moment later, find myself kneeling on damp grass, leaning forward and retching violently.

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The initial physical shock doesn’t last long, leaving just a minor headache and slight nausea as a residue. But the sense of disorientation is more difficult to shake off: I find myself in a place I recognize but which is disturbingly unfamiliar ... the colours seem brighter, the details sharper than they should be. The world I have left was monochrome in comparison. This place and time have the feel of a computer-enhanced photograph, every detail too much *there* ...

When I can finally stand and walk on unsteady legs, I start across the small park on the hill overlooking the main university campus. Below me, a scattering of students lie on the grass, a couple of radios playing competing songs. In the distance, I can see the physics building where at this moment I might be deeply immersed in the first stages of the technical problems of designing the time machine. A part of me is drawn towards it, some compulsion to meet myself face to face, to see this other self who lacks the awful knowledge I now possess. But I know how dangerous that might be – there were (*will be*) cases in which such an encounter results in a kind of psychosis which left (*will leave*) its victims in a state of paralysis.

So, when I reach the base of the hill, I veer off to the left and make my way towards the vast barn-like structure of the art school’s studio building. In front of the main entrance, there is a small plaza in which a number of sculptures are on display. I pause at the drinking fountain to one side and realize that I am parched; I drink until my belly aches with the weight of the water, then slump down on one of the benches facing the studio doors. The sun is beginning to slide down the cloudless sky, warm on the back

of my neck. I grow drowsy ...

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My eyes snap open at the sound of loud voices, a burst of laughter. I'm stiff from the awkward position I've been dozing in. As I straighten up, stretching my neck to work out the kinks, a group of students is crossing the plaza in front of me, heading for the parking lot at the side of the building. And there, towards the back ... there she is, long hair hanging loosely, laughing as she speaks to the student beside her ... and a deep feeling unlike anything I've known before crushes the breath out of my lungs, a terrible aching sense of loss and longing ... she is so much more beautiful than anything my memory has been able to contain ...

One of the boys (they all look like boys and girls to me, I feel so old sitting here) turns to look back at her (*is he the one?*).

"Coming for a drink, Allison?" he calls.

She shakes her head and her hair flows liquidly about her face, her dark eyes gleam.

"No," and her voice increases the pressure crushing my chest, "I'm meeting Martin ..."

And she splits from the group and heads the opposite way.

I sit for a long time as the sun disappears behind the hill and the air begins to cool noticeably. In time the crushing weight eases and I can breathe again. My face feels cold and when I reach up to touch my cheek I discover the skin slick with tears. A hoarse croak of laughter escapes me as I wipe them away roughly with my palm.

*Stupid!* I keep repeating in my mind. *Stupid! how could you have let her slip away?*

Suddenly I feel resentful towards that other me, the one even now working on the far side of the campus, probably so enrapt in what he is doing that he's not even thinking about the beautiful creature making her way towards him ... the fool, he doesn't even deserve her ...

But at least I have come back while she is still interested in him; perhaps there is still a chance that I can keep them together and change what is to come ...

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I spend the next several weeks reestablishing myself in this world. I brought with me everything I need for the task: a healthy supply of period cash, expertly manufactured identity papers and, most importantly, detailed research on a number of stocks which I immediately invest in to ensure continuing financial security. I find a modest apartment not far from the university and spend much of each day near the fine arts studio building, watching for Allison's comings and goings, trying to see who the "other" might have been (*might be*) ... following her at a distance and noticing how

much time she spends with a small group of friends ... and how little with Martin ...

The first time I see him (*me!*) chills me. I must adjust my perceptions, persuade myself to view the scene as an old home movie, a videotape viewed from the perspective of many lost years, a mere recording ... because otherwise the urge to rush forward, to touch, to collide with this long lost self and merge with it, is virtually overwhelming. I recall the reports, the anecdotal accounts which spoke of the “gravitational pull” of one’s self encountered in another time, but I never really understood the meaning of what those witnesses said until now. As if struck by a violent vertigo, I can barely hold myself back from plunging towards myself and seeking obliteration in a final explosive collision ... I manage to turn away and flee, realizing that I must be more careful about where I allow myself to follow her.

I have not been long in this world before I draw some conclusions: first, that as yet Allison has not transferred her affections to someone other than Martin (*myself*); and second, that Martin is (*I was*) a complete fool. Every moment that I spend watching her just reconfirms for me how much more valuable she is (*was*) than the theoretical work he buries himself (*I buried myself*) in. And so, with every passing moment, I feel a growing disgust towards him for making those choices which eventually deprived me of her. Why can’t he see what I see now?

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I have been here for more than two months and I feel more or less comfortable with this world, little different than if I had moved to an unfamiliar state, or another country where they speak the same language but with a slightly different vernacular. And yet, I have begun to feel a certain discomfort ... almost a distaste for what I am doing. For, in a sense, I have been stalking Allison, pursuing and watching from the shadows, with her unaware of my presence. My actions have made me sense a vulnerability in her which disturbs me ... but there is another aspect to this, and that is simply my own desire to be able to draw closer to her, to reveal myself, perhaps to make her understand that in time (*in time!*) Martin will achingly come to realize what a fool he was in neglecting her, and perhaps by giving her this knowledge, forestall her desertion of him ... and so, on a warm summer Friday evening, I make my way to the small gallery where Allison’s debut show is opening.

Knowing where Allison’s work will eventually go, I find a new charm in this early display, the almost naive seeds of the increasingly intricate cultural critique she will develop over the next two decades. In fact, I am rather surprised at how few of the pieces actually deal with those issues of our slow strangulation by technology; some of the work even seems little more than decorative. I circulate on the edges of the small crowd which fills the gallery, watching her from continually shifting viewpoints ... and realize as I do that this constant aching I feel is a reawakening of my original love for her, that sense of surprised discovery that someone as lovely as this could possibly have any interest in me ... but, of course, it isn’t *me* she’s interested in, but rather that other

Martin, the fool who could not even manage to make it here this evening. My resentment of that younger self now feeds this aching new attraction I feel for Allison. As the evening wears on, I find myself circling ever closer to her, drinking in the sound of her voice, her laugh, the sight of her long hair as she tosses it back from her face ...

The crowd is thinning as I finally find the nerve to stand beside her in front of one of the paintings. I stare at it to forestall the powerful urge to look at her from just a few inches away. It takes a long moment for the image to register and then I suddenly see that it is actually a comic portrait of Martin immersed in his work ... a painting I have no memory of ever seeing.

"He looks lost," I say at last, my throat tight.

She glances at me and a chill passes through me as the certainty that she will recognize me produces a powerful urge to run. But her eyes move back to the portrait, a little sadly it seems.

"Perhaps," she says softly. "I'd never thought of it that way before ..."

She seems lost herself for a moment and I feel like an intruder into something very private, very intimate. I should leave, and yet her closeness, the warmth I can feel radiating from her, keeps me here.

"I like your work," I say, knowing how lame this sounds even before the words are uttered.

She turns to smile politely.

But before she can brush me off with a polite response, I gesture across the gallery.

"I particularly like that series," I say and suddenly find myself talking to her of my own feelings about the way we are allowing technology to separate us from our own better selves. I can barely breathe as I sense a change in her, the polite set of her features softening as if a door were opening inside.

And she begins to speak, saying things which obviously originate from some deep, almost painful source. I can scarcely believe it when I hear myself inviting her to go for coffee, and when I hear her accept, I seem to step outside myself, to watch myself from a distance as the two of us leave the now almost empty gallery and walk in the warm moist night towards a small café a couple of blocks away.

We talk through the night, nursing lattes, and I feel a sense almost of awe ... to be this close to her once again, to feel her respond to me with interest, even excitement ...

It is very late when she pauses for a moment, looking at me intently. "I feel as if I've known you a very long time." A sudden embarrassed laugh. "God, what a cliché!"

I smile. "Two old souls," I say and I can't help but feel that we were (*are*) meant to be together. It is only as we part when the sky is brightening to the east that I feel a twinge of something else, something which it takes a moment to identify as I watch her walk away: something like guilt, because now, apart from her, I realize that I have perhaps unfairly been using my knowledge of who she will become ... I have been, in a way, trying to impress her by speaking about all the things which still lie half buried in her unconscious. And yet my desire for her counters that this is really nothing more than

a sensitivity to who she is and that is something which my younger self lacked.

Back in my apartment, lying down but not yet asleep, I realize that it is *I* who loves her, not the younger Martin ... and I begin to believe that trying to guide her back to him as I originally intended would be unfair to her ... and perhaps unnecessarily generous to him. As I drift off to sleep, I think more surely that Allison and I are meant to be together ...

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We meet quite often after that first night and the bonds between us grow quickly. I know she is seeing less and less of Martin, but I no longer care. I now know that I have a part to play in her development as an artist, not just as a sounding board for her evolving ideas, but in a very material way. My carefully controlled investments, based on the detailed analysis of years of stock market data which I brought back with me, have made me financially secure and I can extend that security to Allison so she can devote herself entirely unencumbered to her work. In time, as she gains prominence and we live together in a deep and satisfying emotional atmosphere, I forget about Martin and what he is doing, I forget that I came here not to repossess Allison, but to prevent Martin embarking on that course which would ruin the world. For almost a decade, I live blindly and happily with this beautiful and talented woman ...

But then the failure of my original purpose becomes impossible to ignore: reports of the possibility of time travel have turned into news stories about the first travellers, speculation heating up as the implications begin to sink in. Perhaps it is not yet too late ... I begin to turn my resources towards countering the hype and excitement Martin's invention is generating. But how best to do this without revealing my own identity and making public what I actually know of the future eludes me. Now that time travel is a fact out there in the world, not merely a concept in Martin's eager brain, how can it be contained? I have already lived through the years of decline initiated by the discovery, heard the counter-arguments and seen them ignored for too long ... and the full failure of my journey back begins to overwhelm me. How could I have allowed myself to be diverted in this way?

These doubts, the new anger I feel towards myself, begin to isolate me. I have had ten glorious years of personal happiness with Allison, but I now see a distance growing between us. The greater her prominence, the more numerous her commitments, the more irrelevant I seem to be to her life. I have spent all this time with no other purpose than to be with her, and now I see that she is seeking others with her own sense of commitment to the world. What do I have to offer, other than my own useless knowledge of what will happen in the next ten years?

It is only now that I fully realize the truth of my situation, that it was me, always already, who took Allison away from Martin – from my own younger self – and helped to pave the way for the disaster to come. My coming back had always already happened and I was – am – powerless to change anything. I had my ten happy years, but now even

Allison is once more lost to me and I am doomed to live out these next ten years again, years which I have already lived with growing doubt and regret as a younger Martin ... a Martin who even now is beginning to go through the pains of realizing what he has wrought.

The depression I sink into as all this becomes apparent to me, this terrible sense of hopelessness from knowing so deeply that any attempt to change events is so utterly futile, makes me unbearable to live with in Allison's eyes and we inevitably part ... her to continue her rise as an influential voice crying against the ruin of the world, me to sink into a kind of lethargy of the soul, to watch hopelessly the unfolding of inevitable events which I once hoped I could avert, but now know I must witness again moment by painful moment ... and in time I find myself in a state of decay, living at first as a recluse, then as little more than a vagrant ...

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It is many years before I see Allison again. Wandering empty streets aimlessly I finally notice the posters which have been pasted on walls, left in windows ... a retrospective exhibition of her work paralleling the discovery and consequences of time travel. I do my best to clean myself up and make my way to the gallery where the show is to open this evening. I wait across the street as the afternoon lengthens and see people beginning to arrive. I move closer, uncertain just what I intend to do ... I will not be permitted inside, not the way I look now, but I do want to see her again ...

And now here she is, pulling up in a limousine ... the kind of luxury I was once able to provide her with. She is surrounded by admirers and hangers-on and yet, for some inexplicable reason, as she turns from the car towards the gallery entrance, her gaze passes across me and she hesitates for a moment, glances back. I raise a hand tentatively and try to smile. She is still remarkably beautiful. She says something to the people closest to her and moves towards me. I suddenly feel cold ... a deep sense of shame and self-pity ... what the hell am I thinking, being here? I turn away and run, stumbling as quickly as I can to the alley at the side of the gallery and rushing into the shadows there, to hide, gasping for breath, praying that she will not follow me here ...

That night I remember that once, in despair, I decided to go back in time to change what had become of my life, what had become of the world in consequence of my life ... and had instead brought about the terrible things I wanted to change. The day of that futile journey, I realize, is drawing close and, driven by the sickening sense of self-loathing which erupted when I saw myself once more in Allison's eyes, I know that I must somehow prevent myself from going back, must allow Allison and Martin to find their own way through the distractions of those early years ...

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And so here I am now, sitting hunched in the corner of an ancient and filthy diner

at the edge of a wasteland as dawn spreads across the sky and picks out the ruins of disused factories and warehouses. I can scarcely breathe as I see him enter, pale and nervous as he goes to the counter and orders coffee. When I went back, I felt that terrible sense of vertigo simply seeing Martin at a distance ... here, now, I must actually approach him ... speak to him ... I feel as if I might explode with some intolerable pressure in my brain. But I have no choice ... because I have done this before, I remember it now, the old man who tried to warn me, the old man I shied away from in my preoccupation, my determination to make the attempt, to try to change what I already knew would be impossible to change ...

I force myself to rise, to walk across the cracked and gritty floor, to lean against the counter beside him, to stare at that face, a distorted mirror image of my own. I reach out tentatively and lay my hand, filthy, the nails cracked and broken, on the back of *my* hand ...

“Life,” I say, my voice low and rasping, “is little more than the steady accumulation of disappointments and losses.”

He stares at me silently, waiting, then glances towards the door, across the murky windows.

“We have to accept that fact,” I say, “and learn to enjoy the moment. Not look back. Not desire to change what’s already done and can’t be changed ...”

His eyes snap back to my face; I can’t look at him.

“What?” There is little force behind the word; he seems drained of energy. “What did you say?”

“You have no reason to believe me,” I say sadly. “But I know and if you listen to me, you’ll be spared a great deal of pain ...”

“Get away from me!”

The sudden force of his voice, the way he pulls away from me, makes me stagger back a step. He moves away, going to the door where he leans as if suddenly breathless. I follow him tentatively.

“You can’t change anything ... Remember that what has happened has always happened ... you can’t change *anything* ...”

“But I have to try ...” The words emerge from him as little more than a moan.

“Perhaps there is a way,” I hiss, feeling a renewed sense of urgency ... time is running out. “*Do nothing* ...”

He pulls away from me and I reach for him ... but just then the door clatters open and the man is there, cold eyes raking me. I see a viciousness in his face, the dead stare of a petty thug. When he leads Martin away into the wasteland, I have to follow ... if only there were some way to make him rethink his decision, some way to make him see that it’s all futile ... if I can only make him turn back, then I – *this* me – will cease to be and the weight of hopelessness and regret will be gone ...

I lose sight of them among the ruins and finally slow down, leaning against a crumbling wall to catch my breath.

There is a sudden soft sound behind me, the movement of a foot in dry grass,

slight shift of a stone. I am still turning, barely catching a glimpse of the thug's face as the knife goes in ...