

Eddie +

I am sitting in my office on the second floor of the house my mother and I have shared for almost all my 32 years. She is in the kitchen making lunch. I can smell the aroma of coffee drifting up the staircase, blending with the library scent of old paper stacked in my room. I can hear the popping of the old percolator, and shortly Mother will arrive with her tray of buttered biscuits and a steamy cup, a ritual she has repeated every day since I returned home to her two years ago after an absence that I have never been able to honestly account for.

There have been many reasons for my deceitful silence. Perhaps sensing the destructive repercussions of what I would have to reveal were I to be completely transparent, Mother has not demanded any explanations though 27 years have passed since she last saw me as a 25-year-old youth. She appears fully satisfied that I have returned, and I have offered her only the most superficial accounting of the 5 years that I spent away from her.

Perhaps the thoughtful reader might think that I have mixed up my numbers, or that my words have been carelessly chosen. How can each set of seemingly contradictory facts be true? Let me assure you of the accuracy of both. Yes. I was gone from her for 5 years. And yes, she was without me for 25.

But this perplexing declaration explains nothing of the tragic circumstances which have, since my homecoming 2 years ago, dogged my day-to-day life and forced me to keep the secret which, when it is revealed, will surely discredit my research and professional reputation, brand me a pariah in the eyes of those I respect, and much worse, drive Mother, my sole remaining love, to madness.

So you see I fully anticipate that the decision to reveal my story will come at a great cost to my standing in the scientific community and fracture what little I have had of a personal, private life. I know that, far worse, my beloved mother, always on shaky emotional ground, will lose the stability I have sacrificed my own independence to ensure, that the shock of what I must now reveal can very well end her life, or, at best, condemn her to the horrors of premature dementia. Still, regardless of the impact Mother and I will face, advances in my field of study- Logistical Temporal Sequentiality- and the threatening and imminent realization of a practicable, widely available transporter, unregulated as 3-D printers, have progressed to the point where I can no longer maintain my silence.

As you read my story- with an open mind, I solemnly hope, despite its repugnant revelations-you will understand why, regardless of the effect its reception will have on Mother and me, the time has finally arrived for mankind to learn from the catastrophic mistake I made, the humbling and repulsive mistake that might yet save the human species from its own arrogance and blind genius.

My name is Dr. Edward Pushkin, and I am chief researcher at the Laboratory of 4TH Dimensional Studies at the Arizona Institute of Advanced Theoretical Physics. Although the nature of my work has, up to now, remained a guarded secret, there exists a cadre of scientists committed to the same goal, laboring in windowless, unobtrusive facilities such as ours with a relentless passion, a monomania I shared as a student and a young researcher. But the experience I must now reveal to you has left me convinced that the boon to humanity these well-intentioned would-be benefactors expect from the application of their exhaustive research will rebound with an appalling and opposite effect. The story I am about to tell is just one small example of the unanticipated suffering the exploitation of their advancements shall unleash upon the world. Pray that the horrid revulsion my experience exposes will

be sufficient cause to bring my peers to their senses and confine their discoveries to theory before the nightmare of its implementation is impossible to contain.

The careful reader will notice my use of the exclusionary word “their” in place of the inclusionary “our” when I spoke of my fellow scientists studying LTS. Let this be my first confession then. Since I returned after those 5 years of absentia that began 27 years ago, I have done everything in my power to thwart my colleagues’ research while assuming the façade of helpfulness and collegiality. Throwing sand in the gears while appearing to be the guardian of their workings has not been an art I ever expected to master, but that is precisely what necessity has made of me.

And so, my secret duplicity, and especially my concern for the well-being of Mother, who, as I have already stated, will be crushed by the announcement of my terrible history, have heretofore precluded its revelation and forced my subterfuge. But great leaps in the science of temporal transitioning- in laymen’s terms, time travel- and the imminence of a workable transporter that my colleagues have now brought to the developmental stage, have forced me to reveal my story. I can only hope that this message, coming from a once trusted and soon to be disgraced source, finds receptive minds and hearts before the impending danger dangling before mankind cannot be averted. But let me start at the beginning, when I was a young man, 27 years ago, fascinated by the potential time travel had to bring peace and prosperity to our troubled planet, long before I understood the existential danger its unimaginable possibilities portend.

It was some 30 years ago that I met Maurice Hebbler, my assigned roommate at the University, AIATP, where I currently do my research and lead a few graduate seminars. He was an energetic, inspired PhD candidate in Applied Theoretical Physics. I was working on a doctorate in Applied Mathematics with a special focus on ATP. Our obsessive passions were well matched, he bolstering my limitations in Physics, and I helpful in translating his concepts into the language of advanced Mathematics. Before long, our common interests melded into a great friendship, a brotherhood of sympathetic souls, and when we were matriculated, we decided to pool our minds and resources together in the creation of mankind’s first practical temporal transporter- a time-machine- an invention we dreamers believed could rectify the errors of the past that had brought about mankind’s current hardships and inequalities and usher in an age of health and prosperity, equality, enlightenment and peace.

As graduate students, Maurice and I had come up with a plan that made possible such a machine. Young and inspired, driven by a sense of social responsibility, the hundreds of hours we spent blueprinting theory into reality were joyous and seemingly effortless. By the time Hebbler and Pushkin had become Doctors of Theoretical Physics and Applied Mathematics, we were ready and eager to build a prototype transporter.

So it came to pass that upon graduation, we joined forces to build a laboratory where we could have the freedom to pursue the project independent of bean-counting M.B.A.’s and the intrusion of government regulators. Fortunately, we each possessed the resources to do so. Maurice sold his late father’s television sales and repair emporium (where he had spent his childhood as lead technician), and I had access to the proceeds of a significant life insurance claim Mother and I came into after my father, who had disappeared under mysterious circumstances while Mother was pregnant with me, was finally declared dead.

I have already spoken of Mother's physical and emotional vulnerability. Perhaps it's best for me to interrupt the flow of the narrative to help you better understand the cause of it.

Mother had loved my father with the intensity of the one and only. Their marriage was like what children expect when the fairy tale is finished: They lived happily. But "ever after" was not to be. When he unexpectedly vanished one shattering day, with no letter of explanation or remorse, she suffered an emotional breakdown and, having no family or friends to care for her, was committed to one of Arizona's state mental institutions where she gave birth to me. I was placed in a foster home by the Child Protective Service. After almost a year of therapy, when she finally came out her listlessness, when at last she could function, if not as she had when Father lived with us, at least enough to be independent and capable of caring for her only child, she was finally released. A short while after she was proclaimed functional, I was returned to her. To the professionals who had treated her, Mother appeared fully rehabilitated- another success story. But the truth known to only me is that her stability was due in large part to being reunited with me, that it was my presence that alleviated the anguish she bore after my father went missing. The words she would mechanically repeat at what seemed to be the most inappropriate times will echo for the rest of my life: "You won't leave me, will you Edward? Please don't leave me like your father did."

It is for that reason, and our need for privacy, that Maurice and I built our secluded laboratory in the remote, untrodden desert 25 miles from the house she and I shared. I commuted to work by Jeep or motorcycle every day, while my partner made an apartment for himself there within the confines of its walls.

When we began, building the lab was a logistical nightmare. There were no roads leading to it, no power, sanitation or water at the site. The desert sun was brutal and the nights freezing cold. We began by installing a source of ample photo-voltaic energy with a dependable battery back-up. We dug a well. But after we had electricity and a supply of well water, the work proceeded rapidly and within 4 months' time, a structure with all the necessities of a proper, working laboratory was erected, and we were able to stock up on equipment and supplies and begin the construction of our machine.

It's not essential to go into the many setbacks we encountered, the mistakes we made, the funds we wasted. The important thing is that we were determined to succeed and had the capacity to do so. Perhaps the greatest asset we enjoyed was our treasured friendship, the intimacy that came of our struggle. This was the last time I would ever know such a fraternal closeness, for as I have already stated, after my return from that 5-year hiatus, the warming consolation of brotherly companionship would forever be lost to me.

We worked alongside each other for over a year, he putting all his time into the project, I sharing a worker's homelife with Mother, learning from our failures, the two of us struggling until we made our breakthrough. I remember his excited voice, the gleam in his eye when he first called me with the news of our potential success.

"Eddie!!" he cried, "EDDIE!!! I think we've done it, Eddie! Get over here and make it quick! You need to see this!"

I lost no time rushing to his side. The machine was complete and powered up. He stood by it, beaming and chortling.

“What makes you think it will work this time?” I asked doubtfully. I didn’t want to stifle his enthusiasm, but we’d already suffered multiple disappointments.

“Well, Eddie, what makes you think it won’t?”

“I don’t know if it won’t work, Moe. It sure looks impressive, but so did the Edsel.”

“Ah! Have faith, O Seeker of Insight!”

“Faith is a beautiful thing, Moe- let’s see if the thing runs on something more tangible.”

“‘Tangible’ he says to me! Why, this little beauty will revolutionize life on Earth!”

“OK then- let’s send a hammer into the past and see if it can whack a nail.”

“With pleasure, my bonny lad.”

Maurice withdrew a hammer from his toolbox and placed it on the transport pad. He pressed the isolation tube button and a glass cylinder descended from the overhead mechanism and enclosed the hammer. He turned to me and asked, “How far back shall we send it?”

“Oh,” I wondered, not confident in the machine’s functionality. “How about an hour ago?”

“Will do.” It was 10:23. He adjusted the time selector dial to read 9:23. “How long shall it stay there?”

“Oh,” I repeated, enjoying his enthusiasm, “Five minutes will be fine.”

“You will see it return in exactly 5 minutes, after I send it back an hour.”

He set the duration control lever to 5 minutes.

“Ready?”

“Ready!”

“Here goes then...” and with that he pressed the red send button.

There was a hum and a buzz. The lights dimmed somewhat, but the machine did not explode or even smoke. Instead, we could see through the tube’s glass the hammer slowly dissolve and finally disappear.

“Ha! Told you!” He crowed, haughty as a rooster.

“Told me what? Yes, it’s gone- but where did it go? And what’s going to happen in 5 minutes if it doesn’t reappear? And if it does come back, will it be the same hammer as it was before?”

“Jeepers, Eddie! Don’t be such a pessimist!”

“That’s the basis of science, Pal. Pessimism.”

“Well, you don’t have to like it so much!”

“I’m just trying to be reasonable.”

The conversation went on like that for 5 minutes. And then, to our amazement, more to mine than his, we saw the hammer slowly reappear on the transport pad.

“Success! Success, Eddie!!” he boomed like thunder.

“Not so fast, Moe. How do you know it went back an hour? How do you even know if it reassembled properly?”

“That’s easily determined.” He removed the hammer and hefted it, satisfied with its solidity.

“It seems to be the same as it was.” He drove a nail into a board to support his contention.

“Sure looks that way. But how do we know? There could be a subtle change that we can’t recognize.”

“Alright then- I have an idea. Let’s send a plate of cookies and 2 cups of hot coffee back an hour for let’s say 10 minutes and see how they taste when they rematerialize.”

“That’s what I call thinking! I’ve been eating those cookies all my life- if there’s any change, I’ll notice it!”

We placed the items on the transporter pad and repeated the process. Ten minutes later, we celebrated with cookies and tepid coffee.

“This is swell, Moe! But we’ve been working with inanimate objects. I think the time has come to settle whether something living can withstand the strain. Any ideas?”

“How about a potted cactus? It’s too early yet to risk an animal.”

“That sounds like a good idea, though I’d hate to lose a good cactus.”

“You’re not gonna lose a thing! This baby works like a charm! It’s got to! Don’t you trust your own math?”

“Uh-huh. Let’s find out.”

We took the cactus Mother had potted for us as a laboratory-warming gift and repeated the procedure. Ten minutes passed, and the plant reappeared.

“Look, look, look at that beee-you-tee-ful cactus, Eddie me lad! Healthy as you and almost me!”

“Let’s give it a day or two to see if it survives...”

“Survives’ he tells me! Of course it will survive!! And have little baby cactuses!”

“And baby cacti, too?”

“Why not? Of course it will!”

“And if it does survive? What then?”

“Then, my beamish boy, we send a snake back and see what happens! You know how I feel about ‘em!”

The esteemed Dr. Hebbler was deathly afraid of them, had been all his life. Expending one in the interest of science would not upset him at all. He'd be relieved by the loss.

"I hope we're not getting ahead of ourselves."

"Or behind!" he quipped.

"Because we still won't know where these things really went. Maybe all we have here is a machine that made them invisible. How can we tell if we really sent them back to the past? How can we test the accuracy of our machine?"

"Math, Baby, sweet, sweet math! And they did return when they were supposed to."

"But did they really go back in time? Or somewhere else if- and I mean if- they went anywhere at all."

"I believe we already know the answer to that one. But let's just wait until tomorrow to examine the cactus. Let's be sure that it's still healthy. That's the first step."

That's how we left matters when that day was done, two hopeful spirits uplifted by a cactus on a windowsill.

It was hard to fall asleep that night, and when I finally did, it was to the accompaniment of dream hallucinations. Our formerly passive cactus, having grown taller than a telephone pole, had abandoned its pot. Uprooted and homeless, it crept along the desert on snake-like roots that writhed like the arms of drowning men before they take the final drink. When I approached, its many needles bristled menacingly as though to say that I was the Dr. Frankenstein responsible for the mess it was in. But try as I did, there was nothing I could do to restore its former condition, and whenever I came near, those needles threatened like pikes raised above a shield wall.

I awoke early, ate a rushed, perfunctory breakfast for which I had no appetite, bid Mother a quick adieu with a peck to her cheek and hurried to the lab.

Moe was already there, eager and grinning.

"Hurry up, Eddie- you gotta see this."

I ran to his side. There, on the bench, sat the cactus- unblemished and perky, the image of perfect health.

"Nothing to see. I think it's going to make it," he announced.

"It looks that way, Moe- so far. Let's try a more delicate plant this time, like a fern."

We repeated the process with the more tender plant, sending it 2 hours into the past for a duration of 15 minutes, and upon its return, the fern appeared as lush as it had been earlier.

"Very promising. I think it's going to be fine- but we should wait a week or so before rushing in with a test animal," I suggested, "even a snake."

Thank goodness for the chores that kept us busy that week as we anxiously monitored the health of the cactus and fern. But seven days passed uneventfully: the two plants were thriving, their

healthy condition seemingly unaffected by their experience with the machine. We were ready to begin the last stage of our experiment.

“I volunteer to get the snake,” I offered.

“I appreciate your consideration.”

I lifted the harmless garter snake from its glass terrarium and placed it on the pad. The isolation tube lowered and repeating the previous procedure, we sent the reptile two weeks into the past for a duration of 10 minutes.

We did our best to ease the tension of those 10 minutes, knowing full well what the last step would involve if the snake returned alive and healthy. A strange conflation of relief and anxiety overcame us when it reappeared seemingly unharmed by its epic journey.

“The snake doesn’t appear harmed. But we’ll need to wait a week or so just to be certain,” I said to my friend.

“So we shall. But note that in the meantime, the critter’s not saying too much about what happened to him while he was away.”

“We need to find out.”

“Yeah, we do.”

“Heads or tails?”

“Good God, but I hate snakes!”

“Heads or tails. Not heads and tails.”

“Alright, if you are going to be insistent about it. Heads. And I still hate snakes.”

I flipped the coin and won the toss. I say “won” ironically, for this win of mine presaged the beginning of the agony Maurice, poor Mother and I would forever after be forced to endure.

I had a week to prepare myself for a half-hour excursion into the past. The plan was simple. With Maurice at the controls, I’d whisk back in time before I was born- to prevent meeting myself, Maurice joked- observe, return and report. His joke seemed funny at the time.

At the end of the week, the snake to all appearances healthy, eating and performing all its functions, my knapsack laden with a camera and tape recorder, notebook, pencil and radio, a canteen of water and a bagged lunch, I was ready and anxious to go on the journey Maurice and I had been planning all those many happy years.

How could I have known the heartaches to follow the handshake that soon became a tight embrace? Maurice and I had had too much fun together to ever become poignantly emotional, but I could see a tear welling in his eye as the isolation tube lowered around me. He raised his hand as if in a military salute and I nodded in response. We were to be reunited in 30 minutes, but our parting came off like the last shovel load of dirt filling a grave.

Having made our grim farewell, controls set to send me back 27 years in time for a half-hour stay, Maurice pressed the red send button, and I vanished from the present and re-appeared in the past.

How best to describe one's evaporation and subsequent reincarnation? In fact, I felt nothing, like a patient etherized upon a slab, undergoing complete anesthesia, until I awoke under the blazing desert sky with no apparent after-effects, strong and clear-minded as when I had left. I found myself exactly in the same place where I had started, but the laboratory had disappeared and the ancient cacti surrounding it were merely adolescent volunteers. I was convinced that I had entered the past.

A half hour in the open desert wasn't much time to gather proof of the year I had landed in, but the radio in my knapsack was likely to provide the answer. I found and turned it on, but the reception consisted of static. So I took a few sips of water from the canteen, and refreshed after my long voyage, set off exploring the territory like an archeologist would, searching for rubbish that had been left behind by hikers, perhaps a newspaper, anything that might offer proof. Let me add that I was confident the Hebbler/Pushkin machine would find me wherever I was and send me home when the half hour was up. Our snake must surely have crawled about when we experimented with it, and the machine had retrieved it despite its wandering.

The first striking thing I noticed as I walked was the presence of mobile hills -drifting sand dunes- that were not of my time. The wind had offered a clue. I decided to climb to the top of one to get a panoramic view of the landscape.

I clambered up the nearest and tallest, and when I reached the summit, expecting to see yet more undisturbed desert, the sight I came upon was to prove as whole-life transformative as my meeting with Maurice had been.

Stranded only several hundred yards to the west of me, I saw a young woman, a vision from a fairy tale, straining to change the oversized wheel of a disabled Jeep.

She had cleverly managed to jack the vehicle up on the base of shifting sand using a thick board as a platform. But accomplishing that and removing the five corroded lug-nuts had evidently sapped her strength. She had paused from her exertions to rest in the shade of the Jeep, the blown tire on the ground beside her. But gravity was not going to help her lift the spare onto the axle. She was gathering her energy for the attempt. She was at least 25 miles from the nearest help. Except for me.

Fearing that I might startle her by my sudden appearance, I cupped my hands around my mouth, and in my finest baritone, sang out "Hello, hello, hello!" from the dune's peak. The words echoed and caught her attention. I waved my arms and cried, "Hold on there! I'll be with you in a minute! Don't you worry!"

I tumbled down that hill, running to her as quickly as I could, imagining the anxiety she must have been feeling at that moment. I would be her knight in shining armor; she could help me as well by verifying the year we were in.

What happened next is something time can never change. It's been going on since Adam first met Eve. I fell in love the moment I saw her there, standing up to meet me in her cuffed jeans and knotted shirt, the heavy work boots and rough gloves. The grease on the tip of her nose did nothing to obscure her loveliness. She was absolutely angelic.

Maybe it was the sun, the waves of heat that gave her blonde hair that unearthly radiance. Maybe she truly was an angel, and the glow came from within her. Who can understand these things that so many of us have known? My case was hardly unique. I only know that when I saw those large sky-blue eyes, that pin-point of a nose, the tiny pouted circle of her full lips, the honest expression of her perfect face, well- I fell, and hard, for the first time in my 25 years. And when she spoke confidently, trustingly, as if we'd been forever friends, I knew that I'd met the woman who would be my confidant and lover, the keeper of my soul and fellow-traveler through life.

I was at her side in a twinkling. And then I saw another clue that supported the machine's success: The Jeep was a Willys, not a Chrysler, the kind that was available as war surplus 20 to 30 years before, the model with the gas tank located directly under the driver's seat.

"Hi. Can you use a little help, Miss?" I burred, hoping there would be no wedding band concealed by the work-gloves she was wearing.

"Hello, Stranger! It is so nice to meet you in such an unexpected place! Thank you for your kind offer- but I think I can manage the wheel."

I looked at it, lying there on the sand. Mounted, a "light-weight" aluminum wheel weighs in at 80 pounds. This one was made of heavy-duty pressed steel.

I smiled at her- and truly believed that if those thin arms proved inadequate, her spirit would supply the remaining necessary strength.

"Yes. I do believe you can. But I wouldn't be any kind of gentleman if I didn't offer to help."

Her responding smile lit up my soul. "I suppose I wouldn't be much of a lady if I didn't accept your kind gesture. Think you can lift it?"

Could I lift it! I would have borrowed Archimedes' lever and moved the earth if she had wanted me to.

"Don't know- we might have to work on it together..." Where was my charm coming from? As a student, I couldn't even get a date for my senior prom.

"Well, let's not disappoint each other. I'll take one end, and you grab the other- fair enough?"

"Fair enough."

Those lithe and slender arms were surprisingly strong. Together we boosted the wheel up on its studs. I held it in place as she spun the lug nuts onto the threads. We torqued them with a 4-headed wrench, checked our work and released the jack. The Jeep was ready to run.

"Thank you, kind sir. Your assistance was greatly appreciated. Might I show my gratitude with a lift to wherever you're headed? We are 25 miles from nowhere, after all."

I should tell you that by the time we had finished replacing the wheel, a half an hour had long passed. But smitten as I was, I never gave it a thought. Ask me to explain how time travel works; give me enough chalk and 3 blackboards and I will write out the math that makes it happen. Ask me about love, and I'm a floundering idiot.

“Thank you kindly, Miss,” by then she had taken off her gloves and I knew she was unmarried, “I think I might be going your way.”

“Hop in Mr....?”

“My name is Edward Pushkin. And you...?”

“Ella Caine. And if I’m not being presumptuous, what are you doing in the middle of the desert?”

What could I do but lie? Was I to tell her the truth... that I had just dropped in from the future for a short visit into the past? I settled on an evasive half-truth.

“I’m on holiday, doing a little digging for artifacts. The past is a hobby of mine. How about you? What are you doing out here in this immense wasteland, Miss Caine?”

“We seem to share a common interest in the past, Mr. Pushkin, but I wouldn’t characterize this desert as a ‘wasteland.’ There’s a 10,000-year-old site nearby. I often come out here searching for chards and arrow heads. Sometimes you can find interesting minerals like Feldspar and Fool’s Gold, pink and smoky quartz. There’s even petrified palm and redwood and incredibly old fossils of ferns, shells and fish. We have enough to start our own museum! And of course, the cacti are amazing. I pot up the special ones I find to plant in Dad’s garden. He loves them!”

How I wanted to tell her about Mother’s shared enthusiasm for them! And roses! Needles and thorns. But then the conversation would lead to my home life with her, and the time I had come from was a subject I was not prepared to explain nor lie about. I decided to focus on her and leave my story as vague as would satisfy her. Smitten as I was, our romance having just begun, I could imagine her reaction had I confronted her with who I was and the year I had come from.

“You sound very fond of him.”

“Indeed I am. He and Mom adopted me when I was 6 months old. I couldn’t love them more were we blood related.”

This launched me to lecture on one of my favorite subjects. It’s the pedant in me, inescapable even when my latent Cary Grant is the role that’s called for.

“But you are blood-related, Miss Caine! We all are! Our DNAs prove that. Our genes match 99.9%! From Eskimo to Hottentot, we differ by a mere tenth of a percentage point regardless of appearances. Black and yellow, white and brown! Modern man, in fact, actually traces back a couple of hundred thousand years to a common mother in Africa. We are all rel...”

The Jeep screeched to a full stop. A cloud of dust rose around us. Ella was staring at me open-jawed. Her hand was trembling on the wheel.

“H...H...how do you know that, Mr. Pushkin?” she stuttered.

“I, uh, I took a class in Genetics a while ago at the University. The progress scientists are making in that field is remarkable.”

“And you say we are all that closely related?”

“Not me, Miss Caine. Great thinkers who know much more than I ever will.”

“Related? Like brothers and sisters?”

“Like brothers and sisters...”

“My God! There’s science to confirm the brotherhood of man!” She was overwhelmed by the idea.

“And sisterhood too.”

“Husbands and wives...?”

“Them too, strange as it seems. And mothers and fathers.”

“Oh my sweet Lord!” She paused thoughtfully. “Mr. Pushkin, would you like to meet my father? He would be very interested in talking with you. He has retired since Mom’s passing, but he had a long career hybridizing vegetables for maximum production, drought tolerance, disease resistance- you know, anything that would improve them.”

“I’d surely love to, Miss Caine.”

“Please call me Ella. And tell me about yourself. You haven’t said much- who are you?”

“Well, there’s not much to say. I’ve recently graduated from the University where your father worked, though regretfully I never met him. You could say that I’ve been wandering about since, trying to find a place to send out roots. I guess I’m still trying to start my adult life.”

“Are you in a rush to get somewhere Mr. Pushkin? Can I impose on you for a few hours? It would mean so much to Dad! And I can fix us a nice lunch.”

A few hours! My infatuation had erased my awareness of the passage of time. All thoughts of returning to Mother, Maurice and the lab had been forgotten. My moment with Ella should have ended at least an hour before. But something had happened. Maurice must have had a reason for this delay. Perhaps the machine required a repair. My best friend would never have purposefully left me stranded so unreachably far away.

“It would be a great pleasure, Ella. And please call me Edward.” Ella smiled broadly, ground first gear and we sped off.

I spent most of the ride watching her from the corner of my eye instead of looking for evidence of the past. She caught me at it at one point and grinned a response. I’ll never forget that brief moment. The blue sky. The heat of the sun. The enchantment of the desolate landscape. Bouncing on the rutted desert floor as we raced along. And especially how she turned to look at me, her eyes curious and affectionate, but always, as was everything about her, lovely as the sweetest gift Nature could produce. A rose without thorns. A cactus to hug.

The Caine ranch was located just outside the perimeter of Snakebite, the college town the University is affiliated with. We pulled into the long, dusty driveway and were greeted by her father who was pattering in his garden of cacti and succulents.

"I was getting a bit worried about you, Daughter. But you seem to be doing fine. Who's the new friend you're totin'?"

"This is Mr. Edward Pushkin, Dad. The Jeep got a flat about 25 miles out and he helped me with the spare. He's a geneticist- I thought you'd be interested in meeting him." She turned to me and said, "Edward, I'd like you meet my father of whom I've spoken: Dr. Henry Caine."

"Well, how do you do, young fellow!" He stretched his long arm out to shake my hand. "Thank you for retrieving my independent and strong-willed wench of a daughter! We're pleased to have you here and make your acquaintance!"

"As indeed I am, Professor Caine."

"Oh, you can drop the formalities, Son. I've been retired for several years now and have slouched myself into a life of ease and comfort. Call me Hank. It suits me so much better nowadays."

"Thank you, Sir. I shall. And please call me Edward."

"I'm going to rustle up some lunch for us while you men make your speaks. How about some refreshing lemonade first?"

"Sounds wonderful, Daughter. Edward looks a bit dry, and I've been scratchin' dust since you left. We'll just sit here enjoyin' the day and blabbin', if that's all right by you two. We don't get too much company out here, Edward, and I've built up a passle of thoughts just itchin' to be spoken."

"There are things I'd like to ask you as well, Sir. Thank you for your hospitality."

Ella grinned a fetching smirk. "I'll bring the drinks in a twinkling. Make yourself at home, Edward."

Dr. Caine winked at her, turned a smile at me and said, "You appear mighty young to be a geneticist, Edward. Hybridization has fascinated me since I first read about Gregor Mendel's pioneering work with peas. Are you familiar with him and his research?"

"Yes Sir. But I am not a geneticist. I think your daughter got the wrong impression while we were talking during the ride here."

"No? That's curious. Her deductive powers must be failing her. What is your area, Edward?"

"Applied Mathematics, Sir. I recently graduated from the University."

"I'm sorry I missed you there! And are you planning to continue graduate work?"

"Well, Sir, that's over and done with."

"Don't tell me you're Dr. Pushkin!"

"You could say that."

"Well I'll be dipped! They certainly are hatchin' 'em young nowadays!"

"Thank you, Sir."

Ella was returning with a tray.

“Say Daughter- turns out our young guest is not a geneticist after all but a mathematician. With a doctorate!”

“Forgive me, Ella. I should have been more forthcoming...”

“Will wonders never cease! You seem to know so much about genes and DNA... I just assumed that was your field.”

“No Miss. I hope I didn’t disappoint you.”

“As long as you don’t ask me to do any figuring in my head. Let me pour.”

She did. The talk seemed to flow like a mountain stream during Springtime. We ate and laughed, drank lemonade and enjoyed being together. Though I dreaded that I might disappear from their eyes at any moment, before we knew it, the sun was setting in the purple twilight.

“Where are you staying, Edward?” asked Ella.

I thought quickly. “In town, at the hotel for the moment.”

“I’ll drive you in. It’s been a long day!”

Much longer than she knew.

I bid Dr. Caine goodnight and promised to return the next day. We shook hands warmly. Ella got her purse and keys. We waved to her father and drove off in the direction of Snakebite.

It was a chilly ride in the open-air Jeep, but I didn’t suffer from the cold at all. We spoke little, but there was something understood between us that didn’t require telling. A familiar comfort. Now this might sound like a trite cliché, but I felt as though I’d known her all my life- as if I’d met her as a child and grown up with her, knowing all along that we’d always be together.

The ride ended too soon. “Here we are, Edward. Would you like me to fetch you tomorrow, say at 10:00? We can go exploring if you’d like...”

“Nothing would make me happier, Ella.” I reached over and patted her hand. She took mine and gave it a squeeze. And that’s how she left me on that first night.

I waited until the last reflection of her tail lamps disappeared. Then I hoisted my knapsack on my shoulder and walked down Main Street to the pawnshop that I hoped had not disappeared. Luck was with me. A gold chain and ring allowed me enough spending cash until I could figure out where I could get a job.

I registered at the seedy Hotel Valencia. The owner ushered me to my stuffy room. He opened the windows to let in the fresh desert air, showed me the spot of burnt carpet that entitled me to a discounted rate, and thankfully left. I washed myself and my clothes with a small bar of hotel soap, spread them out to dry, hopped in the sack naked as a newborn and dropped into slumber almost as soon as my eyes closed.

It was well past 9:00 when I awoke, still in the past. The day before had been no dream. My clothes were flapping dry in the sunny breeze. I washed and took care of business, dressed and walked outside at 10:00 to await Ella.

Her timing was perfect.

"Have you had your breakfast yet, Edward?" she asked.

"You know, I'm not one to lolly in bed late in the morning, but I just woke up. Must have been awful tired last night."

"Yes. It's the air. Let's stop by the ranch and I'll fix a snack for us. I doubt Dad's had more than a cup of coffee so far today. Is that ok?"

"I'd like that. Thank you."

When we got there, I could smell the coffee perking, potatoes and onions, bacon and eggs frying. Dr. Caine was making breakfast for the three of us.

"Why, Dad- how did you know we'd be having a guest for breakfast?"

"I know everything. I'm your father," he jibed.

She ran to him, put her arms around his neck and kissed him on the cheek.

"Lucky me," she said.

"Lucky all of us," I thought to myself.

"How do you prefer your aigs, Son?"

We sat at the table with the draped, checkered tablecloth, drank lots of coffee, loaded our plates with his good cooking, scraped the char off the burnt toast and Dr. Caine made the point he'd been saving.

"Edward, Ella here told me you've been tumbleweed in' a spell since graduating. Now if you're ready to settle in, you'll need a job before all your money is spent up there at the Valencia. I have a few connections left at the school and can pull a string or two to get you an interview for a lecturer's position. How does that sound?"

I was overwhelmed by his and Ella's kindness to me. It was as if I was not a stranger to them at all, but a child who'd grown up under their wing, finally ready, with their help, to take on the responsibilities of an adult. I could feel my ears tingle. My eyes began to water. My mouth was paralyzed. I couldn't utter a word.

"Well don't just stand there like a fencepost. Say something!" Dr. Caine demanded.

It took an effort not to sputter excessively.

"I don't know what to say... I was just passing through."

"Say you will," said Ella.

"It's so unexpected..."

"Please get yourself together and say you will!" she repeated.

"I, I, I..."

"Ay-ay-ay!!" Dr. Caine sang out, "Canta y no llores!"

"Say 'aye,' Edward."

"I, I, I..."

"Don't be shy, Son."

"Come on, Edward. You can do it!" she commanded.

"I, I, I..."

"Forget all those 'I's.' Just say 'will!'"

"I, I, I..." I took a deep breath and finally blurted, "... will!"

Ella and Dr. Caine must have enjoyed the comic spectacle I had made of myself because despite the spilled coffee and soaked tablecloth, the laughter that followed went on for quite a few minutes.

When order was finally restored, Dr. Caine patted me on the back and said, "Now that we've settled that, the next issue is where you're going to stay. We have an empty bunkhouse out in back that you could rig up mighty cozy. You can help with the chores to pay off your rent and board. I'm gettin' a mite old to handle all of them and Ella's awfully busy herself. You'd be very helpful to us. What do you say, Son? Is it a deal?"

I was still in shock. What kind of good fortune had brought me to these kind-hearted, trusting people?

"Speak up, Edward. You're clamming up again," Ella bade me.

"Ih, ih, it would be an honor, Sir..."

"Then it's settled. You can move in as soon as you as you'd like- today in fact would work well if you're not busy with anything else."

That's how my life in the past began. I moved into my new home that same day. Within a week, Dr. Caine got me an interview with Dr. Jacobs, the head of the Mathematics Department before Dr. Steigert, my advisor, took on the position. As soon as I stepped into his office, this gruff and unpolished academic welcomed me as if I were a visiting dignitary. An hour and a half later, he introduced me to Dean Burleigh, and just like that I was assigned a teaching schedule. My rise over the following years to assistant professor can be attributed to the fact that I was 25 years ahead of them in scholarly work, but for all they knew, I was simply a precocious talent.

On the home front, my love for Ella could barely be restrained. It revealed itself in everything we did, our private times together and the daily routine of life with Dr. Caine, whom I unconsciously began to call "Dad." Never having known my own father- I have mentioned that he had disappeared suddenly

and unexpectedly while Mother was carrying me- I finally had the joy of a great one's love and companionship. These were the happiest days of my heretofore happy but fatherless, monkish life.

Ella and I were married within the first year. I left my bunkhouse and moved in with her and Dad. Excepting the sleeping arrangements, nothing changed: all three of us comfortable and contented.

And so, life went along like a dream one wishes never wake up from, until the third year when Dad suffered a cerebral aneurism in his cactus garden and died almost instantly.

The loss was devastating to me, far worse for my poor Ella. The two of them had been like two sides of one person, and with his passing, Ella seemed to lose her easy confidence and the sudden rushes of joyfulness that she had showered upon us so generously. She withdrew her affection- or perhaps it's more accurate to say that with his passing, there was little of it remaining to share. Her eyes grew vacant. They seemed to stare into the distance, as if waiting for something or someone to appear. She became like the wife of a whaling man who stands guard in her widow's watch, scrutinizing the horizon, waiting for him, all the while knowing that his ship has gone down and that he will never return.

I did my best to help her. The University offered grief counseling that we took advantage of, and we did make progress. But regardless of the therapy, medication and our unshattered commitment to each other, we could not recreate the contentment we had known before the passing of Dad.

That's the way our situation continued. Then one day in the fourth year, a beaming and exuberant Ella greeted me at the door when I returned home from a busy day at school. She had made a decision. She understood how her grief had changed our lives, that both of us needed and deserved the joy that vanished when Dad died. He could never be replaced. But perhaps, perhaps if we were to have a child to raise and love- an Edward Junior- much of what we had lost could be restored.

I was overjoyed by her decision. I believed that mothering a child was just what she needed. As for me, I felt fully ready to assume the role of father. Her idea was the answer we had been seeking. The next few months bore this out. We were happy. Our romance resumed, and in the fifth year, Ella became pregnant with a male child, my as yet unborn son, whom we named Edward.

Ella's pregnancy was normal and uncomplicated, as was our joyful home life. Our happiness felt fully restored. We were excited to become parents. Then the one event that could spoil it all, the one I had been secretly dreading for 5 years, struck with the vengeance of a cheated demon.

I was poking about in Dad's cactus garden, taking notes on the effect different fertilizers were having on the plants, when I felt as if an anesthesiologist had put a mask on me and turned on the gas. In an instant, I lost awareness of my being. Like death, there was simply a nothingness that precluded an I to lend it consciousness. And after a period of timelessness, like a patient waking after surgery, I came to, but not in a warm bed surrounded by loved ones and caring professionals.

I found myself alone in our old lab. Well, not exactly alone. The first thing I saw was the body of my best friend, Maurice, lying on the floor, dead and horribly mutilated, the remnants of his leathery, mummified face contorted in a ghastly grimace, and nearby, a desiccated rattler with a twisted neck. As I shook myself into sensibility, I surmised that the snake had bitten him, and that he had exacted his revenge before he expired.

I turned the lights on. The solar panels were still doing their faithful work, but the lab was in shambled disarray. Time and the elements had done their work: Instruments were scattered about; shattered glass and piles of sand littered the floor. I rushed to the time machine, hungry for clues to account for my 5-year absence. It didn't take long to picture what must have happened. In his death struggle with the snake, somehow the duration lever had been reset ahead from half an hour to 5 years. The electric calendar clock on the wall added yet one more shock to my plight. The machine had sent me 25 years past my original schedule of re-entry. Had Maurice survived, I would have found him 25 years older than me. At age 30, I was 55 years ahead of my birth year.

I stumbled to my old, tattered armchair and collapsed in it. My mind was racing, but I forced myself to think. I had aged 5 years since the last time I had seen Maurice, 25 years before the time I found myself in. Mother, were she alive, would be in her 80's. Nausea, like acid, crept up from my stomach and into my throat when I realized that I had deserted her just as unexpectedly and destructively as my father had, my unintentional betrayal of her as caustic as his mysterious one had been. Her lonely anguish for an inexplicably lost, beloved husband, made so much more unendurable by my own disappearance, a consequence of my thoughtless recklessness, hung over me with leaden guilt.

And what of Ella? She too would be in her 80's if she survived, and my Edward, my son whom I had never seen, my own exact age.

Were I to find them, if they could be found living somewhere, what could I say to them to explain and excuse the ruin I had made of their lives? For vanishing at the moment they would need me the most? Oh, the guilty tears I shed for my poor, beloved Ella! She had lost the two rocks she had planted her feet upon: her father and husband both. And now, if she was still alive, she would be an old woman, her past wasted in lonesome grief.

I had to act, but how? Nothing I could do would restore the youth of Ella and Mother, or the time we had lost. No, that past was gone and irretrievable. But what of the present? How could I approach them now? And why should they ever trust me again? Or love me as they once had? What would my 30-year-old son think of his wayward father who hadn't stayed long enough to see him born?

The predicament I was in offered me few alternatives. I could not stay at the lab indefinitely, and the only places left me were Ella and Dad's ranch and the house Mother and I had shared. Either one promised nothing but a homecoming of heartbreak.

I found my motorcycle in the lab garage. The tires were deflated and cracked, but they held the air I pumped into them. They'd last 25 miles if I drove carefully. The carburetor was another story. The gas smelled like old lacquer, and I was sure the jets were clogged with gummy sludge. I removed and disassembled it, cleaned it with the ethanol-free, stabilized fuel Maurice and I had stored for emergency use. When it was reasonably clean and reassembled, I fit it back on the intake, flushed the old gas out from the tank and replaced it with the stored emergency fuel. I kicked it over a few times, the back-up magneto sparked the plugs, and the bike sputtered to life.

My first stop would be to find Ella and my son. I still thought of her as the young woman I had left 25 years before. By now a little math showed me that she would be just as old as Mother, but she at least would have found comfort in our son. Mother too, alone these past 25 years, would have a great

need for the dubious uplift I could offer. I'd get to her as quickly as I could. So, I pointed the bike in Ella's direction and drove slowly, praying a sceptic's prayer for a miracle.

It took a little over an hour to get to the ranch. As I pulled into the familiar driveway, I could see a young woman hanging out laundry. Nearby in a crib a child was sleeping. I leaned the bike on its stand and approached her. She put down her basket and smiled. I smiled too- but when the greetings and questions were over, I knew that neither Caines nor Pushkins resided there anymore. The young woman had never heard of them, did not know who they were or if they had ever lived at her home. I thanked her. She had sensed my urgency and done her best to help a shadowy stranger. As I pulled out, I could see a stand of orange trees where Dad's cactus garden used to flower.

I backtracked to Mother's house, hoping to find the only other person I still knew alive and well. It took one more anxious hour to get there, the house being located on the other side of Snakebite, another 25 miles or so away.

It was late afternoon. The sun, a kaleidoscope of yellow, red and orange, was quietly approaching the purple horizon when I arrived. Unlike the ranch, my childhood home looked the same, perfectly preserved: the picket fence and gingerbread porch with its chain-hung swing, the eucalyptus tree I climbed as a boy, the roses she was so proud of, the prairie sage's light blue against the white clapboards. I parked the bike and creaked open the gate, walked along the heaving stones of the pathway, took a deep breath and knocked on the door I remembered so well.

A minute must have gone by before I heard a shuffling approaching. "Hold on there," I heard a thin, dry voice say. A lock clicked, hinges squeaked and there before me stood Mother, aged 25 years since I'd last seen her 5 years ago, now in her eighties, looking very old, bent-backed and frail.

"Yes?" she asked. Then she took a close look at me, screamed "Oh my good Lord!" Her knees buckled under her feather-weight body, and she collapsed in my arms.

I carried her to the couch- she felt light as a pillow- and laid her out as comfortably as I could. There seemed to be less harm in letting her awaken on her own, more danger in adding rushed consciousness of myself to the stress she was already bearing. So, I sat there patiently, waiting and watching. And as I did, her features began to relax and lose their constrained tenseness, and a smile, as if she had found release from a great burden, lit her face.

I minded her closely and as I studied her appearance, impossible thoughts I had repressed while living with Ella returned with sudden forcefulness. There was something about the expression of Mother's eyes and mouth that reminded me of Ella. Let me also admit now another point that I had banished from my mind: My mother and wife shared the same given name; both were Ellas. I had dismissed this as a strange coincidence, but an oil and water mix of unease and comfort settled over me. Every husband finds a touch of affectionate mothering appealing in his spouse. This tendency to find security is absolutely normal. So why was I worried? My wife Ella had been a Caine. Mother's maiden name was Armstrong. I breathed a sigh of relief. The misgivings I had tried to suppress were just impossible suspicions and nothing more.

Mother lay sleeping peacefully. So strange this other coincidence, her physical resemblance to my wife. But appearances aside, it made sense that I would love a woman who loved me much as Mother did. Still, it was puzzling that my father's past mirrored my own, that he too had never met his

son, having vanished while his Ella was pregnant. So peculiar that his Edward- me- would be the same age as my own son Edward.

Mother sighed and slept on. The more I looked at her, the more similarities I could see. Her body size. The shape of her skull. The way she wore her hair. Her nose, her lips...

And then I remembered that Ella had been adopted as a newborn, just as Mother had been. And all the reassuring rationalizing I had done to explain these persistent coincidences rebounded like the first aftershock of a great earthquake.

Stunned, not believing my wild conjecture possible, I ran to her bedroom where she kept the strongbox bearing our family records. There, within its cold, metallic shell, I found the adoption documents that bore her pre-adoptive birth name of Armstrong, the name she was born under before becoming a Caine. And as my fumbling fingers dug out more paper, I found Ella's and my marriage license signed in our own hands: I, Edward Pushkin; she, Ella Armstrong Caine.

By this time I was shaking violently. I had to lay down the papers that had revealed this dreadful secret. I could not hold them steady enough to re-read, to make sure this wasn't some horrific mistake. My eyes refused to focus on the maddening words. But it was true: There would be no need to search out two women because before me slept the one who was both my mother and wife.

My situation became clear to me in an instant: I had traveled back in time, met and married my future mother. And then a horror to beat that one as if any could. The child whom my wife, my mother, had born... my boy, my son Edward... It was so awful, so hopelessly twisted... Edward, my son... even now I shudder to admit it... my son Edward had to be nobody else other than me. I would not need to search for him either. I was both Edwards, son and father, senior and junior. I had one-upped vain Oedipus, appalling Oedipus, by fathering myself.

I am sitting in the second-floor office of the house I share with Mother. I can hear the sound of her footsteps as she labors up the stairs, slowly and carefully, laden with her tray of coffee and home-baked buttered buns.

Yes, the machine is still there at the lab, waiting for me to put it to use, to go back in time to get Dad preventative care, to save my best friend's life, to undo the painful loneliness Mother and Ella had endured, to try to rectify the mistakes I have made. But beware the unknowable X-factor and the flutter of a butterfly's wing! Beware- for there's many a slip, 'twixt the lever and man's grip.

Tomorrow I shall go to my lab and dismantle the machine. I shall consign its many cogs and relays, its dials and electronic grey matter to the desert sand. I shall burn the blueprints Maurice and I perfected so joyfully and scatter their ashes into the desert wind.

Mother is softly humming a lullaby from my childhood. I am grateful for the reprieve from this harsh duty of writing my imperative, repugnant warning; grateful to be reunited with my beloved; grateful that my bitter loneliness is over and I have found my home again. Soon she will be at my door and all four of us will be together, Mother, Ella, Edward Jr., and myself.

Mother will pour the coffee. She will lift the cover from the warm buttered buns, serve them up on a heated plate and join me for the brief, loving moment we will share until she returns to her roses.

Ella will fluff my thick 32-year-old hair with her withered hand. And both of them will say, as they always have, as they always will:

“You won’t leave me, will you Edward? Please don’t ever leave me again.”

Gene Burshuliak (based on a comic book I once read)

March, 2024

