

*sometime in the not-so-distant future...*

~1~

~first monday~

Joe sat quietly at the counter in the coffee shop that Monday morning, drinking his hot cup of the black liquid. It wasn't really black, he realised. It was more of a deep brown, almost, well, coffee-colored.

"You all right, man?" Bill asked. Bill was the morning manager, and since he served Joe almost daily, he got to know the scruffy man who wore jeans and a grey hoodie as if the clothes were his work uniform. From his conversations with Joe, Bill knew Joe did odd jobs where and when he could. Last Bill heard, Joe was working a weekend maintenance gig at the Y or somewhere like that.

"Yep, I'm good," Joe said, taking a sip from his ceramic mug with the shop's logo on it. The logo was a simple line drawing of a coffee cup and saucer with three lines of steam coming off the top of the cup. The name of the shop - Cuppa Java - was in a stylized font on the saucer.

If Joe was honest with himself, he wouldn't be at Cuppa Java drinking coffee; he didn't really like it. But he couldn't *not* drink it. It was almost as if his day wasn't complete without the coffee. He'd had hot tea, iced tea, hot chocolate, even some of the fancy lattes and other coffee-flavored drinks Cuppa Java sold; but it just wasn't a day without the coffee. *Guess this is what they call an addiction*, Joe thought wryly.

While Joe was being honest with himself, he admitted that he really wanted that watch in the window of the pawn shop he passed on his way to Cuppa Java from his little row house in a little neighborhood only about 10 minutes away.

The watch was gold, and part of the screen was digital, another part was analog, with dials and buttons he wanted to get a better look at. Since Joe didn't have a car -- in fact, he never learned to drive -- he walked everywhere. In a big city, this was not a problem, as everything was close enough. The problem with walking everywhere, Joe reflected into his coffee, was that he had the time to stand at ogle the watch in the window at the Second Chance Pawn Shop only two short blocks away from Cuppa Java.

And while he really wanted to own that watch, he'd also seen the price tag tied on the

gold watch band - they were asking over a thousand dollars! It would have to be something like solid gold for *that* asking price. And there was no way Joe would ever be able to save up that much. Hell would freeze over first before he ever had that kind of money.

"You seem distracted today. More than usual," Bill said, coming over to refill Joe's cup.

"Just have a few things on my mind, is all."

"House all good?" Bill asked. He knew a few things about Joe, and that his mother had left him the house when she passed away a good 20 years ago. The house had been long-since paid for, so the only thing Joe needed to remember were the taxes and any upkeep.

"House is good, can't complain," he replied after a sip of the new cup of coffee. Joe was raised by a single mother who didn't really seem to care that she had a son. He never knew his father. But the one thing he could say about his mother was that she made sure she had a roof over her head. Some days she knew Joe was there, other days she had no idea even *she* was there.

When he was little, Joe tried to find out what made his mother so inconsiderate and oblivious. In the kitchen, he'd climbed up on the counter, and in the back of a high cabinet, he found a bottle that smelled like his paint thinner. Since his mom was passed out on the couch (again), he tried a little bit of it on the model airplane he was working on. It was a model of the *Enola Gay*, and he was trying to get just the right shade of silver.

On one of his mom's more lucid days the previous week, she took him to the toy store, and that was when he picked out the model. It said it was for ages 10 and up, and since he was only 5, his mother didn't want to get it for him.

Joe talked to the woman at the register about it, and it was she who finally persuaded Joe's mom to buy it. He had picked out the colors of the paint, but it was hard to tell what the exact color would be on the plastic until you painted with it. The silver was too gloppy; the black was too washed out. So Joe tinkered with the paint, using other colors to change just a small test sample to get the color he wanted. Whatever this "paint thinner" was, it didn't work the way he wanted it to, so he just emptied the bottle down the sink and threw the bottle in the trash under the counter.

When his mom finally woke up and went looking for the bottle in the cabinet, she had a screaming fit when she couldn't find it. After tearing apart the kitchen and then looking through the pantry, which was really a small nook in the corner of the kitchen, she sat down

on the floor next to the trash can and cried for a good three minutes. Joe had actually timed her. After she stopped crying, she looked into the trash can and saw the bottle in there, where Joe had put it, but she didn't know that.

She just looked at it and sighed. "I guess I really did finish it all," she said, as if she was talking to the empty vodka bottle. She looked up, her eyes red from the tears and drying them with the back of her hands, and saw Joe, looking concerned, in the kitchen doorway.

"It's ok, baby," she told him, her voice soft and apologetic. "Mommy just gets a little crazy sometimes."

Joe just stood there and nodded, not really understanding what had just happened.

When he was a little older, Joe's mom told him his full name was Jorund. Jorund, so said history -- or maybe it was legend -- was the son of Hrafn the Foolish. While Joe had no idea who his father was, he was pretty sure his name wasn't Hrafn. Maybe his mother just thought his father was the foolish one.

Joe had gone to the library after his mom told him about Jorund and Hrafn the Foolish. He couldn't find any books about either of them, just an entry in a mythology encyclopedia. But that library opened him to a whole new world -- reading about far-away places, knights who went on quests, dragons who were both good guys and the enemy of men, new worlds in outer space, and learning about things that happened in the past.

That trip to the library netted him not only the freedom to escape his reality (it was better than his mother's escape, but he wouldn't have known that metaphor), but a life-long friendship with books and reading.

Bringing him back to the present, where Joe was a man in his mid-40s (he was exactly 45, actually) that most people would only see as a "dirty old man," he realised Bill was asking him a question.

"I've never seen you this serious before, Joe. Is there a woman?"

"Nah. I just have something on my mind. Something I gotta go do," he said, getting up and digging in his pocket for a few dollars for the coffees. Bill only rang him up for one cup, and not all the refills he'd had.

"You sure?" Joe asked.

"Definitely. Don't worry about it," Bill assured his regular customer with a smile on his face.

Joe nodded, and left Cuppa Java. He had something to do.

Oddly enough, the door was silent when he opened the front door to the Second Chance Pawn Shop. In Joe's experience, doors like this usually chimed or beeped when someone walked in. If this door did, he didn't hear it. There was no one in the front room of the shop. For a moment, he thought about calling out to see if anyone was even there, but decided against it. He looked out the front window, and while there were a few people walking by, they all seemed to be engrossed in the latest tablet or cell phone.

Joe reached out, grabbed the watch from the velvet pillow it was resting on, and ran out the door. He didn't stop running until he got to the safety of his house.

It had seemed much too easy, Joe thought as he looked at the watch he held in his hands. It seemed more magnificent up close. There were many buttons on each side of the face, and a few on the front of it as well.

Joe remembered back to his school days -- it was actually in middle school -- which was where he first learned he could take something apart, fix it, and put it all back together again and it would work perfectly.

His school had a television studio. Sure, they were only six, seventh and eighth graders, but the closed-circuit TV was a "new, innovative" way to have the morning announcements, according to the school.

Joe was quite happy to get to school early. His middle school was a block up from his elementary school, and both were only a ten-minute walk from his house. His mother was never going to be the mom to pack lunches with smiley-face notes in them, so Joe learned how to make his own lunches from the time he was in first grade. His only real memory from elementary school was that he was bored and fidgeted in all his classes, but not so much that his teachers needed to call home. His mom probably wouldn't have cared anyway.

In middle school, Joe was the technical kid at the CCTV station. He could get anything working. The teacher adviser, Mr. Patel, had spoken to some of Joe's other teachers and learned that Joe excelled in everything in all his classes. Several of the teachers met in the teachers' lounge one afternoon to put together an invitation for Joe to join the Gifted Program.

When Mr. Patel gave him the forms the next school morning at the TV station -- which was located next to the main office -- Joe took them reluctantly.

"If my mom's not drunk, she's just going to yell at me. She thinks I'm a no-good nobody."

"All of your teachers think you're a smart somebody," Mr. Patel told him. "Even me."

Joe looked at the floor, not really convinced. "I'll see what she says," Joe told his teacher. "But I don't think she'll really know what it means."

"All you can do is try. But we need to have her permission to test your IQ for Gifted. It's a district policy, not mine."

"Yeah, I understand."

And while Joe *did* understand, he doubted his mother would. He debated if he should even show the papers to his mother, pretend they never existed.

But in the end, he gave them to his mom at dinner that night. She actually cooked pasta for the two of them, and had something resembling a family dinner, even if it was a small, mostly broken, family.

He gave no preamble, just handed her the envelope from Mr. Patel.

"What's this?" she asked, as she read through the letter. "Does this mean you're in some kind of trouble?" she demanded. Joe knew she wouldn't have a clue.

"No, mom," he tried to explain. "It means I'm smart, and --"

"No kid from that ass of a man who fathered you is *smart*," she exploded. "No, I won't sign these."

"Ok," Joe said. He knew he should be dejected, and pissed off at his mother, but he wasn't. He'd already known she wouldn't agree, so it was a non-issue.

Mr. Patel could only shake his head, astounded how a parent could be so blind to their child's intelligence, but he had to abide by school policy: if the parent or guardian didn't sign, there was nothing the school could do. But, Mr. Patel did talk to Joe's teachers, and they promised to give him extra enrichment.

Joe didn't mind the extra worksheets he got, but a lot of the kids thought he was being a goodie-two-shoes, and kissing up to the teachers. Some kids thought that Joe thought he was better than all of them, and that was why he didn't have any friends. They threw balls of wadded-up paper at him, they called him names. But Joe never minded; he was reading another book, off on another adventure in another world.

But by the time Joe got to eighth grade, it seemed that he didn't care in much of his school work or reading any more. He was still the tech guy at the CCTV station, and he had also fixed many of the schools aging computers, updating both the hardware and software.

He had decided he wanted to go to the district's technical school, instead of the traditional high school.

There was paperwork involved, Joe found out. And the tech school was an extra five blocks further from his house than the regular high school. But even if Joe didn't really care for the traditional high school classes, he wanted to go to tech school. He wanted to use his hands, not sit on them all day.

He did the one thing he could to get his mom to let him go: he forged his mom's signature on all the papers. His mom was passed out most afternoons, so he was able to go to the orientation at the tech school without her ever knowing. Had he thought about it before, he could have forged her signature on those papers Mr. Patel had given him back in sixth grade. Maybe he wouldn't have gotten teased and picked on as much.

He had heard about some of the kids talking about something called an "emancipated minor," but that would involve his mother being sober and needing to talk to a judge. Joe wasn't afraid that he wouldn't become an emancipated minor, but become part of the foster system. At 14, that wasn't really what he wanted. His mom did do the weekly grocery shopping, so he wasn't going to starve. He didn't get an allowance, like most kids did. But every so often if he asked his mom for money to buy lunch at school, and she'd give him a few dollars.

Joe learned early on that his mom didn't work while he was at school. It wasn't that she was too drunk, but that she was on disability from her factory job. She had a severe case of carpal tunnel in both arms, a condition that her company had readily admitted to being the cause of, and had agreed to a rather large settlement instead of outrageous court cases, and exorbitant legal fees and medical bills. The disability prevented her from being able to really work anywhere. She did what she could: she drank.

Every Thursday, a check came in the mail. By then, she was sober enough to take the check to the bank, deposit some of it, cash the rest and do the shopping. She may not have loved Joe like a normal mother would, but she didn't beat him, like he'd seen too many times on the news and read in the papers; and he was at least grateful he had her.

Now, as he sat at the kitchen table remembering where he'd eaten many meals alone, since his mom tended to still be passed out when Joe was ready for dinner at the normal dinner time, he studied the watch, pushing the buttons one at a time. He learned the ones to change the date and time, and found a stopwatch was activated when you pulled one of them out. But mostly he looked at it, held it and turned it over in his hands, felt what a \$1000

watch felt like.

Funny, but it didn't feel heavy enough to be solid gold.

Once Joe started at the tech school, he found that he enjoyed it much more than he would have at the traditional high school. His teachers praised him; and he liked the opportunity to work with his hands.

He liked to work with electronics, and excelled at it. When he was a junior, one of his teachers, Mr. Vasquez, paid attention to Joe as he was taking apart a clock mechanism, study the pieces, and then put them back together in the exact opposite order he'd taken them apart. Over the next few weeks, Mr. Vasquez watched Joe in almost a scientific way, observing his work, and taking notes every so often. Outside of school, Mr. Vasquez spoke with some friends and colleagues. When he had everything in place, he spoke to Joe. It was in January of Joe's junior year.

"A friend of mine, his name is Manuel, is looking for an apprentice in his watch shop. I think you'd be a perfect fit for him. What do you think?"

"I think that would be great!" Joe said. But then he thought of something. "What about my mom?"

"What about her? By the time you're working with Manuel, you'll be 18."

"I'll be 18 next month," Joe pointed out.

"Exactly. You'll technically be an adult then, and able to sign any of your own papers."

Joe didn't have to think about it a second time. "Sign me up!"

Mr. Vasquez was true to his word, and most days after school after February 2, Joe spent several hours at Manuel's little watch shop. Time 4 U was a few blocks away from the school, but it was on his way home. Some days he would work until after dinner, making sure the watch he was working on was up and running by the time he was finished with it. Manuel spoke a little English, and Joe spoke maybe only one word of Spanish, but they understood each other perfectly.

For the first time, Joe felt like he was home.

Joe found it hard to sleep the night he took the watch. He'd put it on his dresser, across the room from his bed. It was as if the watch was calling him from his bed. He rolled over and looked at the wall the bed was next to. Eventually, he did drift off to a fitful sleep.

In the morning, he got up and dressed quickly, putting the watch deep in one of his pockets. There was a voice nagging at him to just slip back into the pawn shop, return the watch to its velvet pillow, and walk back out like nothing even happened. But there was also the voice that told him to keep it, open it up and see what made it literally tick.

As he walked the few blocks to Cuppa Java, he approached the pawn shop cautiously, as he'd seen there was a police car parked outside. He thought about running, but no one had seen him, so he continued on -- it what he hoped was a casual stroll -- to the coffee shop.

He seated himself at the counter, and waited for someone to come over. It was Bill.

"Hey, man," Bill said, "You all right today? Everything go all right yesterday?"

"I'm good. Everything was fine," Joe said, trying to sound "present" when all he was was distracted. "I'll have my usual black coffee," he told Bill.

After a moment Bill came back with a hot mug of the hot liquid. Joe pretended to notice the police car he could see from the shop's window.

"What's with the police car over there?" Joe asked, and found he really was genuinely curious.

Bill looked out the window and up the street. "No idea," he said to Joe, but then had other customers to serve.

A short time later, Joe was nursing his coffee when two officers came into Cuppa Java, the bell on the door jangling rather loudly, Joe thought. Joe only saw them through his peripheral vision, but motioned for Bill to come over.

Bill wasn't with a customer so he came right away, and was ready to give Joe a refill.

"Is there another way out of here?" Joe asked, his voice low.

Bill didn't really know how to reply, it left him all flustered and not sure what was going on. "There's an exit through the kitchen. You all right, man?" he was saying, as Joe got up and disappeared into the kitchen. By the time Bill followed him, all he saw was the back door closing.

'What the hell was that all about?' Bill asked himself. After a moment, he shrugged,



went back out to the counter and served the two policemen a cup of coffee each, as one of the officers mentioned the owner of the pawn shop two blocks up was found murdered sometime yesterday morning.

Joe *knew* they were after him. How could they not be? He stole something from the very store the police were at! How was that not their reason for being there? In the back lot of the coffee shop, he looked around for a moment before setting off on foot down the alley he saw leading away from the commotion out front.

He jogged down the narrow street. It was dark and there were a few dumpsters there, from the businesses that used them. In this dark, safe-feeling place, he took the watch out of his pocket and looked at it again. It read 10:30:59 a.m. He knew he should have listened to that voice that told him to put it back. Hell, he should have listened to the voice yesterday that told him taking it in the first place was a bad idea.

He looked up from the watch at his surroundings, and it was in that moment he saw one of the policemen in the back lot of Cuppa Java. He got flustered, and just as the policeman saw Joe, Joe had unintentionally pushed a few of the buttons on the watch at the same time.

It was almost as if his surroundings had “hiccuped,” Joe didn’t have any other word for what happened. And the policeman was gone. But everything else was unchanged. He furrowed his brow and looked at the watch. Did the watch have anything to do with the hiccup? He looked at it, but the only thing it told him was that it was now 10:31:00 a.m. He cautiously came out of the alley to find it was now deserted. He skulked around the building to the front, and looked towards the pawn shop. The police car was gone, and for that, he sighed in relief.

As he’d already had his coffee for that day, and since it had been an exciting morning already, Joe headed for home. He had no idea what happened back in that alley, but he needed to find out what happened when he pushed some of the buttons. But which buttons had he pushed, and in what combination? or what order? Maybe studying the watch would give him some of the answers.

Joe sat at his kitchen table, studying the watch through a magnifying glass on a stand. It gave

him the freedom to work with both hands. There was also a light on the magnifying glass, making it easier to see the watch. First, he'd tried pushing the two buttons next to each other at the same time, but couldn't replicate the hiccup from the alley. Next he tried buttons opposite each other. It must have just been random there were four buttons on each side of the face.

When none of those combinations gave him the same hiccup, he had to rethink what he actually did earlier that morning. He replayed the scenario in his mind over and over many times, each time pushing a different combinations of buttons. The only thing he seemed to know for certain was that he had the watch in both hands, and at least one finger on each hand pushed at least one button. But maybe his finger pushed two at a time? He simply could *not* remember.

After a few hours of pushing buttons systematically, taking off the back and looking inside, putting the back on upside down, he still couldn't replicate that hiccup. In frustration, he just smashed the buttons on both sides towards the face. And that was when his surroundings rippled again. But the time on the watch didn't change, except for the seconds: 4:30:15 p.m., then 4:30:16 p.m.

So, pushing more than one button per side was the answer, and he tried five more button patterns, each one resulting in a ripple or hiccup of his kitchen, but not affecting anything else. Maybe it was his vision that was going. Or maybe his mind.

That was it, he realised. He was hallucinating. It was the only rational, logical answer, neverminding the fact he was completely sober.

It was morning again, and Joe was off to the coffee shop for his morning ritual. He did have a weekend job at the local Y, but they weren't expecting to see him again until saturday morning.

Joe had worked with Manuel from the end of his junior year in high school through what would have been his college years. He was only 23 when Manuel closed up the business and retired, needed to spend time with his children and grandchildren. He would have loved to have kept the shop open with Joe running things, but Joe had admitted he knew nothing about running a business, and he couldn't stand book-learning -- he preferred hands-on demonstrations and hands-on experience. Manuel gave Joe a very generous final paycheck, which he promptly deposited into his own bank account.

That evening, he was home at dinner time, and his mother was oddly sober, one of the few times Joe remembered her that way. And she was making dinner, another rare sight. Joe couldn't help but be suspicious and wonder what was wrong.

"Everything all right, Mom?" he asked, trying to keep that suspicion out of his voice.

She stopped mixing the salad she was making, and as neutral as she could, she told him what she'd learned from the doctor that afternoon.

"I'm dying, Joe. Too much booze," she said, by way of explanation. At the time, Joe didn't really know what to do.

"I'm sorry," was what he did say, and tried to mean it.

"It's ok, Joe. We both know I was a crappy mom." She smiled, but it was bittersweet. After an awkward moment of staring at each other, not knowing what to do, Joe hugged his mom. When he stopped hugging her, he realised they'd both been crying.

"Did the doctor say how long?" he asked, and found his voice had caught when he asked.

"Well, they don't really know," she said, trying to hide her own tears again. "It could be a year, or it could be like five. Or even more." She did try to smile, and Joe had to give her credit for that.

For the first time Joe could remember, they sat down and had dinner together. His mom actually listened as Joe caught her up in his life. It was almost like telling a stranger the story of his school career, starting with the television station in middle school, tech school

during his high school years, graduating with honors, and finally working with Manuel all these past years. By the time he finally got to his news of that day, he couldn't tell if they were laughing or crying at all the time that had gone by, acting more like roommates than mother and son.

But when Joe was finished, his mom genuinely hugged him tightly.

"I'm so sorry I missed everything," she said, and Joe knew she meant it.

For the next two years, they tried to get back what was lost all those years ago, and bond as a mother and son should. His mother even stopped her binge drinking. Joe found a job at a jewelry store in the city, but he only worked when someone had a broken watch or clock. He was on commission, not even a real paycheck from the store. The store would call when someone dropped something off for Joe, and he'd come in the next day and work on it.

It was when he came home one Tuesday evening from fixing a Rolex and a tabletop-sized grandfather clock that he found his mom passed out on the couch again. It brought him back to his childhood when that was how his mom looked every afternoon.

But something told him this wasn't from drinking. He went over to her, and touched her cheek. It was cold, and he knew she was gone. She was only 43, and Joe was only 25.

Joe reached out to all the people he'd known over the years, and a few people were able to make it to the funeral that Saturday. One of his former classmates worked at a prestigious law firm, and was able to take care of his mom's estate, *pro bono*. For that, Joe was forever grateful.

After the funeral, his classmate, a young man named Ron Harrison, came over to the house and went through his mother's papers. Joe was rather amazed it didn't take as long as he thought it might. His mother was very organized, something Joe hadn't known about her. Ron told Joe that the house was all paid for, and now it was his. His mom had a bank account, and that was now his as well. The good news was, he wasn't broke; but there wasn't quite enough to pay the bills and taxes forever. He would have to carefully monitor the account.

After everyone had gone, and people no longer stopped in to visit -- about a week after the funeral -- Joe was all alone. Honestly and truly alone. At first, he cried. No one had ever told him that "real" men don't cry, but he did his crying in the privacy of his own home. And now it *was* his home. It was kind of strange, to own a house at his young age. Even though it was a two-story row home in the middle of a moderate neighborhood in a busy city, it was still *his*.

Then he got angry. It just wasn't fair, that his mom had changed her life around, to finally be a mother to him, and now she was gone. He tried blaming himself, but that didn't help his disposition. He blamed the alcohol, and went through all the cabinets, pantry, nooks and crannies, and dumped every bottle of vodka, rum, Jack Daniels, beer, any kind of alcohol down the sink and washed it all away.

He actually did feel kind of better after that.

As soon as Joe sat down at the counter at Cuppa Java that morning, Bill pounced.

"Where have you been, man? Haven't seen you since last week! I was beginning to wonder about you!" He also had a cup of coffee for Joe already poured.

"Wait - what do you mean *last week*? I was just in here yesterday!"

"It's been a week," Bill said, leaving the counter to get a copy of the paper from the vending bin near the front door. He came back and showed Joe the date. He read it, but couldn't quite understand what was happening. The date was showing one week from the day the police were in here, looking for him, he was certain.

"Wasn't that the day the police were here? Something happen at the pawn shop?" he asked, trying to sound curious, and trying not to sound too anxious.

Bill stilled for a moment, remembering that was the day Joe asked if there was another way out of the coffee shop.

"Yes, yes it was," Bill confirmed. "They said the owner of the pawn shop had been shot and killed that morning, and a number of items were taken. It's been all over the papers! Where have you been?" Bill asked, wondering if Joe was all right.

"I -- I must have missed the papers," he said lamely.

Bill leaned to talk softly to Joe. "What happened last week? That you needed to leave like that? I know it's none of my business, but..."

"Yeah, it's all right. I was just supposed to meet a friend, and I didn't want to get in the way of the police."

"You know how lame that sounds?" Bill pointed out.

"Yeah, I do. It's all I got right now. I'll tell you when i figure it all out myself."

"You're not drunk, I'd smell it if you were," Bill said, and it was not a question.

"Hell no, not after what happened to my mother," Joe said. Some days it still hurt that she was gone. But over the last 20 years, the memories had dulled, the rough edges

softened.

“You didn’t kill the pawn shop owner did you?” Bill needed to know.

“No way!” Joe said, honestly, and just a little too loud. Some of the other patrons looked his way at his outburst. Joe went back to something he’d heard Bill say. “Wait, you said it was a robbery too? Do they know what was taken?”

“They didn’t say specifically. Not in the paper, anyway. The articles just mentioned diamond and gold jewelry, and some gold watches, Rolexes and the like.”

“I wonder if they’ll show up at J’s?” Joe wondered aloud. Joe was still on retention at J’s Jewels, the jewelry shop he’d been working at 20 years ago, as the watch and clock repair man. Business had slowed almost to a halt in recent years, with so many people relying on their smartphones or tablets instead of a watch. Clocks were mostly digital, or built into appliances, like ranges, microwaves, and desktop computers; no one had a watch with cogs and gears anymore.

But sometimes people brought jewels and watches in to J’s to be appraised. Family heirlooms, and such. Now, it made Joe wonder if some of the pieces brought in for appraisal really were heirlooms, or stolen pieces that people might eventually want to fence -- or even try to sell back to the pawn shop they might have been stolen from.

He thought of the watch, buried deep in his pocket.

“Wait, Bill?” Joe said, calling Bill back over to him again. “You said today was a week since the police were here? Like, exactly seven days?”

“Yeah,” Bill said after thinking back a moment. “You have to be that precise?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure I do. And I think i know what happened.” He got up from the stool and fished his wallet out of his pocket. Leaving \$2 on the counter, he said excitedly, “I’ll let you know once I’m fairly sure what’s happening. Don’t panic too much if you don’t see me for a few days.”

“Uhm, sure --” Bill trailed off, as Joe was already out the door.

So, Joe thought as he walked back home, *it’s Wednesday to me, but next Tuesday to everyone else*. He sifted through everything he ever read - which was quite a lot. He tended to spend a lot of time reading science fiction and fantasy when he wasn’t tinkering with something. That always amazed all his teachers: he couldn’t learn from reading the text books, but devoured novels as if they were going out of print.

He also enjoyed the scifi/fantasy tv shows and movies too. There was always something on the tv; and he borrowed some of those movies from the library when he'd take out books as well. He was certain something that he'd read or watched in his child and young adulthood was just like what was happening to him now.

When he got home, he went up to the room that he'd slowly converted to a library. His mom wasn't using it for anything, so Joe figured he would. It was a three-bedroom house, but only two rooms were ever in use. Before his mom had been to the doctor that fateful day, she'd only ever seen his library maybe once. Afterwards, she was rather impressed with what he could do. She had even apologized many times for not realising just how gifted of a young man he really was.

Now, he sat on the comfy chair in his library, looking through his books for what might be happening. He'd lost a whole week. His background rippled, shimmered, hiccuped, whatever it did, when he pushed the buttons on the watch.

He set aside the novels set in space, and turned to more of the earth-bound stories. He leaned back in the cozy chair, opened the first book, and started scanning through the text.

About two dozen books and many, many hours later, he was finally convinced: he'd traveled forward in time. That would account for all the ripples and hiccups he saw when he just started smashing the buttons. How far had he travelled? Bill told him it was seven days after he'd seen him, meanwhile, Joe thought it was only the next day.

He thought back to the previous night. There was the first time he tried two buttons on each side. He'd pushed different pairs on opposite sides... five times, was it? And then there was the first time, out in the alley way. He pushed four or more buttons together *seven times*. Which made each time he pushed two buttons on each side, he had jumped another 24 hours in the future.

Was he ready to try it again?

He took a deep breath, checked the time -- 8:35:02 p.m. -- and pressed two buttons on each side. His surroundings rippled, and clock jumped, but only to 8:35:03 p.m. He got up and turned on the tv, which was set into a bookcase on one of the walls, and flipped through the channels for something that told him the day. Bill had already told him it was Tuesday. Joe found a channel that was giving the weather for the next few days, and after they talked

about “today,” “tomorrow” was listed as Thursday. It worked! It was now Wednesday night!

Joe then tried another test: if pushing two buttons on each side made him go 24 hours into the future, but pushing one button on each side did nothing, what if he pushed two buttons on one side? He was holding it kind of awkwardly, but noted the time again, 8:39:12 p.m. He pushed the middle two buttons on the left side, and the clock flipped to 8:39:13 a.m., and it was now morning outside! He pushed the top two buttons on the right side, and the watch now read 8:39:14 p.m., and the weather on the tv was now calling “tomorrow” Friday. So it was now Thursday; he’d jumped ahead another full day.

If he could go forward, could he go backwards? If *pushing* buttons went forward, did *pulling* the buttons out go back in time? He knew that pulling one of the buttons out started a stopwatch, so he knew the buttons *could* pull out. He tried two buttons - one on each side. The tv didn’t change its program.

He manipulated the watch to get his fingers in comfortable positions, noted the time on the watch, 8:45:12 p.m., and pulled two buttons on each side. The tv didn’t change, the room didn’t ripple, and the watch only moved forward another second.

He reconfigured his fingers again, and tried to pull two different buttons on each side. Again, there was no change, except for the seconds on the clock. It seemed that going back in time wasn’t working.

Joe had never met a watch he couldn’t fix, and he wasn’t about to start now. He’d never fixed a time-travel watch, but there was a first time for everything, right?



When Joe woke the next day, he had to tell himself it was Friday. In fact, he'd gone to his computer after he got dressed, got a piece of paper from the printer and drew a calendar grid on it. He marked the first Monday as the day he stole the watch. He thought about adding that was also the day the pawn shop owner was murdered, but since Joe didn't know that at that time, he left it off for now.

He marked the next day as the day the cops came in to Cuppa Java, and he escaped into the back alley. He X'd out the days until the second Tuesday on the calendar. It was on this day he wrote in that Bill told him about the pawn shop robbery and the owner's murder. After that note, he added "last monday" and drew an arrow from the note about the murder to that first Monday.

It was also in this Tuesday box that he noted that he learned he'd traveled forward in time. On the second Wednesday, he noted his first official time travel test which jumped him 24 hours ahead. On the second Thursday, he noted his two successful 12-hour jumps, as well as the unsuccessful attempt to go backwards.

Which brought him to today, the second Friday on the calendar.

In looking over the calendar, he realised he missed his shift at the Y on Saturday, and gave them a call from the phone in his bedroom. His supervisor was the one that answered.

"I wanted to apologise for missing my shift on Saturday, I came down with a fever Friday night, and wanted to sleep it off. By the time I felt better, it was Saturday night," he explained, hoping it didn't sound as lame as he thought it did.

"And you went to the doctor on Monday, and can bring a note from him when you come in tomorrow?" the supervisor presumed.

Joe didn't, but without missing a beat, he told his supervisor he did, and that he would see him at 7 the next morning. Joe hung up the phone, his mind racing for where the doctor's notepad was from when he was a kid. He had forged a lot of them all those years ago, why couldn't he do it again? All he needed was the notepad... He ran down the stairs to the cabinet in the kitchen that was right under the phone. The top drawer held pens, pencils, scissors ...and a notepad that was stamped at the top of each page with the office and address of the doctor where Joe went when he was a kid. He'd hated going for check-ups and that sweet-tasting antibiotic when he got sick.

So one of the times his mom had grudgingly picked him up from school because he was sick and threw up his lunch in the boys' bathroom, while he was waiting for the doctor to come in and tell him to stay at home the next day and here was a note to go back to school the day after, Joe filched an extra notepad when his mom had put her head back against the wall and closed her eyes. He'd smuggled it home in his bookbag and then put it in his desk in his room.

From then on, whenever he felt sick (or even when he just didn't want to go), he'd stay home from school, and the next day he'd bring in two forged notes: the first was from his mother on a piece of flowery stationery, saying to excuse Joe from school because he wasn't feeling well and had an appointment with the doctor that afternoon; the second was on the doctor's letterhead saying that Joe had been seen, just had a cold, but could go back to school the next day. Both were perfect forgeries, and since Joe only missed school maybe once a month, no one questioned their validity. And since they counted as excused absences, no one from the school asked questions either.

As Joe wrote another "doctor's note" for his supervisor, he idly wondered if the doctor was still in practice, or even still alive. When he finished the note, he picked up the phone again and called the number on the paper. It was a good thing his mother never believed in pediatricians, and this doctor's office saw patients of all ages.

As it turned out, the number was still active. When a woman answered and told him he'd reached the office of the very same doctor, and how could she help him, Joe apologised for calling a wrong number and hung up.

He looked at the calendar again, to see if there were any other missed things in the almost two weeks he'd missed because of playing around with a time travel watch. He looked at the calendar on the wall next to the phone and found that it was blank with the exceptions of the hours he worked on Saturdays, 7 in the morning until 4 in the afternoon. He was able to take his hour-long lunch break about halfway through, which made it at 11. But he preferred to take his hour later, at around 12:30. That way, instead of working four hours, take lunch, and work another four hours (which tended to feel more like six), Joe would work the bulk of the time -- five and half hours -- first, and then when he was back from lunch, he only had two and half hours left.

Sweeping and mopping floors in an empty building certainly didn't take all 8 hours, so he learned to pace himself. He'd collect all the trash first, then sweep before lunch. No, it didn't take all that time to do all that, and sometimes he was finished all that in four hours.

For the hour and half, sometimes he'd go back over the floors for a second sweeping, and sometimes he'd empty the trash from the bathrooms. This Y had three floors, with two bathrooms on each floor. He'd empty the trash in all the mens' rooms first, then start on the first floor for the ladies' rooms, knocking and then waiting a few good minutes even though he knew there wasn't anyone inside. Then, after emptying and replacing the trash bag, he'd return to his big bin in the basement, throw the full bag in the bin and grab another empty bag, and head up to the second floor, and repeat the process. Sure, it was extra work and running around, and could have been done a lot more efficiently. But when he had an hour and a half to do only a half hour's worth of work, it was one way to kill the time. Also, he wasn't ready for lunch at 11 a.m.

And when he was finished with lunch, he made a small production of sweeping the floors one more time before mopping them -- as slow as he could.

The only time he savored was his lunch hour. He'd bring a sandwich from home, get something to drink from the vending machine in the basement, then take his food and the book he was reading at the time, and head back to the edge of the property. Some time ago, someone had put a lawn furniture set back there, in the trees, along the edge of a small creek that ran along the property's edge.

And some time after that, the various owners and directors of the Y made the decision not to keep up with that area in the back, causing the plants, trees and grass to become overgrown and obscure the table and chairs and stream that were hidden back there.

Joe wasn't sure what drew him back there on his second day of work a few short years ago, but something did, and he was glad for it. Even though he was a 45-year-old man, when his lunch hour started, he became that eager 10-year-old boy to hide out in a secret fort and read his favorite book.

It was with a clear conscious and clear calendar, that Joe put his wallet in his back pocket, grabbed his house keys, a paperback book, and headed out to Cuppa Java to talk to Bill. When he'd left yesterday -- no, he had to remind himself -- it *wasn't* yesterday, it was... Tuesday. *Today is Friday*, Joe had to remind himself again.

So, he chatted with himself as he walked, *the last time Bill saw me there it was Tuesday. Now, it's Friday for Bill. For me, it's -- nevermind what day I think it is. Bill hasn't seen me for two days, I'll need to remember this.* Internal pep talk over, Joe entered Cuppa Java and sat at the counter.

He saw Bill and waved him over.

Bill came over with a mug of coffee in his hands, and a look of concern on his face. “Dude, you disappeared for two days this time! Want to tell me what’s going on?”

“I’m going to move over into a booth,” Joe told him. “What time are you either on break or finished for today?”

Bill looked at his watch, which Joe could read as 11:30, even though it was upside down for Joe.

“I’m finished in an hour and a half,” he said. “You want me to bring you some lunch?”

Joe thought about what money he had in his wallet.

“Sure, just a cup of chicken noodle soup is fine,” he said, and watched as Bill officially wrote down Joe’s order.

Joe took his coffee from the counter and headed over to an empty table. From the pocket of his hoodie, he brought out an old battered paperback, *Murder in Legwarmers*. It was one of the funnier time-travel books he owned, partly because the main character was such a nacho-loving goofball. It was also the third book in a series that had like eight or nine titles in it. The other thing about this series was that the timestream was conditionally fixed; most events could be changed if someone did something different, thereby creating an alternate timeline. There were still other novels and series Joe had read with a fixed timeline, where a traveler couldn’t change history to prevent something like WWII or the atomic bombs dropping from happening.

But still, it was a time-travel novel, and that was what he had been reading these last few days, to see how different writers tackled the space-time continuum and traveling through time. Most of the books he’d read dealt with either time travel to some time obviously in the past, and not like last week; or a great leap in the future, and again not “next week.”

There was also that TV show many moons ago where the main character got tomorrow’s paper today. That was helpful, but how did that character know who to save, or which cause to stand for? *That one was easy*, Joe thought. The writers made up what they wanted, and that was how that story went. But what if that had been *him*? What if there were three tragedies on the front page, and Joe could only prevent one of them? How would he know which one to prevent, without writers telling him which one? They were *all* important.

And in these thoughts, reading his book, waiting for his soup to come, he knew the answer. Once he figured out how to get the watch to take him back in time, he would return to that first Monday on his calendar, prevent the pawn shop owner from getting killed, and

never take the watch in the first place.

But would he remember all that had happened when he woke up that first Tuesday? Most writers agreed he would, that the traveler is the only one who remembers all of the time lines.

A little after 1 p.m., Bill slid into the booth across from Joe. Bill was now wearing a black button-down shirt with his jeans, and he looked different from when he was wearing his red apron that no matter how many times he ran it through the laundry the grease stains just stayed there, mocking the soap and water.

“What’s up?” Bill asked, seeming rather impatient.

“I’m not keeping you from anything?” Joe asked, sensing this impatience.

“Nah,” Bill said, relaxing into the plastic bench. “I just wonder what’s up with you sometimes, is all.”

“We’re good friends, right?” Joe asked.

“Yeah, sure.”

“So if I were to tell you a secret, you’d keep it? Wouldn’t go all crazy on me?”

Bill leaned in towards Joe. “Is this what these last two weeks have been about?”

“Yeah,” Joe said softly. “I, uh, might have taken a watch from that pawn shop --” he started.

“You what?!” Bill asked, his voice a loud whisper. “But you said --”

“I said I didn’t kill anyone, is what you asked me. All I did was take one watch.”

“All right, continue,” Bill allowed.

“It’s gold and has all these buttons on it. And that day i went out the back, I pushed some of ‘em when I noticed one of the policemen looking like he was going to come after me. And after I pushed the buttons, he disappeared. I didn’t know what happened at first, but after I did some tests at home --”

“Tests? What’s going on here, Joe? Do you know something?” Bill really didn’t know what to do with this information Joe was telling him.

“Do you trust me?” Joe suddenly asked.

“What?” Bill asked. “What does that have to do with anything?” he hissed.

“It’s a time-travel watch,” Joe just blurted.

“A... *what?*” Bill asked.

"I know, it sounds crazy. But that's why you didn't see me all those days last week. I ended up traveling forward in time seven days."

"Are you sure you haven't drinking?" Bill asked.

"Positive," Joe confirmed.

"Then..." Bill started to say. "Then I have no idea what to say."

"I don't know what you should say either. Say... that you're still my friend and you're not going to call the men in the white coats."

Bill chuckled at that.

"Of course I'm not going to call the men in the white coats," he laughed. "Even though you *do* sound crazy."

"I know it sounds crazy when I say it out loud. It's kind of why i wanted to tell someone else -- someone to share the crazy with me. And i have an idea too," Joe told Bill.

"Do I want to know? Oh, I know. You'll go forward in time to the day of a huge lottery drawing, get the winning number, then go back to the day before and pick those numbers. Then you'll win big!" Bill said, trying not to laugh.

"The idea is tempting. The watch won't let me go back in time though. I think it's broken."

"But you can fix it, right?"

"I'm going to try."

"You, Joe, *try* to fix a watch? You can fix any watch or clock, or, well *anything* mechanical."

"I haven't tried yet, actually," he admitted.

"Well... why not?" Bill prompted.

"I don't know," Joe said, figuring he was being honest. "I wanted to share this with someone first."

"I'm glad you did," Bill said. He pulled a smartphone out of his pocket and looked at it. "It's about 2 o'clock, I should get going." Bill stood up. "I have a few things and errands to take care of before heading home. "I'll see you tomorrow for your morning coffee?"

"If I don't time-jump again," Joe joked.

Bill gave an awkward laugh.

"You sure you're not going to call the local insane asylum?" Joe really was worried his friend might somehow betray him.

"To be honest," Bill thought for a moment, "I don't even think we *have* a local insane

asylum. So I think your safe.”

“Don’t call the police either,” Joe said, trying not to sound as paranoid as he felt.

“I won’t,” Bill said softly, and he left the table where his friend sat.

Joe finished his soup that was still warm, and took his bill to the register to pay.

“Don’t worry about your bill, Joe,” said Delia, one of his favorite cashiers. “It’s already taken care of.”

“Thanks Delia,” he said, and gave her a \$5 tip. He left Cuppa Java in a good mood, and a plan to follow. Hopefully, it would work.

Back at his house, Joe locked all his doors and set up his lighted magnifier at the kitchen table. He got a black velvet cloth to spread the watch pieces out on, and his tools to work on the watch. His watch read 2:26:07.

Taking a deep breath, he sat down at the table, turned the watch over, and started to take apart the watch.

It was slow going, disassembling the watch one piece at a time and placing them on the cloth meticulously. He noted how each piece sat in the watch before taking it out. He wasn’t really sure how it was “broken,” so he didn’t really know what to look for when he got to the pins, so all he did was simply take the mechanism apart and put it back together as if something wasn’t working. He then replaced all the parts just as carefully as he took them out, using tweezers and other tools he’d fashioned after years of working on small, moving parts. Finally, he snapped the back of the watch in place and turned it over.

The watch read 5:56:07 p.m., and it was still Friday evening. It had taken him three and a half hours to take the watch apart and put it back together.

He’d told his supervisor he would be there Saturday morning, so as much as he was tempted to push those two buttons on each side, he felt very proud of himself that he didn’t.

That night, as he got ready for bed, he put the watch at the back of one of his dresser drawers, underneath all the clothes. Hopefully, it wouldn’t call to him that night.

As promised, he was at the Y at 7 a.m., and checked in with his supervisor. Joe wondered how his supervisor got that position. He wondered how nice it must be to have a job that required someone to work for only like four hours on a Saturday morning.

That day was the longest day Joe had experienced in a long time. He had another time-travel novel in his pocket today to read at lunch. This was a series based on a popular movie from the 80s, and the theory in this series was that you could change the timestream to a certain extent. As with the other book he read, big events couldn't be changed, but an entire person's timeline could be. It was like playing with the Fates, the three Greek goddesses who determined the lifespan of the mortals.

While the work day felt like it lasted forever, his lunch hour seemed like only five minutes. He couldn't stop thinking about the watch buried at the bottom of his t-shirt drawer.

Finally, it was four p.m., and time for him to clock out. Some days he wished he had a job where he could make his own hours and didn't have to punch a clock anymore. But he already knew he had no head for business, so he really wasn't about to open his own. Sometimes he told people he met on the street that he fixed all kinds of watches and clocks, working out of his home, and every so often he repaired one of those items for someone who had heard about him either by word of mouth or from someone at J's Jewels.

When he got home, he tried not to act like a school boy with a new toy, but that's just what he did. As soon as he was inside the front area, he locked the door and raced up the stairs to retrieve the watch.

He went into his library with the watch and turned the tv on to the same news and weather channel he had on the other day when he tested the watch. The weather was on, and it was talking about the weather for "today" as being Saturday.

He hesitated a moment, but only for a moment, and then pushed two buttons on each side. The room rippled and hiccupped, but only for a second. Now the tv was talking about "today" being Sunday.

He put his hands in the position they were most comfortable the other day, and pulled the four pins outward. And again, nothing happened. No ripple, hiccup, or any other indication of time travel.



Joe sighed, and headed downstairs with the watch to take it apart again. He had a few other things he wanted to try with the inner cogs and switches. Maybe one of those would work.

Joe set up his tools and black velvet cloth on the kitchen table. He also moved his tv from the family room, living room -- different people always called it something different -- into the kitchen so he could watch that news & weather channel as he tried a few things with the watch once he had it taken apart.

He hadn't seen any different or unique pieces inside the watch that he would have labeled as "time travel components," but that didn't really mean anything right now. He *had* to get it fixed to travel backwards. Even if it meant twisting his hands in weird positions to pull four buttons out at the same time many times.

For many days Joe sat at his table, taking apart the watch and putting it back together again, each time slightly different. It never affected the time travel forward - Sunday became Monday, Monday into Tuesday, and finally Tuesday jumped to Wednesday. Joe stopped only long enough to eat something a few times throughout the day. He didn't know when the last time was he had a proper meal, or left the house for fresh air since that Saturday of work. He was mindful of the time, as he needed to be at the Y every Saturday, and he didn't want to time-jump over another work day.

He did have a job and a responsibility. Other people did rely on his to do the things he said he would. Unlike his mother. He seemed to find himself thinking about her these past few days. There were many times Joe as a young boy found himself wanting to go to something at school with his mother, or over to a friends house that wasn't in walking distance. His mom would say she'd be there, or she'd take him, only to realise too late that they couldn't go, or she'd have been drinking again. And even drunk, she knew enough not to get behind the wheel.

Most of the time, when a friend wanted to hang out with Joe, he made sure to meet them at the neighborhood playground, that was a few blocks away from his house; he passed it every day he went to school.

The block the playground was on was part of a city-wide effort to preserve some grass and trees and nature that gets pushed by the wayside for houses and bus stops and sidewalks that most big cities have. There were trees and grassy areas for picnics, and the playground

with its swings, slides, jungle gyms and woodchipped blanket covering the play area. There were even toddler swings in another part of the playground. There were also picnic benches on the grass, a worn dirt path that wove through it all, for bicyclists and walkers. There were even several bright green trash cans telling the park-goers not to litter.

In addition to his library (at home, school, and the neighborhood library, that is), Joe loved the park. He'd bring his books there to read on days it wasn't raining or snowing. He loved the smell of the grass, new life, and new wood chips in the spring. The wood they used smelled like cedar. In the summer he loved to lie on the grass and read. And when he wasn't reading, he'd roll over and look up at the puffy clouds and pick out shapes he saw in them. Sometimes other kids would wander over, see him laying on his back and ask what the hell he thought he was doing. Even though he was only 12, his answers would range from counting the water moisture droplets in the air to meditating. Eventually though, he'd tell the kids he was looking at the clouds, and sometimes they'd join him.

He loved the leaf piles and the crisp coolness of the fall. Sometimes one of the parents might bring some leftover Halloween candy on November 1st. His mother simply said they don't celebrate Halloween, so Joe never went trick-or-treating. He lived it through the other kids regaling their friends the day after about who went as a vampire or mummy, and who wore the dorky rubber mask of a President, or the celebrity of that year.

In the winter, not too many kids went to the playground. There were a few, but the ground was frozen and it hurt if you fell. You couldn't lay on the ground either. But Joe liked going there just to sit on a swing and listen when it was snowing. The snow was so quiet, but if you listened hard, it might "whisper" to you, spreading its serene calm through your whole body.

Joe wished it was winter now, as he stretched and stood up one more time from his table. All the pieces of the watch were taken out and spread out on the cloth, like a diagram in a book to show you how all the pieces went together. He studied them. He memorised their layout, turned his back to the table and tried to remember which pieces were where. It was like a jigsaw puzzle.

Interestingly enough, Joe never did jigsaw puzzles. While his mom bought him that one model, and he put it together almost right away, he thought that since he showed interest in it right away and didn't leave it untouched, his mother might want to get him more models, even puzzles. But she never did. Most of the time his mother liked to keep a neat house. Sure, the kitchen could look like a disaster area, but she liked for the house to

be presentable, and not have a million pieces of kids toys all over the place. Since no one ever came visiting, Joe wondered who or what she was keeping the house “presentable” for.

Now, he looked at the watch pieces with an analytical mind that could probably do a 1000-piece puzzle in only a few hours, and wanted to see if the pieces could go together in any different ways. He tested his memorization of the locations of the pieces again, and when he turned back, something clicked into place. Maybe this time it would work, he thought, as he carefully put the components back together in a slightly different configuration.

When at last he was done with all that, and he set the time according to the news/weather channel, it was 9:54:46 p.m. He was tired, his eyes were tingling, and knew he should get some rest. But he had to try it just one more time.

The time jump forward worked again, and that was good, because the pieces were in slightly different places. The watch read 9:54:47 p.m., and the tv now told him it was now Thursday.

He took a deep breath before gently tugging the four pins outward. It read 9:54:50. This time, there seemed to be an ever-so slight blip in his scenery, and the watch now read 9:54:30, and the tv still indicating it was the same Thursday as before. *Great*, he thought. *I get it to finally go backwards, and all it does it go back like 20 seconds.*

But at least it was something, Joe thought as he cleaned up his tools by rolling them up in the velvet cloth, leaving them on the table, and turning off the light on the magnifying glass. Maybe he’d go back in time 40 seconds tomorrow.

Joe sat at the counter of Cuppa Java again that Friday. It was the next morning after he completely dismantled the watch and went back in time a whopping 20 seconds. He thought it might have had something to do with the notches on some of the gears that were near the pins.

Bill came over with a full cup of coffee for Joe.

"It's been a few days," Bill told him.

"Since last Friday?" Joe asked, hoping his records were right.

Bill was quiet for a moment, searching his memory. "Yep, last Friday. When you told me that crazy story --"

"It's not crazy," Joe said softly. "You'll just have to trust me. Right now, I can only go forward in time, but when I get it fixed and go backwards, I know what i have to do," he said.

"Buy the mega-million winning lottery ticket?"

"That's a secondary thing on my list," Joe admitted.

"All right, then, I give up," Bill said, in an effort to get Joe to tell him his plans.

"I'm only telling you because you probably won't remember," Joe started by way of explanation. "I'm going to prevent that pawn shop owner from getting killed," he revealed.

"How can you do that?" Bill asked, "by going back in time?" It was painfully clear to Joe that Bill wasn't really paying attention at all. Was he even *listening* when Joe talked to him about any of this? Sighing, all Joe could do was nod. He also paid for his coffee, and then told Bill the same thing he said one day early last week.

"Don't worry if you don't see me for a few days," Joe said.

"I won't," Bill assured him. But Joe really wasn't comforted by Bill's reply.

As Joe walked home, he reviewed what some of the books presented if someone went back in time and changed history. Most of the time, the timeline adapted to the change, and went forward from there. But, as Joe recalled, all of the books Joe read involved the distant past.

He needed to stop at the library.

The search took several tries before he found a few books he could read through. Most of his research included finding a book in the catalogue on the computer and then going

to the shelf to look at it. Many were historical time travel romances, that took place far off in yesteryear.

Eventually, he did find a novel -- he didn't really remember the name -- where the main character, Johanna, goes back in time to right a wrong that happened at the beginning of the book. Once the timeline caught up to where she started at the beginning, the original character essentially merged with the traveler, and the traveler character remembered all the events that never happened in the new timeline.

Joe hoped this was the case with him -- if he ever got the watch to take him back in time more than 20 seconds at a time.

He thanked the librarian for helping him out, and was on his way back home. He had a watch to take apart and put back together again.

Again, Joe unrolled the black velvet cloth. The gold, silver and bronze components contrasted well against the cloth, which is why Joe liked it. He turned on the light on the magnifying glass, and turned on the tv. He got a drink of water at the kitchen sink before sitting down at the table and taking a deep breath.

Again, he took the watch apart completely, and arrayed all the pieces so he could see them all. He studied the parts nearest the pins. He marveled at their smallness, but they were so precise and exact. He noticed there were notches on some of them in places where they weren't on a regular watch. Maybe these had something to do with going back in time, he pondered.

There already was one notch in the gear, so he carefully etched an identical notch on all the other related gears. Satisfied, he put the watch back together.

Once completed, he set the time to what it said on the news/weather channel. It was only 1:30 Friday afternoon, but he decided against confirming the time forward capability, because he hadn't told his supervisor at the Y that he needed to take some days off. He'd make up something about a family-something, maybe that some long-lost relative contacted him, or that he found his birth father. Some bullshit story, in case he time-jumped over another saturday again.

But he did test the back-in-time ability. The tv told him it was still Friday, and the watch told him it was 1:32:35 p.m. He picked two pins on each side, and pulled them out. The surroundings rippled again, and this time, the watch said 1:31:35 p.m. It was a small

success, as he'd gone back in time a whole minute!

It was too late to call his supervisor and call out of work the next day. So Joe spent the rest of the day -- when it wasn't dinner time -- in his library, re-reading some of the many time travel novels he had on his shelves.

He prided himself on resisting the urge to just pick up the watch, smash four buttons together and jump ahead another 24 hours and be finished with work already.

Saturday was another plot-through-work day and wish he was anywhere but there. But soon enough, it was 4 p.m. and time to finally leave. That day, his boss came in at the end of Joe's shift, so after Joe clocked out, he stopped by his boss's office.

"I need a few Saturdays off, Pete," Joe said after knocking. Pete nodded his assent for Joe to come in. "Got some letters about people who think they might be my relatives, so I'm doing some visiting to talk to 'em."

"How long do you think you'll be out? I could hire a temp if it's long enough."

"I was thinking four or five Saturdays?" Joe asked tentatively, wondering if that was too much time.

"Sure, five Saturdays are fine. See you back in six weeks," Pete said. And just like that, Joe had all the time at his fingertips for the next six weeks.

"Thanks, Pete," Joe said, and left his supervisor's office, calm and collected. But as soon as he was clear of anyone's hearing, he whooped a "yeah!" and raced home as quick as he could without looking like an idiot on the way.

The first thing Joe needed to check that afternoon was if the time forward still worked. He turned on the tv again, and made sure whatever was on, in this case it was the news, told him it was Saturday. Once it did this, he pushed four buttons on the watch. He was again rewarded with the background shimmering, and now the tv was talking about today as Sunday.

Before he took the watch apart again, he went back up to his library to get the calendar he was filling in. He filled in the boxes up to that day, and then set it at the opposite end of the table.

Once the watch was apart again, he adjusted all the appropriate notches, this time making them a little bigger than they were. He also added notches in another similar place

on the components. Once it was back together for yet another time -- Joe had lost track of how many times he'd done this -- it was time to test it again. Did Joe want to make sure it could still go forward, or just test the backwards travel?

In the end, he just pressed two buttons on one side, and it was now early early in the morning on Monday, 4:42:33 a.m. according to the weather that was now airing. He pulled out two of the pins on the same side, figuring if pushing two buttons made you go forward 12 hours, pulling two of them would send you back 12 hours.

His surroundings shimmered more than they had when he'd gone only seconds back in time. When he checked the watch for the time, it now read 10:42:34 p.m., and the tv was saying it was now Sunday night again. Six hours! he was getting closer to the 12 or 24 hour time travel increment.

He told himself he would adjust the watch just one more time before finally getting some much needed sleep.

This time, he adjusted the notches a just little bit more. As predicted, he'd fine-tuned it another 6 hours. Now, he could travel 12 or 24 hours into the future, but only 12 hours at a time in the past. He tried a few more times and found that after he pulled the pins out three successive times, it stopped working. He couldn't even move forward in time, no matter how many times he pushed either 2 or 4 buttons.

He stared at it before the reason finally clicked. While he had briefly noted the battery looked a little different than most watch batteries, he now looked at it just a little bit closer.

He wasn't really an expert on batteries, but this one wasn't silver-plated like most of them were -- it looked like it was pure gold. He had no way to test this, and he really didn't want to, either. This was the only battery the watch had. Since time travel was still a fictional plot device, all the writers used different means to power their time machines. In that *Murder in Legwarmers* book, they used the light of fluorescent light bulbs. The DeLorean used plutonium for the flux capacitor.

So, why *not* a solid gold battery?

Another question that remained was how long did the battery hold the charge for? That was something only time would be able to tell him.



Bill wasn't working that Thursday morning at Cuppa Java. A perky waitress named Marissa served him at the counter that morning.

"Hey, is Bill working today?" he asked.

"Actually," Marissa replied, flapping her chewing gum and snapping it as she spoke.

"He took some time off. I've been filling in for him this week."

"Well, I hope everything is all right," Joe said sincerely.

"I'll tell him you said that," she said, flapping the chewing gum again.

Joe had a bad feeling about why Bill wasn't working, but he couldn't put his finger on what it was. He tried a gambit he wasn't sure would work.

"Marissa," he called. She came over with a fresh pot of coffee.

"Thanks, just top it off. Hey," he leaned in towards her, "could I get Bill's address? Just, y'know, swing by and make sure he's all right?"

She stopped flapping her gum that Joe could tell was a bright neon color for just a moment. She looked at Joe, trying to decide if he was harmless or an axe murderer. Finally, she topped off his coffee cup. "I'll be right back," she promised, and Joe smiled.

True to her word, Marissa stopped back with his bill and another page from the order pad. This page had Bill's home address on it, which Joe recognized as being just on the other side of the city in the suburban area that felt like it surrounded the city.

That wasn't the case for the entire city, however -- just along the west and north. Around the south and eastern sides of the city were the docks and waterways, which led out to a rather large lake, as well as parks that were along the waterfront. The parks started at almost the northeastern corner of the city, came down the eastern side, and started curving around to the south. Here was where the pleasure boats were docked at the many marinas. Most of the southern coast was the shipyards for the big freight and cargo ships.

The northern border of the city was a nice area, parks there too, and more trees than in the center of town. The houses and properties were bigger out in that area. As the city moved towards the northwestern part, the neighborhoods seemed to get poorer. No one really wanted to live along the western part of the city, and whole areas were deserted and abandoned, almost like a ghost town. The suburban area opposite the west part of the city was just as drab and grey, with a high rate of crime, including robberies, murders, and auto

theft. It was towards the western part of the city, but still along the northern edge was where Bill's address was.

Joe's house and the coffee shop were in the northern part of the city, but closer to the eastern edge of town, and the water. Sometimes when the wind and weather was *just right*, you could smell the water from the breezes off the lake. Joe enjoyed the breeze, but just never made it out there. He told himself that once he fixed this thing with the pawn shop owner, he would take some time to visit one of the beaches that had been so close to him but he'd never gone to in his entire life.

There was the one time that he had asked his mom if they could go, just for the afternoon, and all she said was she didn't want him tracking all that sand in the house. Joe never asked again, and just never made time to get there. But now, he told himself, he would.

Joe looked in his wallet, and gave Marissa a nice tip for giving him the address. Bill settled, he left Cuppa Java and set out for Bill's address.

The house was easy to find. It was easy twice the size of Joe's and for a moment, he felt a pang of envy. But he was here just to see what Bill was doing, to make sure for himself that nothing was amiss. Besides, not only could he not afford a bigger house, the house he did own was completely his, and there hadn't been a mortgage on it for at least 25 years. He did take comfort in that security.

He was a few houses away when he saw a car pulling into the driveway at the address on the paper. Joe stopped walking and waited at a mailbox several houses down as he watched the car park and the door open. When Joe saw it was Bill, he breathed a sigh of relief.

Bill opened his door with a key and disappeared inside the house. Joe sighed in relief knowing that Bill was all right. But that niggling feeling was still there, that Joe couldn't shake. He had no rationale for the feeling: he'd seen with his own eyes Bill was okay. But because he couldn't get rid of that gut feeling, he got a little closer to Bill's house.

He wasn't really sure about the neighbors, or how nosey they were, so he went around to the backyards, and positioned himself under one of Bill's first floor windows. At first he didn't hear anything, but then heard some talking between Bill and a woman, who Joe figured was Bill's wife.

When he heard a man's voice, Joe had to look into the window, rather than sit below it, eavesdropping. He rose up slowly to take a look in the window. Not that he would have known who the second guy was, but he didn't look like someone he would want to tangle with. He was burly with wide shoulders, wearing a leather vest with a lot of chains on it. He had a dark beard and wore dark glasses.

His voice was gruff when he spoke.

"Where is he?" the man demanded.

"Where is who?" Bill asked, clearly annoyed this other man was in his kitchen. Joe saw Bill's wife -- Theresa was her name, he remembered Bill telling him -- sitting at the table. It kinda looked like she had her arms around the back and they were tied there. Bill was standing at the table next to here. The other man had his arms crossed over his chest and he was trying to look menacing.

"Joe Beor," the man said, as though everyone knew who that was. Joe almost fell over when he heard his name.

"I have no idea who that is," Bill answered again, and Joe was pretty sure Bill was, in fact, telling the truth as he knew it. Joe was pretty sure he'd never told Bill his last name, and he never used the one credit card that he did have at Cuppa Java. In fact, Joe only used that credit card once in his entire life, and that was for his mother's funeral all those years ago. If he thought about it, the card was also buried at the bottom of his sock drawer.

But the bigger question was who was this guy, and why was he looking for him?

"Joe, that guy you meet every day at your coffee shop?" Gruff Voice Guy said as if it was completely obvious who he was talking about.

"That's his last name?" Bill asked. *Don't give anything away, Bill*, Joe silently implored. But Bill didn't hear him.

"I haven't seen him for like a week now," Bill admitted.

"So you admit you know him," Gruff Voice Guy said.

"I had no idea that's who you were talking about."

"Did he seem or act odd in any way lately?"

"Well, Joe is an odd guy anyway," Bill said, wanting to give some levity to the conversation.

Gruff Voice Guy grunted, as if Bill's reply was not what he wanted to hear.

"Sorry," Bill said. "Let me think for a moment," and Bill was quiet, presumably thinking about anything odd about Joe "lately."

“Well, I don’t see him every day like I used to. Maybe he got a morning job. Other than that... nothing odd.”

Joe let out a sigh of relief that Bill hadn’t said anything about the watch.

“Hmm,” Gruff Voice Guy grunted. For a while, no one said anything and Joe snuck another peek in the window. No one had changed positions, either. After some time, Gruff Voice Guy spoke again.

“Boss thinks you know something about Joe and his strange behavior.”

“I’m pretty sure I don’t,” Bill said. “I’m the morning manager at a coffee shop. I see a lot of people every day, and people tell me their problems and about their day at work from the previous day, or what their day might be like. Or what their kids are doing in school. Everyone has their strange behaviors. Most people are either texting, checking email or talking on their phones these days,” Bill explained. “I’m like a bartender, but you don’t have a hangover at the end of it.” He tried to joke again. And for that Joe had to smile.

“I ain’t moving until you remember this.” Gruff Voice Guy said again, and Joe didn’t need to try to get another look in the kitchen to know that no one had changed their positions, and Gruff Voice Guy was still leaning against the counter, arms crossed, stern look on his face.

Joe wondered who this Gruff Voice Guy was, and who his boss was. But how could he find out? He leaned with his back against the wall under the back kitchen window of Bill’s house, thinking of how he could get answers his questions. Nothing was forthcoming, and the sun was starting to set in the sky, so he figured he ought to get some dinner. He was also glad he’d left *the* watch at home; what would happen if he was caught?

Joe checked his wallet for the second time that day to see how much money he had, and how much he could afford for dinner. It was too far for him to go home and eat, and he did remember passing some fast food restaurants on the way out here.

He kept his head low as he walked along some of the backyards, putting a few houses between him and Bill’s house, before returning to the sidewalk and heading in the direction of dinner.

As he ate dinner that night -- something from the value menu, it was all he had the money for -- he pondered how he could find out what Gruff Voice Guy wanted. He ate quickly, but then took some extra time over his drink, which this time was a cola.

He must have had a far-off look on his face, because after quite some time had passed, he realised someone was now sitting across from him. She was a young woman, if he had to guess he would say she was in her mid 20s, wearing a shirt from the restaurant he had his dinner in.

"I'm sorry, I was lost in thought," he said. "Are you closing now?" he seemed a little embarrassed that he was caught staring off into space.

"Nah, you're all right. it's only 9, we close at 10. We were wondering if you were all right, you hadn't moved in like an hour."

"Yeah," he said, "Yeah, I'm fine," he sounded more confident the second time.

"You want to get something off your chest?" she asked, her short bob hair-do bobbing as she spoke. He didn't really want to, but suddenly found himself talking.

"I think someone i know is in trouble, but I don't know what to do about it."

"Is this person a friend?" she asked.

"Well, kind of. he's the morning manager at this little coffee shop in the city i stop at pretty much every morning," Joe explained. "But he wasn't there today, which is actually kind of odd," he felt like he had to add. He had no idea who she really was; the only thing he knew for certain was that her name tag said "Mary." Maybe her parents were religious? he thought.

"What kind of trouble?" she asked.

Without giving anything away, Joe told her the events of that afternoon. He said nothing about the watch, or his travels forward in time, or his experiments to calibrate the watch to go back in time. As he spoke, he could see her mind working as well.

He didn't really want to involve anyone else, this could turn into something dangerous, and he certainly didn't want anyone in trouble, or even hurt, because of him. He even told her this.

"I don't want you getting involved. You don't even know me, and I have no clue what's even going on in the first place," he tried to dissuade her. But apparently, for whatever the reason, it didn't work.

"Well, I'm the nosey type. I don't mind looking into things for someone else," she told him. "What you need is a way to get in the house, find out what's going on, and ask your friend the questions you want to know. You said this Tough Guy --"

"Gruff Voice Guy," Joe corrected. "That's what I'm calling him in my head, anyway."

"OK, this Gruff Voice Guy," Mary continued. "was guarding your friend and his wife."

So I can knock on the door, distract him, and you can sneak in the kitchen and ask your friend if he's all right."

"Ok, so how do I sneak in the house in the first place?" Joe asked, pointing out least the first flaw.

And he'd stumped Mary with that one. "Oh, good point. Let me think for a moment." While she was quiet as she thought, he could see her eyes moving, her expressions changing, and she was making hand motions. Joe found it kind of amusing.

"I, uh... yeah, I don't have a way to do that," she finally admitted.

"Wait," Joe said, remembering something. "What if you distract Gruff Voice Guy at the front door and I knock softly on the window and motion Bill to the back door. I just remembered there's a back door there."

She was quiet again, thinking it over. "Sure that would work," she finally said.

"When would we do this?" Joe asked. "When is your shift over?"

"I close tonight," she said, "But i'm not off the clock until like 11. What if you meet me back here tomorrow morning about 9 --"

"But what about Bill tonight?" Joe sounded impatient.

"I know this is something you want to find out tonight, but a young woman knocking on the door pretending to sell magazines at 10 at night is a little more suspicious than at 10 in the morning," she pointed out.

Joe was silent. She did have him there.

"All right," he relented. "9 a.m., I'll be here."

Even though it was a fast food restaurant, he insisted on giving Mary a tip for her time. At first she refused to take it, but Joe insisted.

"Thanks for your help," he said sincerely.

"Don't thank me just yet. We need to find out exactly how much trouble your friend is in. When we get him out of it, *then* you can thank me."

Joe really hoped this plan worked. He'd never done anything like this -- it was only done in some of the books he'd read. He also never thought of himself as a hero either. But then again, neither did any of the heroes in those books. Pretty much all of them figured they weren't worthy of the big universe-saving stuff.

Joe was aware this was probably on a smaller scale than saving the universe, as he was only trying to save two lives. Well, three, if he was counting his end mission.

Now, he sat poised under Bill's back window, in pretty much the same place he'd been yesterday. The only difference today was that he was waiting for Mary's knock at the front door to distract Gruff Voice Guy.

Even though it was a short walk, they took Mary's roomy car and parked it about four houses away. She gave him the ignition key as part of her plan. To this, Joe protested, since he'd never even been behind the wheel of a car, let alone driven one.

"It's just in case they're watching when we get in the car. You'll get in the driver's seat, I'll get in the back and pull a shirt over what i'm wearing, and undo my hair. Then you'll move over to the passenger seat while I get into the front," she had explained. Joe thought it sounded good, and they were on their way.

When he and Mary got to Bill's house about a quarter after nine. the first thing they both did was go to that kitchen window and look inside to assess the situation. Bill's wife, Theresa, was still sitting in the chair with her hands behind her back. Joe was pretty certain that had to be uncomfortable, but he realised she was wearing different clothes, so Gruff Voice Guy -- who was still in the same pose and clothes as yesterday -- had to have let her change at some point last night.

Bill was still wearing the same clothes. Instead of standing next to Theresa, he, too, was now sitting in a chair with his arms tied behind his back, and the chair was at the opposite end of the table. From what Joe could see, Bill's face looked roughed up as if Bill had been hit repeatedly.

"Now," Gruff Voice Guy was saying, "You will tell me where Joe Beor is, or this time, i'll hit your pretty wife!"

Joe turned to see what Mary thought of that, but she was gone from his side. After only a moment, Joe saw Gruff Voice Guy turn his head in the direction of the door. Joe

jumped up and tapped on the window. Bill slowly turned his head in Joe's direction. His eyes widened when he saw who it was, and he started shaking his head "no!"

Joe tried the door he'd seen last night, and hoped it wasn't that complicated to get to the kitchen from there. Joe should have been surprised that the door knob turned easily in his hand and the door opened into a lower level den or office room, but he really wasn't. Gruff Voice Guy had the homeowners tied up, and had probably stayed up all night to keep an eye on them. Joe figured this was how Gruff Voice Guy got in in the first place.

Once inside, Joe found a small set of stairs that took him right into the kitchen. He untied Theresa first, then Bill, and led them outside to their back yard. As he did so, he heard Mary talking at the door.

"Hi!" she said, in her perky customer-greeting voice. "I was in the neighborhood, selling magazine subscriptions for my college. I'm trying to get into nursing school full time," she was explaining. She even had a schoolgirl outfit on, one she said she'd worn for Halloween, but Joe suspected it was hers, and she'd worn it to school when she went to the local private school several blocks away from the restaurant she was working at.

The previous night she'd told Joe she was 25, but the way she was presenting herself the door, he would have figured her more for just barely 18.

"What the *hell* is going on, Joe?" Bill demanded to know in a harsh whisper.

"Wait until Mary is done at the door," Joe said, oddly calm as he lead Bill and Theresa to one of their neighbor's houses a few yards down. Joe could still see Mary at the door, with her little plaid pleated skirt, white button-down shirt with sleeves that stopped just before her elbows. She wore saddle shoes -- actual, authentic, saddle shoes -- with little white ankle socks folded over to touch the top of her shoes. Her hair, which was twisted up in some kind of hair clip, was now French braided down the center of her head, and the hair band at the bottom just touched her waist.

Joe started to wish he was like 20 years younger. That thought was also coupled with the thought they must have looked ridiculous together that morning at the restaurant, a bit like Beauty and the Beast. Joe barely looked at himself in the mirror that morning, his face was scruffy with a few day's growth on his chin. It was becoming more and more grey each day. "Brushing his hair" was running his fingers through that mop of still mostly brown hair on his head. At least he still had his hair; he'd known young men in their late 20s who were starting to go bald.

He was wearing a reasonably clean pair of blue jeans -- it was probably about time to



do his laundry again, he thought -- a black shirt, and one of his comfy grey hooded sweat jackets. His black sneakers would need to be replaced soon, as the heel and ball of his feet were wearing through the bottoms. He had no idea what he did when he walked, he seemed to need a new pair of sneakers like every six months.

He turned his attention back to Bill's front door. Mary was finishing her schpiel, but just then the door abruptly closed in her face.

"Well!" she said, and huffed off. To keep the ruse, she continued to the next house, which was now only one yard away from where Joe was hidden with Bill and Theresa.

A moment later, Bill's front door flung open, and Gruff Voice Guy came storming out and stopped on the front walkway. He looked around, fuming silently. Well, Joe didn't really know that, but just the way his posture was, it didn't take a genius to know this guy was pissed off. Joe also knew it probably wasn't a good idea to actually piss off a guy like that, but that's just what Joe -- via Mary -- had done.

The house that Mary was now at had no cars in the driveway. And after he saw her knock, he heard a far-off sound of a dog barking from somewhere inside the house. He figured that family wasn't home, and Mary figured the same thing, since she now left that porch to come to the house where Joe, Bill and Theresa were hiding on the far side of the building.

Joe looked again at Bill's house, and saw Gruff Voice Guy on the phone, probably calling for backup. There was just one house between them and Mary's car, which she'd left unlocked. Mary was still continuing her magazine-selling ruse as she worked her way back to the car, but Joe, Bill and Theresa crept along behind the houses, hoping that none of their neighbors were home to see them.

There was a moment when Joe was just able to see Gruff Voice Guy turn his head and look in their direction, but when he turned the other way right afterwards, Joe figured he was looking around, and just didn't see them any more. Which Joe figured was a good thing.

He saw Mary's light brown car parked along the curb and whispered to Bill and Theresa they should sprint to the curb and get in the back seat, and stay low once inside. Joe pretended to be walking down the driveway of the next house and got into Mary's car in the driver's seat as she'd told him to earlier that morning, before they started on the crazy plan.

The one thing he'd forgotten about was that Bill and Theresa would be in the back seat, so how could Mary get in there to do her part of changing her appearance?

As it turned out, just as Mary finished knocking on the house Joe had just "come

from,” Gruff Voice Guy turned away from glaring at the street and went to his car, and turned his back on Joe. At that moment, Mary opened the driver’s door, and Joe slid over to the passenger seat.

Mary turned the car around, and drove away down the street, away from Bill and Theresa’s house. The couple in the back seat sat up as Mary got to the stop sign and turned left.

“What the fuck was that about!?” Bill demanded. He knew Joe wouldn’t shush him now, because there was no one else to hear him.

“I think it was about the watch,” Joe finally said.

“The what?” Mary and Theresa said at almost the same time.

“We need somewhere to talk where we can’t be overheard,” Joe said.

“I don’t believe this,” Bill muttered to the car window as Mary drove. She seemed to know where she was going, and no one else asked where they were headed, only knowing that it was hopefully somewhere mostly private.

Joe was a bit confused when they pulled into another driveway, which led a ways down to a single one-floor house that was surrounded by trees. Joe had noticed the houses had been becoming further and further apart, but they were only in the car for about 10 minutes.

The drive changed from blacktop to gravel, and this was where Mary parked the car. Joe also noticed the house was bigger up close than when they first turned down the drive.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” Mary said grandly, but then smiled. “Well, it’s not mine. I live here with my parents. But they’re away for the month. They love their road trips,” she said by way of explanation.

“The only thing out here to overhear us are the geese that might be in the backyard,” she said, leading them around to the back of the house instead of inside. In the back there was a slate patio with a white table and six matching chairs. There was an orange and yellow umbrella in the table that was open so it shaded the glass-topped table. There was a lush carpet of grass, and near the back and edge of one side of the property, was a landscaped area complete with a lake. Joe didn’t see any geese, but he did see a pair of ducks paddling around in the water.

“Let’s sit down at the table,” Joe suggested. But only Mary and Theresa were the only ones to use the chairs.

“Guess I ought to start pretty near the beginning,” Joe said. “About four weeks ago, I stole a watch from the Second Chance Pawn Shop. It’s only like two blocks from Cuppa Java,

where Bill works.”

“You did *what?*” Bill’s face turned red from his anger.

“Let the man talk,” Theresa told him.

Joe continued. “None of you know this, but i repair and tinker with watches. Well, mostly. It’s what i did in high school and after. Now i just mop the floor at the Y on Saturdays.” He looked at the three people who were waiting patiently for some kind of answer as to what was happening.

“It was actually about a week later I’d learned about the shopkeeper’s murder. It took some time for me to put the pieces together when Bill told me about that. When i went into the shop that day, I didn’t see anyone in the front of the shop. The door didn’t tinkle or chime, either. I completely brushed it off then. But now, i’ve come to realise that when i was in there taking the watch, the shopkeeper was dying or was already dead, and I had no idea that was happening.”

Bill and Theresa looked at each other, then back at Joe. Mary just continued watching Joe, wondering what he was going to say next.

“Back to the day after I took the watch -- I had no idea about that murder when the police came into Cuppa Java that morning -- I just thought they were after me for stealing the watch, so that was when I asked Bill about a back way out.”

“I had no idea what was going on either,” Bill jumped in. “It was only after you’d gone out back that the police had asked me if i’d seen anyone leaving the pawn shop. Since I didn’t, and told them as much, that was when they told me the poor guy had been shot.”

“And then I didn’t see you for a week,” Joe told the three of them, but was looking at Bill. Bill nodded.

“But I came in a few days later, and told you everything. And that was two weeks ago,” Joe said.

“You told me... everything? What did you tell me? And why can’t I remember?” Bill was confused again. “You were like this last week when i talked to you again,” Joe said, hoping that was helpful to Bill.

“So two weeks ago I was totally coherent, but last week i was confused?” Bill asked for clarification. “So something thing happened to me that week?” he asked.

“It’s possible,” Joe allowed.

“So this is all about a watch?” Theresa now asked Joe.

“It is,” Joe said honestly. He was still debating telling them what the watch really

did, and what his end plan really was.

“Must be a very special watch,” Mary said.

“And some how they know that Joe is connected,” Bill added. “What *exactly* did you tell me about this watch two weeks ago?”

Joe took a deep breath, know that these people he might have called friends in a different timeline were about to think he was certifiably insane in just another moment.

“It’s a time-travel watch,” Joe said. There, he’d done it. In a moment one of the three would be calling the men in the white coats. But no one moved.

“You mean,” Mary was the first to speak again after some minutes of awkward silence, “time travel is *real*?”

“It is,” Joe confessed. “I’ve even gone forward and back in time.” Again, more awkward silence. “It’s only like a few days forward, and only one back,” he tried to explain. He thought someone would laugh at this absurd notion, but no one did.

As Joe watched them, he could tell when something clicked in Bill’s memories. “I thought you were crazy,” Bill said. “And then you told me something about that you were telling me because I probably wouldn’t remember. Why did you tell me that part?”

“Because whenever it is that i’m able to save the pawn shop owner, the timeline with change.”

“What do you mean, whenever you’re able to save the pawn shop owner? Why can’t you go back in time right now and do that?” This was from Mary.

“The battery needs time to recharge. Right now, i can only go back in time 36 hours at a time, and the battery must recharge after that simply by letting it rest and only using the watch as a watch, not a time travel device. I don’t know yet how long it really takes to recharge. I also think I can go back in time further than the 36 hours, but that was after i was testing it quite a bit. Right now, it’s been recharging for not quite 48 hours. When I get home later, I’ll see what it lets me do.”

“You’ve thought about this quite a while, haven’t you?” Bill asked.

“I’ve lost the better part of the past four weeks jumping forward in time trying to figure this out. I even marked up a calendar so i would know what day it really is. For me it feels like only ten days have passed since that day i took the watch, when in reality it’s been like 25.”

“Wow,” Mary said softly.

“Yeah,” Joe readily agreed.

"You're quiet, hon," Bill turned to his wife.

"Thinking," she replied, and it was easy to see she was lost in thought. "So," she said after a bit of time, "You steal a watch, and it turns out that the owner of the shop had been killed. Now, almost four weeks later, this guy appears out of nowhere, herds me and Bill into our kitchen, keeps us captive for a day, wanting to know where this guy Joe Beor is, because... his boss knows that Joe -- that's you," she said, indicating Joe, and he nodded in agreement, "took something from him -- i'm guessing the something is the watch. Am I right so far?" she asked, and Joe nodded again.

She continued, "But what i don't know is how did he know *who* took the watch from him?"

Had he stopped to put all the pieces in the right order, Joe too, would have come up with the same question. He thought about Theresa's question for some time.

"Ok," he said after a long while, "this sounds kinda crazy, but it's the best I got: This guy -- the Boss that Gruff Voice Guy mentioned --"

"Gruff Voice Guy?" Bill interrupted.

"I don't know his real name?" Joe said. "Anyway, this Boss must be well-connected in the city. Bill told me there were jewels and other watches like some Rolexes that were stolen. With the shop owner dead, these guys have some time to look through the shop's records and account for what's been stolen. Maybe the Boss had his guys steal them, i don't know. But when they look through the inventory, there's a gold watch still missing. So they start asking the jewelry stores and places that sell watches -- or places and people that repair them. And J's knows me. So the Boss puts a few pieces together -- there's a gold watch he's missing from the haul, and I fix watches. Now he's looking for me, to either give him the watch, or tell him where it is."

"Why *you* specifically?" Theresa. "There has to be someone *else* in the entire city that fixes watches."

"Believe it or not, no, there isn't. Well," Joe amended what he said quickly, "J's will fix your watch, but they'll "fix" it so it breaks in a few weeks so you have to bring it back again. Pretty much anyone who still has a watch like that knows it. And plus, us watch tinkerers are a dying breed. We have been since they started making watches you don't have to wind anymore."

"What does this Boss-man know about the watch that he's missing?" Mary asked.

"I don't know what the Boss-man knows about the watch i took. It's very pricy, and

the pawn shop was asking \$1000 for it.” There were three whistles when Joe said that. He continued describing it, “The face is part digital and part analogue. The digital part includes the seconds, and when you push a button for the date it tells you the day of the week and the number of the day of the year it is. The only other feature i found was pulling out one of the pins gives you stopwatch and timer functions. I only learned of the time-travel function when I was rushed, fumbling with the watch, and pushed four buttons together at once. I know it’s awkward, but it works,” Joe finished giving his verbal “tour” of the watch.

The four of them sat or stood at the table not sure of what to do next. They were impressed with the watch, but no one seemed to know what needed to be done next.

“The obvious thing now is that we need to keep Joe safe,” Bill said.

“I still need to find out the limitations of that watch battery. I do still plan on going back to prevent that murder,” Joe said.

“What if,” Mary started, but then stopped. “I’m trying to ask this so it makes sense. What if, when you go back in time, you prevent the shop keeper’s murder, but someone else gets killed? Does that make sense?” she asked.

“It makes sense,” Joe said after a moment. “But that’s the chance i’ll just have to take.”

“What if it’s you?” Bill asked. “The police seem to think the owner struggled with the gunman. What if it’s you that struggles with the gunman instead?”

The thought was morbid, and Joe didn’t want to think that way, but Bill had a point. “I’ll have to take that chance too,” he said after a moment.

As before, Mary was the one to break the awkward silence.

“Who wants to order a pizza?”

Mary drove them all back to Bill and Theresa's house so the couple could pack a few items, get their own car, and then spend some nights at a hotel, away from the obvious place the Boss man or his men might find them.

Against everyone's better judgement, Joe had asked Mary to take him back home. As far as Joe could tell, the watch could always jump him into the future at anytime. So if someone came looking for him, Joe could push the watch buttons again.

At Bill and Theresa's, Joe and Mary waited in her car until the couple came out again. After Gruff Voice Guy's sudden appearance yesterday, it was clear that the Boss could do anything he wanted, when he wanted it done. Joe wondered how he could find out who the Boss was.

Bill and Theresa came out only a few minutes after they entered. She had a *bona-fide* suitcase with another tote bag that she put into the trunk. In contrast, he had just a large duffle bag, that he tossed in the back seat of the car. They decided to leave the light on, to make it look like they were coming back, if anyone was watching their house.

They got in their car, with Bill behind the wheel, and drove off down the street.

From the front seat of her car, Mary and Joe watched them leave, and then after a moment, Mary left in the opposite direction. Joe told Mary how to get to his house. He did appreciate the quickness of travelling by car, but since he lived inside the city, where everything was in walking distance, he saw no reason to learn to drive. Besides, he probably couldn't afford a car, not since his taxes had been a little bit more each year for many years now. A good portion of the little money he made went into the bank account his mom had left him, and that was the money he used for property taxes and such. So really, there was no room for a car, even if it was a used one. But he did have some money he could use if he needed a bus to somewhere, that he made sure of.

For now, he did enjoy the ride to his house. Even though neither of them spoke, it wasn't awkward as some of the quiet was earlier in the day. Joe found it quite pleasant.

And much sooner than Joe would have liked, Mary had turned into the driveway in the front of his house. All rowhouses in the city had a driveway in the front, as well as one in the back, which lead right into the garage. Joe's garage was a storage space for the things he and his mother had accumulated since his mom had moved in before Joe was born. After his

mother died, Joe boxed up her things. Most he gave away to Goodwill or the Salvation Army, or those random clothes collection bins in parking lots. Some of the things, however, he moved out to the garage. Even if he *did* have a car, he wouldn't have been able to put it in the garage anyway.

"You'll be all right?" Mary asked as she parked and waited for him to gather his thoughts.

"Yeah," he said, still a little spaced out in all those thoughts that came whenever they wanted to. He put his hand on the door to open it, but then turned back to Mary. "I'll be fine, honest," he assured her, his voice stronger than only a moment before. In turn, she handed him a piece of paper.

"My phone number, in case you need anything," she explained.

"If i call you before yesterday, you won't know who i am," he said.

"Do you know how *weird* that sounds?" she asked, laughing.

"I do, and if this was like a month ago, I would have myself committed," he admitted.

"You really think that?" she asked.

"Nah, I've always read time-travel books, loved the movies with time-travel in it; some of the tv shows with it made my brain hurt, but i've always loved it. I'd readily believe it, especially if I can from the future to tell my younger self. That would really be weird..." he trailed off. He opened the door, but before he got out, he turned back to her.

"If i need anything, i'll call," he promised, and he closed the car door.

She waited until he was inside before leaving, but she was pretty sure she saw Joe in the window, watching her leave.

The first thing Joe did after he saw Mary's tail lights turn the corner was to run up to his room, and get the watch from underneath all the socks in the drawer. He retrieved the timepiece and noted the time: 7:47:26 p.m.

When he got back down to his kitchen table, he took the piece of paper Mary had given him and taped it to the handset of his cordless phone. In a time where most people had smartphones, Joe still had his old-fashioned landline. It didn't cost much for the upkeep, and no one really called him that much as it was. He also even still had dial-up, in a time when most people had DSL or cable internet -- or just had the internet on their phones. Joe didn't need that -- there was always the library when it was open, and when it was closed, he didn't



mind waiting for the web pages to load in on his slow computer that was probably obsolete the moment he bought it 10 years ago. That was the one thing he did want to splurge on then, and in his mind, it was a very wise investment.

He also turned on the tv to the news/weather channel. He found it was very reliable for his purposes, as they not only said the day, date, and time a few times an hour, that same information was also displayed at the bottom of the screen unless they were showing a commercial.

To test the maximum time the watch would allow him to go back, he pulled out four pins at a time. Once, twice, three times. The fourth time nothing happened, so Joe knew the watch -- limited by the battery -- allowed him to go back in time three days. And the time, day and date all reflected this: it was now 7:48:01 p.m. Tuesday, two days before he met Mary.

Something strange happened in his thoughts now. He no longer thought of it as time calculated from when he took the watch -- four weeks away was too far away. For now, he was using the day he met Mary as his timestamp. As he got closer and closer back to that Monday he took the watch, that would again be his reference date.

That Tuesday night, he watched the same shows he'd already watched, and checked his calendar. That was one of the nights he was still learning how the watch sent him back in time. He wondered if he did something different -- like go out clubbing instead of watching TV -- how much of the time stream it would screw up.

He remembered a tv show, where in one episode, the main character became Death for the day. He stops a young girl from dying, but in that new reality, a woman was killed instead, and it set off a chain of events that completely changed everything, including the woman's widower almost crashing into a busload of people, and almost killing all of them. All because Death saved one young girl. But since this was a tv show, the timeline was set right, and everything worked out in the end.

Joe shuddered. Would he really wreak *that* much havoc if he saved the shop keeper? As he said, he was willing to take the chance. Even if he himself had to be a casualty of the new timeline.

When Joe woke up the next morning, he honestly had no idea what day it was. He was glad he'd thought of the idea of putting his calendar on his night table, so whenever he got up he could look at it to see when and where he was.

*Right*, he said after studying it for a moment. *I went back in time from Friday night to Tuesday night. It's now Wednesday morning, the day before I met Mary.*

Before going downstairs again, he got another piece of paper and drew another calendar. On the first Monday, he starred it, indicating this was the day he stole his watch. On the fourth Thursday, he put another star and noted this was the day he met Mary. On the fourth Friday, he noted the time the watch read when he went back in time: 7:47. He didn't need the exact seconds on his calendar, since they were negligible.

Several times during the day, he tried to see if the watch would let him go back in time, and each time it didn't. He was afraid to see if the watch would let him go forward, as now that he had his mission set, he didn't want to waste any time getting back. *Waste time*, he thought. *That was funny.*

He didn't leave the house because he didn't want to take the watch outside, where the Boss -- or his spies -- could grab him, the watch, or both. But, he realised he had no idea when the Boss learned that the watch was missing, or that Joe had it. Once he was certain of the battery's recharge time, then he might venture out to the library to do some research, or risk the chance of going to J's, to see if Jack -- the owner, hence the J -- had heard anything.

Towards the evening, he looked at his first calendar, and realised that the first time he was at this day, he learned the battery did, in fact, have a limitation. He sat down on the couch in the tv room, turned on the evening news to watch things he already knew about, and about 75 minutes later, he sat upright as if he was startled. He had fallen asleep.

He jumped up off the couch, and looked at the watch, which was still on the table. It read 8:01:03 p.m. It had been just over 24 hours since he went back in time those three days, and he hoped the watch was finally recharged. He pulled out four pins at a time, and his surroundings rippled in the way that Joe was becoming used to. The same way a clock going backwards goes counter-clockwise, Joe knew this ripple pattern was the opposite of when he went forward in time. He was able to go back another 48 hours when he pulled the pins out again, for another total of three days. He noted the time on the watch again, 8:01:06 p.m.

So he had another 24 hours to wait until the battery was fully charged again. But, he learned something else: it has to be a minimum of 24 hours later, or it doesn't work.

The tv told him it was now Sunday night, the third Sunday after he stole the watch and four days before he met Mary.

All he could do now was wait.

He had now completed four time jumps backwards, and it was now three Thursdays since he'd taken the watch, and a week before he met Mary. He thought about calling Mary, leaving a cryptic message and seeing if she'd call back.

When he was here on this Thursday before, he had been able to go back in time only 20 seconds, but it was finally a start.

He felt that day might have been safe to venture out, to the library, and this time, look up the unsavory side of city.

The library looked like an old-time church, and for good reason: When the city was new, it was a church. Joe never knew what denomination the church had belong to, but that didn't matter now. The library was also next to a squat, round building that was City Hall. Joe figured if he couldn't find any information at the library, he could always try City Hall. Although he wasn't sure that information about organized crime would be in their record books.

Every city seemed to have some sort of crime syndicate or crime "family." Joe had no idea how they worked, but he had heard that somewhere. The other thing that Joe did know what that if this Boss man was working for the city's Mob, or Organization, Crime Syndicate, who ever they were, Joe didn't want to piss anyone off. And it's not like he could ask the question openly, "Hey, who's in charge of the Mob here?"

He scrolled through rolls of microfilm, and had to have been the first person to do so in like 10 years. He also looked through the actual paper archives, carefully turning the old, yellowed pages, marvelling at the creations they were, and lamenting that people would rather do their reading on electronic devices these days.

Without realising it, Joe spent most of the afternoon at the library and he didn't even stop to eat.

He did learn a few things from some of the smaller articles that appeared from time to time, buried in the middle of a section all the way at the bottom of a page, barely getting two inches of space. He wasn't surprised at the location. He also wasn't surprised by how little information there was out there; after all, the Mob or whatever name they went by in

this city, was a secret organization.

The one thing he did find was a “tell-all” account in a tabloid magazine that normally Joe wouldn’t have even looked at. But the headline was compelling in a hilarious, sci-fi kind of way: *The Mob sold my Baby to the Aliens*. Joe had to stifle his laughter, because, after all, he was in a library.

After getting his laugh in for the day, Joe completely discounted the article not only because of the source it came from, but Joe’s city was never even mentioned anyway. He was closing up his books and putting away some of the microfilm reels when the librarian came over to him.

“Did you find everything, dear?” she asked. While Lillian looked like a typical librarian with the gingham checked dress and white hair in a bun at the back of her head, she didn’t have the wire-rimmed glasses perched on her nose, or the “find it yourself” attitude some of the librarians did. For that, Joe was grateful.

“Well, no, not really,” he admitted. “I might need to find more... shady characters to talk to,” Joe told her. Part of him was joking, but part of him really was serious.

“I can talk to some people if you’d like. What kind of information are you looking for?” she asked.

Joe didn’t know how much to tell her, so he just told her a few facts.

“I guess I need to know if someone was looking for a watch tinkerer; and who that someone is who’s doing the looking. Does that make sense?” he asked.

“Sure, you need to know who’s looking for you,” she said.

“I -- uh... I... How did you know that?” he asked.

“We librarians have their ways,” she said coyly. “Besides, how many watch tinkerers are there anyway?”

“Good point,” he conceded.

“I’ll see what I can find out,” she offered. “I’ll call you tonight or tomorrow morning?”

Joe thought about it, and finally gave her his phone number. He didn’t *have* to go back in time right as soon as the clock got to the 24 hours. He could wait to find out who was looking for him. But once he knew who it might be, what would he do with that information?

He watched Thursday’s tv shows and news again before turning in for the night. Lillian hadn’t

called him yet, but he hoped she called on the earlier side of Friday. Maybe if he had a name, he could find a way to talk to the Boss and... and what? Make a deal with an unscrupulous business man? Joe might not have known the ins and outs of how to run a business, but he knew a shady deal when he heard one.

His phone rang as he was pouring himself a bowl of cereal. He'd always had cereal, even when he was a kid. It was easy for him to make, and his mother didn't have to supervise him. As he got older, his taste in cereal changed, but he never had any of the sugary cereals until he was in high school. And by then, they'd lost their appeal.

He had just filled up the bowl and was about to pour in the milk when the call came.

"Hello?" he asked.

"It's Lillian," she said. "Word is, the guy looking for you is Little Jimmy."

"Thanks Lillian, I owe you one," he said.

"I'm sure one day I'll collect," she promised.

Joe hung up the phone and finished getting his breakfast. He sat at the other end of the table from where he'd worked on the watch the first time it was this Friday for him.

"Little Jimmy" was the local businessman who owned quite a number of shops in the city. If he didn't own them, his enforcers made sure that any after hours deals was beneficial for Jimmy's business. And Jimmy really wasn't little. Joe had no idea where that moniker came from; Jimmy was about the size of a house, and built like one too.

If someone needed a way to get money from stolen goods, they would find a way to get word to Little Jimmy -- or one of Little Jimmy's men -- and Little Jimmy would get the person their money, and relieve them of the burden of the stolen items.

But if you had an item Little Jimmy wanted, he would court you until you had no choice but to sell him the item. The only consolation, such as it was, was that Little Jimmy paid well.

Joe was pretty sure that Little Jimmy wanted to offer him some monetary compensation if he gave over the watch. And maybe he would, as long as he could ensure that Little Jimmy couldn't use it for time travel. But if Joe saved the shop owner's life, Little Jimmy wouldn't have a need for the watch anymore. Would he?

The day he'd heard back from Lillian, he waited until about 2 in the afternoon before going back in time another three days. After he recharged on the third Wednesday, another three days plus the recharge, took him back to the third Monday. Finally, his last time jump backwards took him to about 4 in the afternoon of the second Thursday after he stole the watch, and two weeks before he met Mary.

That Thursday night, when he knew she was working, he called and left a voicemail at the phone number she gave him.

"Hi, Mary. My name is Joe Beor. You don't know me yet, but don't think I'm crazy when I tell you that you'll meet me in two weeks from today. I... I hate leaving messages, call me back if you want." He left his phone number, but then added, "It's ok to call me back if you don't think I'm crazy, too. Bye." And he hung up.

He didn't expect her to call back that night anyway. He watched the news that he already knew about, since he'd been to this night already. He read a few more of his time-travel books, seeing if any of the authors had mythos in their books to help him out when he reached his destined time. No one had anything new to offer, so he called it an early night at 10 p.m., locked all the doors, turned off all the lights, and went upstairs to bed.

In the morning, he woke to the sound of the phone ringing. It seemed so far away, until he realised he was upstairs in his bed, and the phone was down in the kitchen. He got out from under the warm covers, found slippers and a robe to wrap around him, and went down to where the phone was calling for him.

It wasn't overly cold outside, it was just cool in the house. Joe preferred the house to be cool for two simple reasons, one of which was the obvious -- it saved money on his electric bill.

The other reason was that he liked it cold. It was easier to pile on blankets or put on another sweater than to find things to take off when it was hot -- either outside or in the house.

Joe got to the phone just as the voice mail picked up. He listened to Mary leave her message.

“Hi Joe, this is Mary. I don’t think you’re crazy, and I think I’m looking forward to meeting you when that time comes.” Joe reached for the phone, to talk to her, but she added a quiet “bye,” and then the phone disconnected.

He erased the message, and then went over to the table, where he’d left his calendar from the last time he noted happenings on it. When he did this Friday the first time, he’d told Bill that he’d taken the watch.

He also wondered if he’d have to go to work tomorrow, as that was what happened when he did the next day the first time. He did remember a series of movies where, in the first one, the character goes back to the 50s, or somewhere like that, to a time when his parents first met. In the second movie, this time the character goes forward in time, but circumstances are such that he has to go back to the 50s again, and has to be careful not to meet up with the original traveler to the 50s. At one point in the movie, there were two of the main characters, from two different timelines. Joe was glad his head didn’t explode.

If his timeline did that, then the original Joe going forward would be going to work tomorrow. But where was the original Joe, that was here in this timeline, when he was here the first time? He looked at his calendar, and discovered that at the beginning of the following week while he was going back in time, the original Joe was going forward in time. When he was here the first time, he was at Cuppa Java talking to Bill for most of the morning into the early afternoon.

So if there was an original Joe in this timeline, the traveler Joe hadn’t seen him yet. He wondered why -- they slept in the same bed after all.

*That sounded so wrong*, Joe thought, but smiled at it anyway.

He was secure in the fact that the original Joe would go to work tomorrow. He, the traveler Joe, would take a few more time jumps backwards later today, but first he had to see a man about a watch.

Little Jimmy wasn’t difficult to find, especially if one had read books and watched movies that focused on the mob. Or the Mafia, as was the proper name, Joe had heard. Little Jimmy loved anything that reminded him of the old-time gangsters, too. Joe thought that was more than a little clichéish.

But, true to Little Jimmy’s clichés, Joe was able to find Little Jimmy’s men at an Italian restaurant that was many blocks away from Joe’s comfort zone. Living in the city all



his life, Joe felt comfortable almost anywhere in the city. But as he got closer to that western edge, he himself felt more and more on edge.

Little Jimmy's men were about as "little" as Jimmy was, and Joe was pretty sure it wasn't from all the pasta they ate. There were many gyms and athletic clubs throughout the city, and Jimmy probably owned most of them.

From the front, the restaurant named A Slice of Sicily looked like any other inner city Italian restaurant. The sign was in red, white and green letters, and there was a red, white and green striped awning over the front window. The window was a huge pane of glass with red, white and green paint drawings of pizza, pasta dishes, an Italian flag, and various phrases claiming how good the food was.

Joe had only heard about Little Jimmy in passing, and from that little he'd heard, he had every right to turn and run at this point. He was pretty much a coward, and this was about the bravest thing he'd ever done. Except for maybe forging his mom's signature on the entrance papers for the tech school.

But this was about his *own* survival. *His* life depended on this. Of course, the fate of anyone's life never rested on him before, his actions never dictated if someone lived or died. Well, if those actions ever did, Joe wasn't aware of them. It reminded him of the Chaos Theory -- a butterfly in China flaps its wings and it rains in New York. Was it truly possible if he stepped off the sidewalk at a moment later, something happens someone halfway around the world?

*Nah*, Joe dismissed that idea. *That's crazy talk.*

Taking a deep breath, Joe opened the door to A Slice of Sicily, and the bell tied to the hinge tinkled. There weren't too many people inside, but Joe didn't know what the Friday afternoon crowd looked like. A hostess came over to him.

"Uh, is Little Jimmy here?" Joe asked, suddenly feeling very exposed and awkward. She hostess nodded ever so slightly.

"Wait here," she told him, and disappeared into a part of the dining room Joe couldn't see from the front door. The part he could see was clean with round tables covered with red and white checked tablecloths. There were four chairs at each of these round tables. There was a booth at each window, some of the booths looking like they could fit six people at them.

After a moment, the hostess came back up to the front of the dining room. Joe could now see she'd gone behind a beaded curtain when she went to the other part of the room.

Presumably she went to tell someone -- Little Jimmy, or one of his men -- he was here.

"Follow me," she said. Her voice was soft, but commanding, as if he had no choice *but* to follow her. And not for the first time, he wanted to turn around and run.

Also, he had no idea how to even talk to Little Jimmy. Just jump right in about why is he looking for Joe? Or start off with the weather instead? Maybe he'd just sit and watch Little Jimmy eat his pizza or spaghetti, or whatever Jimmy was having.

The hostess showed him to a round table that was in the back corner of the room. The man that sat there looked neither little, nor like a "Jimmy," but it was obvious he had a commanding personality. And he could see the entire room. Like Joe, Little Jimmy didn't like to have his back to the room, and wanted to see what was going on around him.

The man finished chewing and took a sip of wine from the glass in front of him. When he'd finished swallowing his food and drink, he gestured to a chair.

"Have a seat," Little Jimmy said. From that sentence it was hard to tell if he had any kind of accent. Joe figured he'd talk some more.

"I understand you're the watch guy," Jimmy told Joe. Joe thought he heard something that sounded like Little Jimmy was from somewhere on New York's island.

"I, uh..." *What the hell did that mean?* Joe asked himself. "Yeah, I guess so," He heard himself saying. "What's a watch guy?" he asked, and then silently kicked himself for asking such a stupid question.

"A watch guy... well, he's the guy who fixes watches," Jimmy smiled, showing Joe a set of perfectly white teeth. No gold on any of them as was the cliché.

"I... I guess that makes sense," Joe admitted.

"So. You fix watches," Jimmy said again. "You work at J's?" he asked.

Joe saw no reason not to be honest.

"Used to. But when I learned Jack didn't really want me to fix-fix them, I left."

"Can you explain a little better?"

"At J's, they'll fix your watch, but only do the minimal repairs. It'll probably break again in a few weeks, so you keep bringing it in for them to fix it again."

"And how about you?" Jimmy leaned back in his chair, liking Joe's answer.

"If someone brings me a watch to fix, I make sure it's not going to break again for a long time," Joe said truthfully.

"So, uh, you can make a living doing this sort of thing?" Jimmy asked casually.

"No sir. Not really," Joe admitted.

Jimmy studied Joe for a moment, but Joe thought Jimmy could see right through him. “My understanding is you might know where a certain watch might be,” Jimmy asked. Joe knew exactly what watch that was, but he wasn’t ready to just turn over his watch to this large man who could turn him into a pancake just because he felt like it.

“If I’ve repaired it, I probably know where it might be,” Joe hedged.

“Which tells me nothing. Do you not know the details of all the watches and their owners? There simply can’t be that many out there for you to lose track,” Jimmy said, and Joe knew he was right -- there weren’t that many watches out there.

“Honestly sir -- and I’ve been nothing but honest -- I just fix the watches. I guess I don’t really pay attention to who they belong to. You are right there aren’t that many for me to fix, but that’s just what I do -- fix watches, leaning over a huge magnifying glass, working with little cogs and screws and pins and gears. It’s really very tedious,” Joe confessed.

Little Jimmy listened to what Joe told him, and thought about what he was about to say next.

“I know a lot about what happens in this city,” Jimmy told Joe. “My city. I happen to know just about two weeks ago, on a Monday, one of my pawn shops was robbed, the owner killed. But when my guys went through everything that was stolen, they told me there was one more gold watch missing, and now there’s no trace of it. You wouldn’t happen to have repaired a gold watch in the last two weeks, have you?”

Joe thought for a moment, before he answered the truth. “No, sir, I have not repaired a gold watch in the last two weeks.”

“Ok then, that’s just what I wanted to hear. I’m glad you found me, and I’m glad we had this talk.”

“I’m glad too, sir,” Joe said, standing up, and offering his hand. Jimmy took it and shook it firmly. Joe left A Slice of Sicily feeling pretty good about the conversation, yet not entirely sure the matter was completely resolved.

When Joe got back to his house, he retrieved the watch from under all the socks in the drawer in the center of his dresser. He hadn't lied to Little Jimmy; he *hadn't* repaired the watch. It worked perfectly fine, just like a watch should.

The watch now read 4:15:11. It was time to go back in time again.

After the requisite 24-hour recharge period, Joe went back another time to stop on the first Sunday night after he took the watch. He also knew he wouldn't meet up with the original Joe, since this was one the days he missed when he was randomly pushing the buttons on the watch; that first time when he jumped ahead an entire week without knowing what was happening.

At first, the time jumps just showed his background rippling, shifting, changing ever so slightly. Now that Joe was going back in time the full 72 hours in only three to five seconds, the rippling sometime looked like his kitchen was blurring in those seconds. And maybe it was; was he supposed to use the watch like this? Maybe he *could* buy that lottery ticket and hit it big.

As many times before, Joe watched that night's news, but it really wasn't news anymore. However, this news broadcast had an item about the pawn shop owner's death, and that the police were still investigating a week after it had happened. Joe had never seen any of the news stories about this before. He was interested only *because* he'd never seen it on the news.

He also jotted down the winning lottery numbers for one of the larger jackpots, a few million dollars. He thought about picking a different digit out of the six -- well, seven numbers, the seventh number was a wild card number and if that was the only number you matched you did win something in cash -- so that all but one number would match.

Another part of him told him he could use the millions, even paid out in escrow and after all the taxes were paid. He decided to sleep on it.

He got up early that Monday morning, a week after he'd stolen the watch, and went to the

corner convenience store. He got a cup of coffee, and asked for the lottery ticket. But after thinking about it, he changed his mind, and got a few scratch-off tickets instead.

He'd thought about the way the lottery was set up, and since he had Sunday's numbers written down, he would get the lottery ticket on Saturday. Once he got to this afternoon, he'd go back to Saturday afternoon, buy Sunday's ticket, then continue back to Friday.

And even though he'd be repeating the Saturday he would have bought the ticket, he considered it insurance buying it the first time he was at Saturday. And damned if *that* didn't make his brain hurt.

He picked buying a ticket for Sunday because there weren't many Sunday lottery drawings, so this was a good one to buy. And he figured even though he'd be sitting on the edge of his couch checking numbers to make sure he didn't screw up the timeline *that* much, he figured he'd claim the prize about three weeks or so after the drawing. After all, lottery winners had like six months to claim the prize. He'd have to get the ticket validated at the place he'd get it at, and then send it to the state lottery fund. About four to six weeks later, he'd start getting his checks. The winning amount should be enough for taxes and whatnot on the house; and he should have a nice sum left over for himself.

One of the drawbacks he would prepare for is that people he never knew would suddenly claim to be related to him. As far as his mother told him, she was an only child. No, the person he figured his winning might draw out of the woodwork were men claiming to be his father. But he had a plan for them: take a simple DNA test. The samples could be sent away to a lab for comparison, and he'd have the results in about a week.

Of course, it had crossed his mind that his mother wasn't telling the truth either, and some of her relatives might contact him.

The best thing to do, Joe realised in a burst of clarity, was to just remain silent to the press or anyone else who could spread the word. Sure, the Lottery people sent their winners' lists to the papers every once in awhile, but maybe he could request not to be on that list. Nodding to himself, he told himself that's what he would do.

On his way back from the Monday after he took the watch, he stopped at the convenience store on Saturday to buy his lottery ticket.

As if he'd been buying them all his life, he read the numbers off a battered piece of paper to the clerk. When the ticket came out of the machine, Joe checked to make sure the numbers were the ones he'd written down after the next day's drawing.

Once he was certain they were the right ones, he paid for the ticket as well as a chocolate bar. It had been a while since he'd gotten one, but if this was a small celebration for winning the lottery, it was a good one.

Joe realised, as he put the ticket in his wallet, this was a very cliché thing to do -- go back in time and buy a ticket for tomorrow's winning lottery. If time travel was ever available to the masses, everyone would be doing it. Joe thought again about some of the books and movies that dealt with that. In one case, only a select few controlled the time travel. In another book he read, it was very costly to travel in time, and you could only go one way -- forever. You could choose to go in the past and live your life back in time, or you could go ahead to the distant future and live there. The main character there had to make a choice between travelling ahead to the unknown, or going into the past and correcting a mistake that he wouldn't live to see the benefit he had given to his future wife and her family.

It was only after he returned home and locked his doors again, did Joe activate the watch to go back in time to Friday afternoon, to live the next 24 hours in real time. He'd leave Saturday before he even got there to buy the ticket.

This time travel business sure was weird.

The very first time Joe was at this Saturday, he really wasn't -- it had passed him by in a second on the day after he'd stolen the watch. He hadn't even known what he was doing.

The second time Joe was on this Saturday, it was yesterday. *Wait*, he thought, *that doesn't sound right*. But it was, as the last time he was here was, in fact, 24 hours ago.

This time travel business was making Joe not be able to think straight. Not for the first time, he was glad of his calendar he'd made. In fact, it was very helpful that he had made that second calendar when he started going backwards. He wondered two things at that point: the first was would his brain straighten itself out when he started going forward in time again? Almost every moment, he had to think about where he was as well as when he was, and it was very taxing.

The second thing he wondered was would Mary accept him as readily the second time as she did the first.

He'd looked at the first calendar -- the forward calendar -- and tapped the Saturday after he'd met with Bill and Theresa and Mary at Mary's house. If, once he set the timeline right, he'd jumped forward to that day, he wouldn't have to meet Mary all over again. But if he'd fixed the timeline, he might not have even met Mary those two days before.

Joe decided when he'd fixed things, he would go forward again, but only to the morning of the day he met Mary. And then he would make sure he had dinner at her restaurant that evening. And then he would be able to live life forward again.

Two full jumps and the recharge days brought Joe to the day after he stole the watch. He waited until Tuesday evening, around 6 p.m. before finally going back only two days to Sunday night at the same time.

Joe had no idea how to go about preventing the shop keeper's murder. From the few newscast reports and newspaper articles he'd seen, the coroner put the time of death at about 10:00 on that Monday morning, and Joe had come by the shop probably only like 15 or 20 later. Not much scared Joe, but thinking how close Joe came to possibly meeting the murders -- who probably worked for Little Jimmy, based on what Jimmy had said about the stolen items -- gave him chills down his back.

Hell, Joe didn't even have a weapon.

But after a moment of thinking, he realised maybe he didn't need a weapon. He thought back to the hours posted on the pawn shop door, hell, he'd passed them enough time.

Sundays the shop were open only until 6 p.m., which had just passed, so the owner was closing up. If Joe thought a little harder, all he knew was the owner was an older, middle-aged man, his skin weathered by years of hardship. Joe didn't even know if the owner had an accent, if he was born here, or came from another country hoping to seek his fortune here in America. Once he righted the timeline, Joe promised to talk to the guy at least once.

He seemed to recall the hours posted for Monday started at 7 a.m. One of the ways to know for certain was to wait until it was dark out and go past the shop. On his way to the coffee shop for an evening cup of coffee! Joe thought in a sudden rush of inspiration. No one would suspect that, Joe reasoned.

And so it was, about an hour later, Joe headed over Cuppa Java for an evening cup of coffee and a muffin or something. On his way there, he made sure to stop at the pawn shop and check the hours that he knew were posted on the front door.

Had anyone stopped him, he would have simply said he was surprised it was closed, and was looking to see what time they opened in the morning. As it was, Joe was correct in his supposition that the Second Chance Pawn Shop opened at 7 in the morning, Monday through Saturday.

He started to walk right past the window he'd stopped at so many times before, but he couldn't not look this time. And there was the watch, just as it was that Monday, that



even though it seemed like four weeks ago, really hadn't happened yet. He thought of his watch, hidden safe under his t-shirts this time, and realised something interesting: the watch he had now was no longer the same one as the one he had stolen. His watch, the one hidden away, was very different than this one that now sat on the velvet pillow in the store window.

As if on a cue, a light breeze ruffled the hair on the back of his neck, as though the universe might have been laughing at him.

Even as he continued on to Cuppa Java, he couldn't get that strange sight of *his watch* in the window out of his mind.

A waitress he didn't know took his order from where he sat at the opposite end of the counter from where he'd have his morning coffee. It all seemed very surreal to him, including the no-nonsense way she served him, with no conversation beyond "here ya go" and "thanks, have a good day."

Joe smiled whenever she came by, but she didn't check on him, ask how everything was. Of course, he would have said everything was fine. But based on this behavior, she didn't merit a tip. It also made him realise that he missed Mary. Even though he'd only known her so far for two days, he wanted to get to know her better -- for purely selfish reasons. He wondered if meeting her sooner would screw up the timeline.

Sure, he'd liked girls in school, but he was always the quiet one, too absorbed in his electronics for girls to be interested in him. One time when he was in 9th grade, some of the more popular girls told him a cheerleader named Trina liked him, so he tried to say hi to her one day at lunch. She completely blew him off, and he saw the girls who told him about Trina laughing as if the whole thing was a big joke.

From then on, Joe kept even more to himself, and let the rumors spread. Some rumors were that he was gay, other rumors were simply that he didn't like girls. There were others, but he didn't remember everything anymore; that was a long time ago.

By the time he thought he'd spent enough time at Cuppa Java, he still didn't have a plan for preventing the pawn shop owner from getting killed that day. As he walked home, he gave it some more thought.

If he got there early, what would he tell the owner? "hi, you need to close up shop this morning. Open later, so you don't get killed?" Joe didn't think *that* would go over very well.

If he got there right at the time the murderer was already in the shop, he might either be too late, or get himself shot in the process.

But in the end, he decided he'd get there about 9:30, and figure out *something*. He

knew two things had to be accomplished by 10 a.m. the next morning: the shop keeper would still be alive; and Joe would still be alive.

Joe got to the pawn shop closer to 9:15. He had trouble sleeping the previous night, and moved into his library. He hoped rereading several books might help him fall asleep. It did eventually work, and he fell asleep in the cozy chair rereading *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* about 3 in the morning.

He woke up shortly after, to the sound of the book falling on the floor. It startled him, but he got up from the chair, put the book on it, and turned off the light. He went down the hall to get a few more hours of sleep in his bed.

When he woke only four hours later, he was still and sore, as if he'd slept in a funny position in bed. He had a quick bowl of cereal, and washed it down with a cup of coffee that he'd made from those instant grounds the supermarket down the street sold.

The walk seemed quicker that morning, and he was at the pawn shop earlier than he expected. When he opened the door, it didn't jingle, and immediately he froze where he stood.

*Oh no*, he thought, and rushed to the back room of the shop. There was the owner, lying on the floor in the back room, dead on the floor. *Crap*, Joe thought, *I was too late*.

He left the shop, and noted that there didn't seem to be anyone out on the street; it was very odd for the time of the morning. Usually at 9:30 the sidewalk was filled with people going about their daily business, going to work, or the bus -- which was the opposite direction from the pawn shop as Cuppa Java was

It was all too surreal for Joe, but he had something he had to do -- no matter how many times he had to. He would prevent the pawn shop owner from getting killed. He really had no personal stake in the owner's life; just that he was a fellow human, and Joe would do anything he could to save even one life.

Joe went back to Sunday morning and let the watch battery recharge for its requisite 24 hours. And he hoped that at the end of that time, he'd be able to save the pawn shop owner.

Joe wasn't sure that the battery needed the full 24 hours to charge, since he'd gone two days back in time, let the battery rest until the next morning, and then he went back in time only one more day. He hoped the battery had an unlimited lifespan, because he had no idea what the battery was made of on the inside, and was pretty sure he couldn't get a replacement at the local Radio Shack either.

He'd brought the watch with him that morning. He wasn't exactly sure why he didn't leave it buried at the bottom of his t-shirt drawer, but something told him to bring it with.

Again, it was Monday morning, the day the pawn shop owner was supposed to die. And the original gold watch was still in the window. And this time, Joe would not fail.

This morning, when he opened the door, there was a faint tinkle from the bell, and he heard noises coming from the back room. But after the bell sounded, Joe heard the noises of metal clanging, and something falling, and then a door slamming.

Joe rushed to the back, to find a set of metal shelves upended between the front door of the back room, and a door that led outside to the back of the shop. Underneath the shelves and the various items that people had dropped off at the pawn shop, was the owner, dead.

"Damn it!" Joe said, but there was no one to hear him.

Take three, he thought, as he pulled the watch out of his pocket. He was glad he listened to that voice that reassured him to bring his version of the watch with. He fumbled for the pins, and pulled out four of them; and it was Sunday morning all over again.

They say the third time's a charm, Joe told himself, ignoring the other voice that told him that bad things come in threes.

But this time, he had a better plan, and set his alarm for 6 a.m that Monday morning. He would greet the owner at the door, and no matter how crazy he sounded, he'd tell the owner he had a bad feeling about that day. And just for insurance, he put the gold watch deep in his front pocket.

When Joe got to the pawn shop about 6:30, the lights were on, and he could see the owner moving around, checking the merchandise he had on display. As Joe understood it, a person would bring an item to the shop to pawn -- the owner would appraise its value, and give the person money for the item, and a claim ticket.

If, after one or two months, the person is able to claim the item, they could buy it back, plus any interest the pawn shop owner might charge. If an item wasn't claimed after three months, then the owner could offer the item for sale, and if someone bought it -- well, that was the price of pawning something.

In most cases, the people pawing the items understood they had three months to claim their item, and most of the merchandise at Second Chance had been there at least six months or more. And not for the first time, Joe wondered who pawned the gold watch he took, and if that person knew what the watch really did.

Joe tapped lightly on the door, and the man came over. He pointed at the sign with the hours, but Joe called out, "It's important!"

The man, who Joe figured to be in maybe his early 70s with grey hair, shrugged and started to turn away. Joe tapped more impatiently. He used his finger and wrote out "its important" backwards on the door. He hoped the man understood what he was trying to spell out. The owner held up a finger, as if to say "one minute," and he turned away from the door. Joe watched him go behind the counter where the register sat, and after a moment, he came back to the door with the key to unlock the door.

When he spoke, he had a faint accent that Joe didn't know where it was from.

"I am not open yet." He looked at his watch, a Rolex knock-off that someone had probably once pawned. "20 minutes."

"This is going to sound crazy," Joe started, "but I really need to talk to you."

“You are not drunk?” the man asked.

“Hardly,” Joe said, amused that the man might think that. In a few moments, Joe would be asked what kind of funny drugs he was taking.

“It’s not safe for you to be here today,” Joe started. The man turned away and continued straightening, even though it looked fine to Joe. It was probably to keep his hands busy, Joe figured. “I’m not crazy,” Joe offered. “There are bad people coming here this morning, and I don’t want you to be here.”

The man looked up at Joe’s words and just stared for a moment.

“You,” he pointed to Joe, “don’t want me,” he pointed to himself, “to be in my own shop? Who are you that you want this for me?”

Joe was silent for a moment. *Who was he in all of this anyway?*

“I --” he started, and then had a great idea. “I have visions, I see things. You’re not safe here today. Can you close the shop just for the day?” Joe tried again.

“Close the shop? Young man, what is it that you do?”

“I, I... uh, fix watches?” Joe thought that actually sounded kind of lame when he said it out loud.

“You, young man, practice a dying art. I do the same. I can not simply close the shop for just today. Someone may come in and repay their loan, and I would miss out making money today.”

“You’d rather miss out someone paying their loan than you cashing in yours?”

“I do not know what you mean.”

Joe tried again. “You’d rather work today, thinking that someone might pay off their loan, rather than staying safe from someone who will kill you today?”

“What do you mean, *will* kill me today?” The man had stopped moving among the displays and was now giving Joe his full attention.

“I told you, I have visions.” Joe swallowed. “Sometimes.”

“And you saw a vision of me...” the man started to say.

Joe finished, “...dead. Yes. I know I’m just some random person, but I don’t want to see that happen to you.”

The man looked at his watch, and then back at Joe. “I am supposed to open in 10 minutes, but you don’t think this is wise.” At Joe’s confirmation nod, the man continued. “Then I shall believe you for today. I shall lock up and be closed today. But how do you know if I am to die today, that it will be here, in my shop?” he asked.

"I can't tell you," Joe said.

The owner regarded Joe for a moment, before nodding and getting the keys to lock the shop.

"I'll buy you a cup of coffee?" Joe offered.

The owner nodded again. He and Joe walked the block the opposite direction from Cuppa Java to another fast food restaurant. Joe didn't want to run the risk of running into himself when he did this day the first time around.

"I'm Joe," Joe told the man.

"My name is also Joe," the owner told him, smiling a little bit.

They sat at the table, drinking coffee, and Joe, the pawn shop owner, told his story of how he came to this city when he was a young boy looking for a job that wouldn't be obsolete and replaced by something more efficient. Maybe he'd read too much science fiction, but he didn't want to be replaced by a robot. The younger Joe had to smile at that.

The younger Joe didn't know how long they were there, talking. He didn't wear a watch as a timepiece, and he thought about taking out the gold watch to check the time. He couldn't see the watch on the shop owner's wrist, it was turned to the inside of his arm. He only knew that after they'd been sitting there for some time, he felt a wave go through his body, like a shock wave passed over him. He felt nauseous, but only for a moment, and then it passed.

Joe never wanted to feel that way ever again.

"Joe?" the younger Joe asked suddenly, "What time is it?"

Joe the shop owner looked at his watch. "It is half past ten."

The younger Joe smiled, knowing he'd done what he set out to do. That awful feeling was the time lines merging, and he wouldn't be worried about running into himself again.

"Is everything all right?" the elder Joe asked.

"Oh yes, everything is perfect," the younger Joe said, almost giddy knowing that he'd saved a man's life. "I should be going, I have a few things to do today. I'll stop by the shop tomorrow?" He grabbed the tray, planning to throw out the trash on his way out of the restaurant.

The elder Joe nodded. "That would be fine. And thank you for the coffee." After a moment, he added, "and for listening to part of my tale." Joe the shop owner stood up and put out his hand. The younger Joe shook it warmly. He emptied the tray, and watched as the older Joe left the restaurant. He went in the opposite direction of the pawn shop, and Joe --

the time traveler -- breathed a sigh of relief.

He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he had a niggling feeling he'd met this older Joe somewhere before...



For some reason, Joe was nervous when he left the house the next morning about 9. He left the gold watch at the bottom of his t-shirt drawer again, not trusting himself to play with the timeline again. He needed to see what happened since yesterday.

He walked to the pawn shop, and looked in the window. The gold watch was no longer there, but in its place was a silver watch with a leather wristband that looked like it was snakeskin. He saw the older Joe moving about inside, so he went in.

“Good morning, Joe,” the younger man said.

“Ah, good morning, my new friend. It is good I was not here yesterday, as you said.”

The younger man was curious now, so he asked, “Why is that?”

“When I came in this morning, everything was overturned, and things were out of order. I am just now setting things right to see what is missing.”

The younger Joe breathed a sigh of relief. He had corrected the timeline, which was that wave that he felt yesterday. His feeling then was proven correct now.

“I believe, young man, that your vision you had was correct. You have saved my life. For that, I should reward you,” the older man said.

“Oh, no, I’m fine,” Joe said. “Me knowing I saved your life is reward enough,” he insisted.

“Well, then,” the older man nodded for a long moment, and it looked to Joe as if the shop owner was bowing to him, acknowledging him in a new manner. After a moment, the older Joe asked him a question.

“Would it be out of place to ask if you would like to work here?” the owner asked.

The younger man was surprised at the question. He knew the answer was yes, he would like to work somewhere that he might be able to have stable hours. But it seemed like another job that he wasn’t sure about it’s future. He thought there was a future with watch repair, but as he’d learned the hard way, that was all but gone because of watch batteries and cell phones. But, live and learn, right?

But a moment later, he heard himself saying,

“Sure. When would you want me to start?”

“Tomorrow would be good. I will teach you what you need to know, and one day soon I can take a real day off,” he joked. He shook the younger man’s hand. “I should finish with

my inventory to learn if anything was taken. I shall let you know tomorrow.”

The younger Joe thought it was all right for him to leave, but it sounded awkward the way the older man spoke.

“So... I’ll be back tomorrow? is 7 a.m. a good time?” he asked.

“Certainly. I shall see you tomorrow morning. I do not mind if you leave now,” he added. The younger man smiled, and left the shop.

He continued his way to the next block to Cuppa Java. When he was here this day the first time -- the old timeline -- it was the day after he took the watch. Now it was the day after he saved Joe the shop owner’s life.

On his short walk to Cuppa Java, he thought of something. If the timeline changed, it was possible that gold watch was no longer on the inventory list of what was stolen. Was it also Little Jimmy that was behind the theft? This time, or in the original timeline? Joe didn’t know, and there really was no safe way for him to find out. If he went back in time again, even to *observe* this new timeline, it was possible he could change the outcome again.

Bill was there, behind the counter, the same way he was that monday of the original timeline.

“Hey Joe, how are you doing?” Bill greeted Joe.

“I’m pretty good this morning. How about you? Could I get a cup of coffee to start?”

“Of course. Anything else?”

“Maybe later,” Joe said. Sitting down on a stool at the counter, he took out his wallet and looked to see how much money he really had, what with all his going back and forward in time.

Bill poured Joe a mug of coffee and set it with a napkin, stirrer, some sugar packets and one of those little cups of creamer.

“You know I don’t use the creamer; save it for someone who does,” Joe reminded Bill.

“Missed you yesterday,” Bill said.

Joe had to think for a moment, remembering what timeline was where. In the original timeline, he’d come into Cuppa Java with the watch firmly on his mind that Monday. In this new timeline, he didn’t stop in yesterday. In fact, he’d deliberately gone to a different restaurant, in the opposite direction.

“Yeah, I didn’t make it out until the afternoon,” he said. He’d thought about telling Bill that he was out with another cup of coffee, but he thought Bill might get jealous. He smiled at that silly thought.

“You all right today?” Bill asked, noticing Joe was deep in thought. Joe, on the other hand, distinctly heard that same bit of conversation from the previous timeline, and automatically looked up, and into the parking lot of the pawn shop. There were only regular cars there, and Joe breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’m totally fine,” Joe said, turning his full attention to Bill and smiling.

But how long would he be on edge, looking at Second Chance Pawn Shop’s parking lot, to make sure there never were any police cars or paramedics? There was a series of movies that Joe had only heard about that dealt with cheating death. There were seven friends who were able to cheat death by surviving a plane crash that was supposed to be fatal, but throughout the movie, each of those friends was killed off one at a time, in a horrific way, showing that death doesn’t like to be cheated. If it was someone’s time to die, they would eventually die, sooner rather than later.

Joe hoped this was not his timeline for this future he created.

Joe arrived at the pawn shop a little before 7 the day after he was offered the job. He was an apt learner, and soon the owner had taught him all that he would have needed to know about the pawn shop business. The trickiest thing, Joe thought, was determining how much value an item was worth in the first place.

After that, it was a simple matter of putting the value into a formula to arrive at the various figured Joe would need: how much to offer the person; how much leeway he had for bartering; how much the person would need to buy the item back; and how much to price the item once those three months were over.

Sometime in the early afternoon, Joe went into the back office and asked the shop owner about Saturdays.

"Will you need me to work on Saturdays, Mr. Joe?" the younger man had taken to calling the shop owner 'Mr. Joe.' It somehow seemed right in Joe's mind.

Mr. Joe looked up from the desk where he was doing some paperwork. "I do not believe so, Joe. Do you have a prior commitment?" the older man asked.

"Actually I do. I work at the Y over by the middle school -- it's a few blocks from there. But only on Saturday," Joe assured his new boss.

"That will be fine with me," Mr. Joe assured his new employee. As Joe turned to leave the back room, he paused in the doorway, wondering if he ought to say something about the gold watch that was still hidden under his shirts.

"Is there something else on your mind, Joe?" Mr. Joe asked, interrupting Joe's thoughts.

"Some time ago, oh, maybe it was some months back, I thought I remembered seeing a gold watch on display in the front window. But I might have remembered wrong?"

Mr. Joe thought for a moment, and then reached for a card box, that Joe knew that was where the shop owner filed the cards of those who had claimed their items.

He flipped through the cards thoughtfully, and then after some moments, pulled one of the cards out and looked at it. He flipped it over, but there was nothing written on the back, so he returned to the front of the card. He furrowed his eyebrows in confusion.

"What's wrong?" Joe asked.

"Well, I have the card here," Mr. Joe started. "And the item has been picked up, but

this card does not say the date when it was picked up, who picked it up, and there is no amount listed that person would have paid. This is confusing me,” he admitted. He noticed there were two cards stapled together, so he picked up the first one to look underneath. “This too, has no information on it,” Mr. Joe said. “I do not understand. I have always kept accurate records. This puzzles me.”

“Well,” Joe said, “At least I know i’m not going crazy and that I did see the watch in the window at some point. I’ve passed this shop many times over the many years i’ve lived here,” he said with a smile on his face. “Time moves too fast for me these days, for I know it could have been *years* ago.”

Mr. Joe nodded, accepting Joe’s explanation. But in the quiet of the office, the older man looked at the cards again and even pulled out the staple holding them together. He looked at them under his jeweler’s magnifying glass. It was similar to the one the younger man used in his watch repair. The shop owner held the cards up with the light on the magnifying glass behind the cards, to maybe see shadows of writing that was erased or, well, any kind of marks that could shed some light on this mysterious item.

He had set the cards aside after a little bit, and was working on different paperwork when it was 3 p.m., the time he told his new hire he could leave. The younger man was again in the doorway when the older man looked up again.

“I will see you tomorrow?” the shop owner asked.

“Yes, sir. 7 a.m.,” the younger Joe said.

He watched Mr. Joe as he opened a notebook that was in a folder holder on the desk and write something down on one of the pages. He figured those were his hours for that day.

“Thank you Joe. You may go, I shall see you in the morning.”

“Thanks,” Joe said, and he left the back office, and a moment later, Mr. Joe heard the bell at the front door tinkle, indicating someone -- in this case, Joe -- had left the shop. He again turned his attention to those index cards on the gold watch. The description said it was a gold watch, with a gold stretch band. The face was square, with part of it analogue, and part digital. There were four pins on either side, those on the left side were for decoration. The pins on the right side could be manipulated -- either pushed in or pulled out -- to set the time, date, seconds, alternate between time and date on the display; and one could be used to set it as a stopwatch.

There was nothing on engraved or stamped anywhere on the watch, which, looking at that information now, Mr. Joe thought that was odd. Usually a watchmaker would put their

stamp on the back of the watch. In the case of silver items, there was usually a “925” stamped on the inside. Some of the gold jewelers had stamped “10” “14” or “18” on the insides of watchbands, to indicate the karat number. But this watch had no stampings, or even the maker’s initials. Sometimes the watches of old that were made by individual people instead of on an assembly line had the maker’s initials engraved on the back somewhere.

All the notes were in Mr. Joe’s handwriting, which meant he was the one who accepted the loan repayment when the mysterious person picked up the watch. This was very odd for him, as he kept meticulous records.

Finally, after looking at all of the cards, front and back, one more time, he noticed a faint impression of what looked to be the date. He turned it towards the bright bulb on the magnifying glass so he could see it better. The date was mostly there, and the year looked to be -- he did a quick calculation -- 17 years ago.

Why would the younger man think he’d seen this watch described on the card on display in the window within the last few years? There was still no name of the person who picked it up anywhere on the cards.

The shop owner still had one more place to look for information, and that was the intake box, when he initially accepted and appraised the watch before offering a price for the loan to the original person.

He located the intake box on his desk and pulled it in front of him. He blew a fine layer of dust off the top; it had been a while since anyone had brought anything new to him. He opened it and flipped through the cards until he found the one he was looking for. There was only one card this time. The description was the same, which means he had to have gotten the intake card to fill in the redemption card.

There still was no name -- which again, Mr. Joe thought to be very strange. But the date it was dropped off was plainly visible, as if written in a thick ink, legible through the ages. But Joe the elder just stared at it. It was pretty impossible, he thought, and maybe, for the first time, realised that he just didn’t have it in him anymore to keep doing this.

The intake date was a full five years after the item had been claimed.

Joe, the new employee, arrived a few minutes before 7 on his second day of work, holding a takeaway cup from Cuppa Java, which was filled with warm coffee. The aroma was something that Joe had always loved. Some days, it made him think of his mother. There were those times when she was sober, she loved to brew a good pot of coffee, and Joe could smell it through the house. She even had a coffee maker, that Joe still used to this day.

When he was a teenager, he asked his mother if he could try a sip from her cup. She thought he was silly, but she let him have a taste. Joe knew she liked it “black,” but didn’t really know what that was until a few years later, when he was with friends and they stopped at one of the many convenience stores in the city. One ordered coffee, and was asked if she wanted cream and sugar; her reply was she wanted it black.

Joe had tried his coffee many ways at his house -- black; with just cream; with just sugar; with milk not cream; with sugar and milk -- but he found he just preferred it black. He also found he enjoyed different roasts of coffee, and the flavored ones could be good most of the time. Sometimes they were just bland flavors at the fast-food restaurants or convenience stores, so he preferred his own.

On this day, he had a aromatic hazelnut coffee blend that he was certain the whole block could smell it. He looked through the shop door as Mr. Joe opened it for him, and then the owner turned the closed sign around to announce they were now open for business.

“Follow me,” Mr. Joe told Joe, and he headed for the back room. “I would wish to talk to you.”

*Already? Joe thought. But I’ve only been here two days. What did I do now?*

“I have a confession to make to you Joe,” the owner said, once the younger man was in the office. At Joe’s confused look, the older man continued.

“I was able to find all the information pertaining to that watch you mentioned yesterday, and there is something I cannot understand.” He showed Joe the claimed card, and pointed out the date. “This is 17 years ago,” the older man explained, and the younger man nodded. The elder man then showed his new employee the intake card, and pointed out the date. This time, he let the younger man do the calculations.

“But --” he stuttered after a moment, “How can something be claimed like five years before it’s pawned?” He blinked. “Wait a minute,” he said after he gave it a moment of

thought and looked at the dates again. “What if it was claimed 17 years ago, and then pawned again five years later? It that possible?”

“It is possible, young Joe, however, there would be a second intake form earlier than 17 years. And I looked through the box many times last night. There is only the one form.”

“Well then, I’m just as confused as you,” Joe admitted.

“My confession is that I believe I am finally getting too old for this. There is something not right in my mind. I know I have just hired you, but --”

“You can’t keep me on?” Joe asked.

“Oh, no, that is not it. My question is would you remain working for me, personally, once I have sold everything here and closed up my shop? You are a good man, Jorund Beor. Most definitely not a fool, this I know.”

The younger Joe felt like something had struck him, in more ways than one. True, he’d lose his job at the pawn shop when it closed, whenever that was; but he was now offered a continuing job to work for the older man, as ... what? a personal assistant? gardner? maid? He had to mentally smile at that. But that wasn’t the main thing that confounded Joe. This man knew *his name*. *How?* Had he looked it up? That wasn’t common knowledge. He’d told him his name was Joe, and even wrote “Joe” on the employment papers. His driver’s license even said “Joe.”

“I shall give you some time to think this over. As shall I, to find out what I would like for you to do for me.” After a moment, the older man said, “I will be working back here today again.”

All Joe felt safe doing right then was just nodding, and then returning to the front room to get ready for any business of the day.

After Joe left the pawn shop for the day, he went over to Cuppa Java again, but Bill had long since gone home. Joe remembered Bill finished at 1, while Joe was finished at 3.

Joe had a theory that he wanted to find out about, and today was the perfect day -- it was Thursday. He set out to the fast food place where he’d met Mary. He wouldn’t meet her for another four weeks. He also wouldn’t leave her that message for another 8 days. But he was curious to see if she remembered anything about the previous timeline. He figuring on her not knowing, so he didn’t expect anything.

When he got to the fast food place, he studied the menu, planning to get something of



substance, as he'd missed lunch that day. The elder Joe had been working in the back office again, getting papers in order for the impending liquidation of the the merchandise and then the sale of the store.

But Joe was still weirded out about the old man knowing about his name, and that his mother had once told him he was the son of a fool. Well, Joe reflected, his father -- whoever he was -- certainly was a fool. But Joe knew he wasn't. Once he'd gotten over the self-esteem issues inflicted by his mother, he felt much better about himself, and wondered why it had taken him until 10th grade to break out of his shell.

Now, as he looked at the menu board above the counter, he also watched the people working at the counter and in the kitchen, to see if he could see Mary. He didn't want to people-watch too closely, someone might mistake him for a dirty letcher of a man. He smiled at that because it really was funny to him.

"May I take your order, sir?" asked a voice that he thought sounded familiar. When he looked at the woman who spoke, he realised Mary was right under his nose!

He tried to sound normal when he ordered, telling her it was to go, but there was something in his voice that made him look at her instead of the at the menu board. She was looking at him strangely.

"What is it?" he asked when he was finished ordering his combo meal and noticed her watching him.

"You remind me of someone, but... no, I don't know you," Mary told him.

"Maybe I just have one of those faces?" he offered helpfully.

"Yeah...maybe," she said as she turned away from the counter to get his burger and fries, but Joe didn't think she sounded convinced.

Since this was a fast-food place, it only took a few minutes for his late lunch to arrive, in a large, white paper bag with the soda on the side.

"Thanks," he told her. "See you around." He took his lunch and winked at her on his way out.

There was one thing Joe had to do on this day, and that was make sure he'd written down the lottery numbers for that night's drawing correctly.

He watched the live drawing and as each number was drawn, he looked at his ticket.

Yes, all the numbers were correct, and the official from the state lottery office monotoned that any grand prize winners would get \$4 million dollars, in an annuity payout. That was more than Joe had originally figured it being. How was *that* possible?

Not that he minded, any amount would be enough for him. Especially now that he was probably going to be working for the older Joe for at least a few years.

And now that he knew his numbers matched up that he was a winner, after he claimed the prize, he'd call the Y and give his supervisor his two weeks notice. Joe had thought about it yesterday, when he was mopping the lower level floor. But in the end, he'd decided to wait until after he'd been confirmed as a lottery winner.

He put the winning lottery ticket under his clothes with the watch; today it was in his sweatshirt drawer, nestled between two of them.

This was the third time Joe had been to the second Friday on his calendar: the first time was when he told Bill about stealing the watch and travelling in time; in his backwards timeline, he left that cryptic message for Mary, and met with Little Jimmy; and now he was finishing his first full week of work in a very long time.

One thing Joe did after he'd gone back to that Monday and saved Mr. Joe was to start a third calendar. He put it on top of the second, backwards moving calendar, which was also on top of the original timeline calendar. It helped to keep things straight in his mind, which he was surprised hadn't turned to mush by this point in time.

Even though Second Chance Pawn Shop was now liquidating its inventory, Joe felt very useful, and needed. The aging shop owner was afraid he really was losing his mind, and the younger employee was helping him stay sane.

Through it all, the elder Joe was teaching the younger man about the pawnshop business, how he got into it -- which was very cryptic, Joe thought, he hadn't really told him anything beyond that 30 years ago the shop was an empty store, and Mr. Joe didn't really know anything about running a business, let alone a pawnshop. He learned as he went. He watched the city grow and change around him.

Joe, the younger man, was only a boy of 15 when that happened; he didn't remember much from that time, other than his mother and her drinking. *30 years ago*, Joe thought. *That would have made Mr. Joe* -- here he did a quick calculation -- *45 years old. The same age he was now.* That was just *too much* of a coincidence. Joe couldn't vocalize what he was even thinking, it was just too bizarre.

The other thing Joe was learning was how to run a business from, well, the business end of things. The taxes, all the filings, maintaining the accounts -- which Joe knew about personally -- but business accounts were a little bit different. He learned accounting, and unlike the math teachers he'd had in school, Mr. Joe used real numbers to show Joe how those formulas worked. And Joe found that he actually enjoyed the learning this time around.

One thing Mr. Joe was careful not to talk to much about was his past personal life.

"Is there a Mrs. Joe?" the younger man had asked on Wednesday afternoon when they had a lull and were adding up the sales receipts for the day so far.

“There was,” Mr. Joe said. “She died just last year, and I still miss her so very much,” he said.

“Did you have any children?”

“Sadly no, we did not. I wish we’d had the time to when we were younger.” And that was all he spoke of Mrs. Joe.

Now it was Friday, and the younger employee confided something in his boss.

“I bought a ticket last week for this past Sunday’s lottery drawing,” younger Joe said. “And I think I was a big winner.”

“Congratulations then,” the older employer told him. “You will be leaving my employ after you get your winnings?” he asked, curious.

“No, I don’t think I will. I’d like to keep working, if that’s all right with you?” he phrased it as a question.

“That is quite all right with me. I need to develop a list of what I will need from you, and we can agree on a wage. Is that fair?”

“More than fair, sir,” Joe agreed.

“What of your job at the Y?” Mr. Joe asked.

“Once my ticket has been validated I’ll give them notice.”

“That is very wise of you,” the older man said thoughtfully. “Why have you not validated your ticket yet?”

He tried to act embarrassed rather than give the real reason. “I’d forgotten about it until last night. And when I finally looked at the numbers this morning and realised I’d won, it was too late to go back to the store where I bought the ticket.”

“Again, this is a very wise thing. Are you sure you are not older than you say?”

It took the younger man a moment to realise the older was making a joke, and they both laughed.

The sales for the week were phenomenal. A great deal of the merchandise was sold, and even though a number of pawned items were claimed that week, the sales outweighed the claims considerably. Joe learned the older man’s record keeping system and used the cash box for the sales. When he asked why the shop owner didn’t use a cash register or computer for the inventory, all the owner said was this was the way he preferred to keep his records. It was accurate, he said, and it never crashed.

Well, until Mr. Joe found the one record that made him doubt his sanity, that was.

When Joe got home a bit later than usual, about 5 p.m., there was a message on his answering machine. Mary's voice filled the room.

“Hi, I, uhm found your message and phone number on my voicemail last night, and I'm not sure if I know you, but I thought I should return the call anyway. So, uhm, bye,” she said into the machine awkwardly.

Joe smiled, knowing everything would turn out just fine.

The way things were going for Joe, in his case, the third time was the charm. Another week of working for Mr. Joe had come and gone. Joe looked over his two calendars that night.

The first time he was here was the day Bill was all confused and didn't remember anything Joe had told him about the time travel watch. For a moment, Joe thought the Men in Black had visited Bill and wiped his mind clear. And maybe they did, but Joe never knew.

When he was here during his backward timeline, Lillian had told him that Little Jimmy was looking for him. The oddest thing was Joe had spoken to Little Jimmy a week before he'd learned who was looking for him. Things like that still made Joe's brain hurt if he thought about it too hard.

The past week brought in more money for the pawn shop, as less people came in to pick up their pawned items, and most of them were sold for their asking price. During the next week, Mr. Joe said he would be discounting the remaining merchandise by 20% as an incentive for people to buy things from the shop.

Mr. Joe also gave his younger employee a list of responsibilities that he might have when he worked directly for Mr. Joe. Yard and housework were some of the items, as well as physical aid, if Mr. Joe needed a hand when he was out, and that could be a literal shoulder to lean on, if he felt his frail body needing support, or driving him somewhere like the store. For now, Mr. Joe still wanted to do his own shopping, but he might need to rely on the younger man for helping take his things to the car and put them away once back at his house.

In addition, from time to time, Mr. Joe said he'd like the companionship of another person sometimes at dinner a few nights a week.

It was on that third Friday that the younger Joe agreed to this new position. The elder Joe understood his employee had his own life as well, and knew that he wasn't going to sell his mother's house to move into with his employer.

The previous day, Thursday, Joe had gone to the convenience store where he bought the winning lottery ticket and had it validated. Joe still had to send the ticket with all his information with it to the state lottery commission, or whoever it was that ran the lottery program. Before sealing it up in the envelope, Joe made a copy of everything he was sending with his printer/scanner combo unit. He then wrote the date he planned to mail it on the paper, then addressed, sealed, and stamped the envelope.

There was one thing that Joe still did not tell the store owner: about the gold watch that was once again hidden back under his socks. He didn't know why he didn't tell Mr. Joe, other than he didn't want Mr. Joe to continue doubting his sanity. He thought Mr. Joe was just as sane as anyone else.

That Friday night, in the comfort of his own kitchen, Joe wanted to try something that had been on and off his mind from time to time. The watch had a digital component, and had the obvious capability to set or reset the time if needed. It also showed the full date - day, month, and year -- all of which were customizable.

It seemed to him he hadn't worked on the watch in almost a month -- which was surprisingly accurate; he hadn't needed to once he fixed the timeline and saved Mr. Joe. But now he had an idea that was more programming work than tinkering.

He thought about what he wanted to do, then turned on the tv to that weather/news channel, and sat at the table facing the TV. He carefully adjusted the watch to display the same date and time, yet the year was for the previous year. He wasn't sure how many pins to pull on, but he started with two, one on each side.

He pulled, keeping his eyes open to watch his surroundings, and there seemed to be a ripple more like a force wave shimmered around him. Maybe he'd seen too many movies. After only a moment it stopped, and he looked at the TV. It looked the same, so he waited a moment for when it flashed the date and time, or even a news story might tell him when he was.

After several annoying commercials, the full date was flashed on the screen, including the year, and it was, in fact, last year!

Joe tried it again, this time setting the watch back to the correct date and pushing a button on each side. And again, after that weird force-field like shimmer went through the room, he was back in the correct year.

He held the watch in his hands and stared at it for a long time. Could he go back in time and save his mother? He wasn't sure how he would do that, unless he went far enough back in time to fix her behavior that led to her drinking, since that was what ultimately killed her.

There was a part of him that had been getting impatient with the living day-to-day that he wanted to jump ahead in time to the day he met Mary and meet her all over again, without having the burden of needing to go back in time to fix something.

After about 20 minutes of staring at the watch, he wondered if he could bring

something back in time *with* him. His wallet and clothing, and things he had physically on his body traveled with him, why not something he was holding? He got up from the table and grabbed a couch cushion, sat on the couch, and put the pillow on his lap.

This time, he simply pulled out two pins, to go back in time just 12 hours. After the ripple, the TV confirmed his jump 12 hours back in time, and the pillow was still on his lap. He put the pillow back, got up and walked to the kitchen table. He dragged a chair clear the of the table, and wrapped his arms though the back of the chair and hooked his foot around one of the legs. He pushed two buttons to move forward another 12 hours back to his original time. As he hoped, the chair came with.

He moved the chair back to his spot at the table and sat down at it, and started at the watch once again, allowing the thoughts he was scared to think of to invade his mind.

Did *he* go back in time 12 years ago and pawn the watch? If he did, how could he claim it five years earlier? Maybe instead, he went back in time more than the 17 years the first time and pawned the watch then? Sometime later (to make it 17 years ago from now) he claimed it, but then five years later pawned it again? But if that were the case, why was there no record of the first time it was pawned? Could Mr. Joe have lost the intake card from the first time it was pawned, or never made one in the first place? That would make it seem like the claim card from 17 years ago was first and then it was pawned five years later.

But, if it was pawned 12 years ago, and then claimed 5 years before, that would mean there would have to be another watch out there, just like this one, in order for that kind of time travel to work.

Unless....

No, Joe told himself, no more playing with possibilities. He really was starting to get a headache.

The next day he had to work at the Y, and since his winning lottery ticket had been validated, he planned to talk to his supervisor the first time he saw him that day.



This was the first time Joe really was here on this day. The first time he was here he was playing with going back and forward in time in 12 hour increments, testing his various configurations with the gears and the timing.

The second time, it was a recharge day, letting the battery charge up the needed 24 hours before he went back in time another three days again.

He felt good about things as he got ready for work that day. There was one final week at the pawn shop before Mr. Joe closed the doors on the shop he'd owned for 30 years, and started retired life. Mr. Joe had told the younger man he had looked for a buyer for the shop in the past few years, but no one was interested in owning a pawn shop anymore. Even a realtor told him it was best if he sold the shop and land to a property developer, who could put a new sparkly computer or cell phone store there instead.

As it was, since the mortgage on the business had long since been paid off, Mr. Joe was able to find a bank who was willing to pay him the money for the shop as long it was emptied out by a certain date -- in this case, the fourth friday since Joe had saved his life.

*What would the timeline have looked like if Mr. Joe really had died that day?* Joe asked himself. *What would have happened to the shop?* Joe shook his head. He would *not* dwell on the "what would have happened if"s, it was not good for his sanity.

Two days ago, when Joe worked at the Y, he found his supervisor in his office right at the time Joe was ready for his lunch break.

"Mr. Smith?" Joe asked, knocking on the door jamb. Mr. Smith looked up.

"Everything all right, Joe?" the supervisor asked, sounding rather surprised to see Joe. And with good reason -- Joe never came to his supervisor's office unless it was an emergency.

"Sure, everything's great. I just came up to give you my two weeks' notice. I found another job." There, he'd said it. He hadn't planned on telling anyone he'd won the lottery, but he seemed strangely nervous about leaving this job. He'd taken it when he needed the money, and now it felt like he was giving it back. Well, he kind of was. But he had something to replace this job, so that was a good consolation prize.

In the end, Joe's worrying really was just that -- a lot of worrying.

"Completely understand, Joe," Mr. Smith had told him. "Tell you what," he said, as he reached for a book that was on his desk. He opened it and began to write what Joe

thought was a check. He was right. Mr. Smith handed him the slip of paper, but Joe didn't look at it right away. "We'll call that your last check," his supervisor explained, "so good luck at your new place, and hopefully I won't see you next week. But if you need to come back, my door is always open," Mr. Smith offered. "Do you need a recommendation for this new place?"

For a moment, Joe didn't quite know what to say. Finally he found his voice.

"Uh, no, i'm good, thanks. Thank you sir!" he raised the check, to indicate his thanks for the check. But then something occurred to him. "Should I stay through today, sir?"

"Nah, don't worry about it. Have a good one, Joe," the supervisor said, dismissing Joe in the nicest possible way Joe could imagine. He left the office, and then leaned against one of the walls in the hallway. He looked at the check, and for a moment thought it might have been a mistake. It was written out to Joe (so he knew it was the right check) in the amount of \$1,000! He only got paid \$100 for each weekend he worked, and this was ten times that amount! Well, he wasn't going to complain about it.

On his way out of the building, he noticed one of the clocks on the wall said it was only 10 a.m. After leaving the Y, Joe went right to the bank and deposited most of the check into his account he used for the house and the taxes. He did get some of the money in cash, enough for him and a friend to have a nice meal somewhere at some time in the future.

Monday at the pawn shop, Joe had apparently turned on his sales guy mojo, and before noon most of the big ticket items were sold, making room on the shelves and in the display cases for more of the inventory that Mr. Joe still had in the back room.

One of the boxes Joe had gone in the bank and brought out for the owner was overflowing with gold and silver chains, necklaces, knick-knacks, and something that looked like a bracelet started to fall on the floor. Joe caught it without seeing it, as his view was blocked by the box. He put the box down on the glass top display counter and looked at the jewelry he held in his hand.

He almost dropped it when he saw what it was. Another watch, just like his. Well, not quite like his -- this one was made for a woman. But other than the band being just a little more delicate, it was the same exact watch as the one Joe stole that day that seemed like forever ago. He fought the urge to put this one in his pocket and take it home with him. But when he looked at it again, he noticed the analog movement wasn't working. Was this

what they call fate? He had a second time travel watch in his hand that he might be able to own, just for fixing it. It was worth asking about, as there was a tag on the watchband that he noticed, and it read only \$20.

Leaving the box on the counter, he went over to his employer on the other side of the small store.

“Mr. Joe?” he asked. “I found this in one of the boxes, and it doesn’t appear to be working. Could I buy it from you for 50%? I’d fix it of course,” he added.

Mr. Joe looked up from his own box of items he was putting on display. He saw the watch Joe held, and just stared for a moment. When he spoke, it was very soft, and the younger man thought he would need a hearing aid to hear what was said.

“I thought I’d lost you,” Mr. Joe barely whispered to the watch. He took it very reverently from the younger man’s hand and caressed it as if it were a religious icon. He stood, transfixed at the watch. The younger man felt awkward and out of place for a moment.

“Mr. Joe?” he asked again.

Mr. Joe came out of his trance, and handed the younger man the watch. “You may have it with my blessing. Maybe there is a young woman who might like this, as you can see the watch band is quite feminine.”

Joe accepted the watch, and he too held it as if it might shatter at any moment. He carefully put it in his front pocket, where he’d kept the first watch for so long.

Joe had almost forgotten about the watch by the time it was closing. Mr. Joe was pulling the blinds down on some of the windows, something they’d only started doing during these three liquidation weeks.

Even though Joe was on the schedule until 3, the previous week he’d started staying all day, helping Mr. Joe.

“You know I cannot pay you for the extra time you stay?” Mr. Joe had told him the previous thursday.

“It’s all right with me, I’m good,” Joe insisted. When the next day came, and Joe got his paycheck, it was handwritten on a business check. There were figures and notations on the stub attached to it, and Joe realised that was the tax calculation for the federal, state, social security, and local deductions that came out of his check. Mr. Joe was a walking

calculator, he realised. But then also realised he wasn't much different, with all the things he'd learned over the years.

So by the time it was 9 p.m. and closing time on that Monday, Joe was exhausted and ready to go home and go to bed. He waited with Mr. Joe as he turned on the alarm and locked up the store, then they went their separate ways.

When Joe got home, he reached into his pocket for his house key, and felt the ladies' watch at the bottom. He waited until he got in the house and locked his own door to take out the watch and examine it. He took it with him up to his bedroom, where his watch was now in his jeans drawer. Pulling out his watch from between two pairs of denim slacks, he compared the two.

Yep, except for the watch bands, they were identical in appearance.

Joe brought both of the watches back down the stairs to the kitchen. He put them both on the table as he unrolled his black velvet cloth and set up his light and magnifying glass.

For several hours he worked on the ladies' watch, notching the gears on that watch as were notched on his, calibrating the gear ratio and tweaking the springs until they matched his watch. Finally he tested the normal pins for their regular watch functions as well.

He stood up and stretched, and noticed it was quite close to midnight. He put his watch in his front pocket and picked up the ladies' watch. He found the remote and turned the TV on to his news/weather channel, and put the remote back on the table.

He set the ladies' watch for noon yesterday, and pulled out the pins. He got the same shimmering force field as he got on Friday night when he tested his watch.

And now the sun was shining in his windows and the TV was telling him it was Sunday at noon, a perfect time for a football game.

He reset the watch for midnight again, and pushing the pins he returned to the time he'd left from.

He again tested the watch, this time with the year, and successfully traveled from this year to last, and back to this year again.

Now, he could take Mary with him when he went back in time.

But after thinking about Mary, he wondered if he'd altered her timeline by leaving that message in his backwards timeline, and then her calling him in this timeline. It was now after midnight, and now Tuesday, meaning it was only two days before he met Mary in the original timeline.

Would she still be the same Mary?

He supposed he'd find out on Thursday.

In the original timeline, Joe was worried about Bill. In this timeline, Joe made sure he stopped by Cuppa Java each morning for a takeaway coffee and he and Bill chatted. The same was true for this morning.

Joe had already made plans to leave at his scheduled time to go up to Mary's restaurant for dinner that night, which he did in the original timeline as well as his backwards timestream.

It still seemed very strange to Joe that he was repeating some of these days three times, when the normal person only got one chance to live that day.

For Joe, his day seemed to drag by very slowly. He made a few sales, but even though Mr. Joe was offering 40% off everything in the store, and they were planning on closing for good the next day, business was slow as well. Maybe it was just Joe. What he wouldn't do to be able to get his watch from under his shirts and jump ahead to the end of his day. But he told himself that on the days he woke up on, he would live in those days, and not skip over them.

Finally it was 3 p.m. and Joe felt as if something huge was lifted off him, and he was finally free. In that moment, he realised what others go through -- those who work at a job they hate but can't leave; those who are oppressed by their governments; those who are abused because they just are -- Joe knew what freedom was, as trivial as his was.

Mr. Joe was in the back office when Joe called out to him.

"I'm leaving, Mr. Joe. See you in the morning!"

Something about his voice made Mr. Joe come to the office door.

"Everything all right?" he asked casually, but Mr. Joe had seen this before. Young Joe was in love.

"Everything is *perfect*," young Joe called back. I'll tell you about it tomorrow!" And with that he was out the door.

The late afternoon chill was such that Joe was glad he had his hooded sweatshirt he wore all the time. It was part of the reason he didn't want to be caught looking at a woman

who was like 20 years younger than him, it made him feel self-conscious. He'd seen his reflection enough times to know that he'd look like a creepy old man ogling a younger woman. But since he'd been working for Mr. Joe, he'd been shaving his face every other day, instead of letting his facial hair grow out so it looked like there was a small animal on his chin. He never really wore beards well, and that wasn't just him that thought so.

Every once in a while when he could splurge for a haircut, the barber or hairdresser who cut his hair would tell him that the shape of his face was more attractive when it was clean-shaven. But there were times when he just let things grow, and that was when people stayed away from him, never calling him a pedophile to his face, but he knew that was what they were thinking.

Joe stopped at his house first, made sure the watches were safe, and took some of the money he kept in an envelope always in his sock drawer. For his first official time meeting Mary in this timeline, he wanted to be prepared to offer to buy her something to eat. He also grabbed his paperback copy of *Murder in Bell Bottoms*. This was another book in the series that featured the character that loved his nachos, his killjoy business partner, and his lemon-headed fiancée. Or had those two gotten married? He couldn't remember, and that was one of the reasons he wanted to re-read it.

The walk up to the edge of the city was quicker than he remembered it, or it could have also been the springs in his steps as he walked. He knew he was in love with her. But she didn't yet know or trust him for those feelings to be returned. She had left a message on that day in his backwards timeline that he'd left one for her. She'd left him one as well, but in that timeline he'd erased the message on his machine. Now he wished he'd kept it, so he could hear both of her messages.

The only thing he hoped for as he got closer to the restaurant she worked at, was that she didn't outright reject him. It was all right if she didn't *remember* him, that was sometimes how playing with time worked. It would even be all right if she didn't even *know* him, that happened too. But if she knew him, and *rejected* him, that he didn't think he could handle. She didn't seem too repulsed when he was at her restaurant three weeks ago. But then she probably just thought he was a random weird customer.

There were a few people in line ahead of him when he entered, so he used the time to study both the menu board and the employees. Finally he spotted Mary, she was coming from the back of the kitchen area to the registers. He guessed she was called up to the front because there were a few customers waiting to order.

She had simple brown hair, and Joe thought he saw some highlights at the bottom of her ponytail, but that could have just been from the fluorescent lights. Her light brown eyes always sparkled as if they were always happy. He wasn't sure if she put on her smile just for work or she wore it all the time, but with her cheerful attitude all the, he was pretty sure that was one thing that stayed with her even when she wasn't at work. He was glad she was working that night, and that he didn't screw with the timeline all *that* much.

"Hi, may I take your order, sir?" she asked, and then looked up at him.

"I remember you from a few weeks ago," she said, smiling, and it turned his insides to goo.

"Yes, that's me," he said, forcing himself to behave like the 45-year-old man he was, and not the 15-year-old school kid with his first crush.

"Maybe you do have that kind of face," she was saying, "I'm pretty sure I *have* met you before, just didn't say hi, or something."

"That could be it," he said, trying to sound neutral.

"Can I get your order?" she asked again, as if suddenly remembering what she was supposed to doing.

He ordered one of the combo meals, instead of from the value menu like he did the first time he met her, and hoped that wasn't tempting fate too much either. After he got his dinner on his tray, he stopped at the self-serve soda, filled up his cup, got napkins and a straw, and found a seat that was visible from the front counter. He purposely sat with his back to the counter, as the table he picked wasn't really for him to watch Mary. It was for Mary to watch him, and come over and talk to him like she did in the original timeline. As far as Joe knew, he didn't manipulate Mary's forward timeline any more than he did when he was going backwards.

While he was eating his burger, he was reading his book. After he finished his burger and fries, he took a long drink of his soda as he was reading a funny passage in the book. The humor was the other thing that he liked about this series. It was probably not a smart idea, he reflected, especially if he read a funny passage that was worthy of making him laugh while he was drinking. Either way -- spraying his soda or it going up his nose -- would not have a good outcome.

When he looked up from the page, Mary was sitting across from him.

"My boss thinks you're a creep. But I told him i think you're harmless," she said as if she were talking about opposing sports teams. "So which are you?" she asked with all the



curiosity of a new kitten.

"I like to think I'm harmless," he said. "But i'm sure else someone might think I'm a creep," he added after a moment.

"I told him you were harmless, and that I know you. I do know you, don't I?"

"I'm Joe, I left a weird message on your voicemail the other other week," he said. She nodded, remembering it well. "I met you today," Joe continued, "but that feels like three lifetimes ago."

"What do you mean?"

Joe took a deep breath. "Where do I start to explain?" he asked himself out loud. "Do you like time travel?" he asked, as a starting place.

"Are you a time traveler?" she asked, wide-eyed.

He arched his eyebrow. "And how did you get to that conclusion?" he wanted to know.

"In the message you left me, you said that you would meet me in two weeks. And then just now, you said you "met" me - past tense. Well, you did meet me about a month ago, i think it was. I think there was also that 'three lifetimes' thing too," she said.

"Well, that was easy. But I've only back traveled in time to right a wrong. And now that that wrong is fixed, i think i'm staying in this time for a while. I have always loved time travel, though," Joe felt the need to point out.

Mary looked up, behind Joe, at someone behind the counter that Joe couldn't see.

"I need to get back to work, but you can stop by any weeknight except Friday. I wouldn't mind seeing you again," she admitted.

"I wouldn't mind seeing you again either," he told her. She smiled, her ponytail bouncing, as she got up from the table.

"Would you like me to take your tray, sir?" she asked, a playful spark in her eyes.

"No," he said cautiously. "I'm good, thanks." He smiled at her, and then she disappeared from his view, and back to work behind the counter.

The first time Joe was here, he and Mary had rescued Bill and Theresa from the guy with the gruff voice. Later -- or was that earlier? -- Joe had learned that Gruff Voice Guy worked for Little Jimmy. And then later -- or earlier still -- Joe spoke with Little Jimmy, and learned that Little Jimmy knew the gold watch was one of the missing items from the pawn shop. He didn't think he really learned anything from Little Jimmy.

Now, he was helping Mr. Joe close up the pawn shop. Most of the merchandise had already been sold throughout the week, and there were just a few final big ticket items that Mr. Joe wanted to sell. The younger Joe was boxing up items and papers from the back storeroom while the owner was out front, making plenty more sales.

The younger Joe opened a few of the file cabinets that Mr. Joe asked him to pack up. There were dusty files and papers going back to when the owner bought the shop from the bank that held the title, and he happened to look at some of the pages.

One of them was a signature page, and Joe almost did a double-take. The signatures on whatever page this were read "Jorund Beor" and "Mary Beor," and it was dated 30 years ago. But... how in the *hell* was that even possible? But then Joe remembered Mr. Joe's reaction to that ladies' gold watch he said Joe could have.

Was that *even* possible? Was this store owner and older version of himself?

Joe had never done any vanity searches on the internet for himself, and he really wasn't about to start, but this had him wondering. Did he and Mary get married, go back in time and buy the pawn shop? Well, if they didn't, this really *was* too much of a coincidence.

Joe decided not to ask his employer about it, because then he was afraid his employer would probably ask Joe to just put him out of his insane misery.

The other question was, if the older Joe was an older version of himself, he shouldn't have been able to shake hands with him that one time. There was an action movie he'd seen, once, a long time ago, so the plot of it was hazy, but it dealt with a politician who had time-traveled and met another version of himself. The main jist of the story up until then was if you go back in time, you can't interact with your younger versions. In the movie, the politician ended up (either accidental or on purpose, Joe couldn't remember which) colliding with his younger self, and the two of them disappeared instantly. This, of course, altered the timeline of the movie, but that was the way it was written. Obviously, the rules of Joe's own

time travel were not the same as this movie.

But as he worked and went through the rest of the day, he couldn't *not* think about it. He'd once asked Mr. Joe if him and "Mrs. Joe" had children, and was saddened at the fact they didn't. If Mr. Joe was really an older version of himself, and if the traveler remembers all the timelines, Joe could change his future one of two ways. If he and Mary were to go back in time, they could have children. The other way to change the future would be if he and Mary just didn't go back in time this time. Ultimately, there had to be a "Joe and Mary" first. And then any decision would be a joint decision.

At 3 p.m. when it was normally Joe's time to go home, he offered to stay and help load the moving truck that Mr. Joe had hired to take some of the the furniture he'd originally brought to the store to a storage locker. The fixtures and display cases could stay in the main part of the store for whoever had the building after him.

Even though the young Joe had really only "known" the pawn shop for the past month, it was sad leaving, even for him. One job was ending, but another was just beginning.

Days passed as the younger Joe worked at the older Joe's house, doing the many things he was asked. The elder Joe had an extensive garden, which he'd loved working in when he was younger and more nimble, but now he wasn't nearly as agile as he was even five years ago. He wasn't sure when the old age set in, he was pretty certain it just slowly crept up on him, waiting to take him by surprised. And he certainly was surprised.

He was also surprised by the younger man he now watched from the window, who was digging up a section of the garden. Planting time was soon, and he was glad his younger assistant enjoyed the garden as much as he did.

Which wasn't surprising, because that younger man was in fact, a younger version of himself.

The elder Joe had done just what this younger man did -- stole the watch from the pawn shop all those months ago, but did not go back in time to save the shop owner. The elder Joe had tinkered and fiddled with the watch, and even came upon the thought to try to program the digital date and year to take him back in time. And like some of the scientists of old, he made a mistake that set him back. In this case, it was a literal set-back.

He meant to program the year to take him back three years in time, just as an experiment, but instead accidentally set it for 30 years. In retrospect, since all he had to do was just change the digital display of the year, he didn't know why he changed the tens digit instead of the ones. But there it was, 30 years earlier, and the space that would become the pawn shop was available for sale.

He came forward back to his own time, did almost the same thing the younger Joe did, and bought a winning lottery ticket. This first time, though, he opted for the winnings in one large sum, which he deposited into a bank, and then withdrew it in smaller amounts over the period of a week, each with the explicit instructions to not have any new bills. They all had to be more than 30 years old. The tellers thought he was crazy, so he started going to different branches of the bank all over the city. Finally, he had withdrawn enough money to buy the store outright -- if it was 30 years ago.

He wrapped the money in a canvas bag and hid it in his garage in some of the boxes he knew were there from when he was 15, and knew that his 15-year-old self would never think to look there.

When he went back in time those 30 years, he waited until his 15-year-old self was at school and his mother was passed out (again) on the couch. He let himself in the back door with his key he had (since it was technically his home), which was next to the garage door. He entered the lower level quietly anyway, even though he knew his mother was passed out cold, there were times where she would suddenly awake, and he didn't want "now" to be that time.

In that lower level hallway, there was a door that opened to the garage. The door swung inward into the hall, but he'd expected that. From there, it was easy to retrieve the money, and retrace his steps back outside and relock the door.

As he walked to the bank, back at the beginning of his new life 30 years ago, he thought about Mary, who he'd met in almost the same way as the younger Joe did in his current timeline.

But the older Joe's Mary had a choice to make on the day the older Joe went back in time 30 years for that first time. At the time that older Joe stole the men's time travel watch, there was also a ladies' watch in the window with it. The set was selling for \$1500, and the elder Joe knew he could never afford both. He took both.

When the older Joe came back to his own timeline, he rushed over to Mary's fast food place, to learn that she'd left work only five minutes before. As it turned out, she was sitting in her car in the parking lot, fiddling with her CD player when Joe had knocked on the window.

"Joe! Hi!" she'd squealed, putting down the window.

"I have something for you. It's really important, so I want you to listen," he'd told her.

"Wow, you sound serious. What's up?"

As an answer, he handed her the ladies' watch. She'd looked at it and frowned.

"This is important?" she'd asked. "A watch?"

"Not *just* a watch," he's stressed. "This will take you to me when you're ready."

"Well that was cryptic," she'd quipped.

He crouched down so he was more on her eye level on the other side of the car door.

"It's a time travel watch," he'd confided softly. "It's programmed to go back in time 30 years. I've found the perfect place for us."

"Wow," she'd said, "Some people go to Disney for vacation, you take me back in time."

“You don’t have to go if you don’t want to,” he’d told her, offering a way out. “I’ve been able to program your watch to take you back to whatever date is displayed on my watch, if that’s tomorrow or next month, or even next year.”

She was quiet a moment.

“When do you leave?” she’d asked, realising the seriousness of what Joe was saying.

“Tonight,” he’d said. “But if you want to leave with me --” he’d started.

She’d interrupted him. “Give me a few days to think about it,” was all she’d said. She’d leaned out the car window and kissed him on the cheek. She’d put up the window, and drove off. Joe was afraid he’d never see her again.

That night, as planned, he’d gathered his few things he wanted to bring with, and pulled out the pins to go back in time those 30 years for the final time.

It had been easy to buy the store, the elder Joe reflected as he watched his younger self finish digging the area of the garden for the day. For the first few years of owning the store, he ran it by himself, and mostly lived in the back office, as one of the things he neglected to take into account was somewhere to stay.

He’d called it the Second Chance Pawn Shop for two reasons: the times there were given a second chance for someone else; he’d been given a second chance at life, or love, or whatever.

One day, when he’d owned the shop for about 6 months, there was a knock on the back office doorway. He’d looked up from some of the papers he was reading about owning a small business, to see Mary standing in the doorway.

He had been so overjoyed to see her, that they got married that day by the justice of the peace at the city offices.

Now, as the older Joe watched his younger self water some newly-planted seeds, he refused to think about his Mary’s fate, and the unknown disease that claimed her life just ten short months ago. Maybe his younger self would make a different decision that day she found out. *If she ever does find out*, he thought. *His Mary is actually already a different person than mine was.*

Several months had passed, and the younger Joe still worked for Mr. Joe at his house. It was a fine place, near the northeastern part of the city, across a small street from one of the larger parks. It explained the richness in the soil, and he loved the cool feel of the dirt on his hands as he dug up parts of the garden to plant vegetables, and the compost that he spread on the base of the fruit trees in the backyard.

He went back to his house every night, the walk was pleasant, and it wasn't a very long walk. Mr. Joe's house wasn't all that far from Mary's either. He and Mary continued to see each other, and it became serious in a very short timespan.

Joe never asked Mr. Joe about how it was they were the same person, because he was afraid he'd set the older man off again, lost in some trip down memory lane. But the younger man was very curious to learn the story of his older self. All he could do is make things up in his mind, none of which were right. All he did know was that his older self went back in time *now*, when he was 45, and he'd gone back in time 30 years.

But why? And what was the story of his Mary?

Part of him didn't want to know, he'd be trying to find ways to prevent her from dying. Yet, since she was only 25 now, if she'd also gone back in time 30 years, that would have made her 54 when she died last year! That was very young for someone to die these days, so part of him *wanted* to know, no, *needed* to know, especially if it was something that could be prevented.

He also hadn't told his Mary that Mr. Joe was an older version of himself, even though she believed in this whole time travel thing. He wasn't sure what she'd think of that.

After they'd been together about six months, Joe had met Mary's parents on a nice evening with a nice breeze. From her parent's house, they could even smell the water from the nearby lake as they sat out on the back deck, enjoying a barbeque dinner.

Mary helped her mother clean off the dishes from the table and they were in the kitchen washing them or putting them in the dishwasher. Joe sat out at the table with Mary's father, as they drank their beers.

"I want to make sure you're all right with me and your daughter," Joe said. "I mean, I

am 20 years older than she, sir,” he added.

“I’m perfectly all right, Joe,” Mary’s father said warmly. “And drop the ‘sir’ nonsense; you can call me Keith,” he said.

“Keith it is, then, sir,” Joe said, adding the ‘sir’ subconsciously, and then laughed at what he’d said. Keith laughed with him. For the first time that evening, Joe relaxed, knowing that Mary’s father was comfortable with him.

“You know, I’m about 15 years older than Kathy,” he said, referring to Mary’s mom, “So it’s not really all that weird,” he said.

“But you’re only, what, 20 years older than me,” Joe guessed.

“I’m exactly 20 years older than you, m’boy,” Keith laughed. Joe did another calculation, and realised he was 5 years younger than Mary’s mom. That would have to be weird for her, he speculated.

“Ah, what’s age but just a number?” Keith asked, and then took a drink of his beer.

“Agreed,” Joe said, and took a swallow of his beer. He never really liked the taste of any alcohol, probably because he didn’t like the smell the few times he’d poured out his mother’s drinks, and probably also because he hated the smell of his mother when she was drinking. But, he’d told himself on this night, meeting Mary’s parents, he would be sociable and have one drink. He was still nursing this one beer, whereas Keith had had one with their meal and now was on his second drink.

That was his preference, Joe thought, he’d stick with his own. In fact, the first sip he’d taken of the beer from the bottle, he almost choked. Mary got up and ran into the house and came back with a beer mug, and she poured the tan-colored drink into the mug. Joe thanked her, and found it was now a little easier to drink.

“The bubbles went up my nose,” he’d said by way of explanation, and then realised how juvenile that sounded. But everyone got a good laugh out of it.

Mary drove Joe home that night, but it didn’t feel as awkward as Joe thought it might have. Earlier in the evening, he’d walked out to hers and her parents’ house, but after the meal and the conversation was over, it was actually Mary who suggested driving him home. While Mary had been to his place many times before, it seemed different to him this night, possibly because of what he was about to ask her.

He invited her in, so she parked in the front driveway and turned off the car. It was very quiet both inside and out, which was a welcoming sound in the city, with all its bustle and business. Joe just sat there a moment before opening the door and inviting Mary to do



the same. When Joe got out of the car, he closed his door and faced the street. Straight up in the night sky was a little sliver of the moon, and it looked like a sliver of silver. He got Mary's attention to look up at the sky too. As they both watched the night sky, a streak suddenly went across the sky somewhat above the moon.

"Was that a shooting star?" she asked, excited.

"It was," Joe confirmed. For a moment, they stood there, next to the car, sharing the wonder of seeing a shooting star, the quiet of a usually busy city. Joe wondered if the busyness of today's city was why his older self decided to remain 30 years in the past, where it wasn't as fast-paced.

After sharing the comfortable silence outside, Joe was the first to move, as he went to his front door, unlocked it and held it open for Mary to enter first. He followed and closed the door behind him. Mary had taken a seat on the couch, and he sat next to her.

"Mary, I'd like you to move in with me," he said with no preamble. The words just tumbled out.

She sat there a moment, not sure of what to say. She really wanted to say yes.

"It's ok if you don't have an answer just yet," he reassured her. "And i know the house is smaller than your parents, but --" he started.

She put a finger on his lips to silence him.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I'll move in with you."

He kissed her then, a long sweet kiss that told her that he did love her. When the kiss was over, they sat on the couch for a quiet moment.

"Will you marry me?" he asked in that quiet moment.

"Of course I will!" she said.

"I don't have a ring yet -- " he started to apologize. She reached out and caressed his cheek.

"It's perfectly all right, Joe. A ring is just a thing, that's all," she said, her turn to reassure him. "I love you," she said, and kissed him again, and then thought of a question for him.

"When do you want me to move --?" she started to ask, but before she could finish, he interrupted her with his answer.

"Whenever you'd like. All at once, or a little at a time. It's completely up to you."

She smiled then, but it turned into a full laugh after Joe smiled too. It broke some of the serious moments before.

Joe still couldn't bear to tell Mary about her fate. He would, just not tonight.

But that night, after she'd gone home -- she said she wanted to tell her parents, and she'd spend tomorrow night at his place -- he laid in his bed, staring up at the ceiling and trying to think of a way he could ask the older Joe about it, without actually asking him about it. He also promised himself when he had some time alone, he'd look it up on the internet, to see there were any obits online that could be helpful.

It took Mary the course of a week to move her things into Joe's house. The library was a tight squeeze, and at that Joe had to smile. As she moved her things in, he checked out her books, and had also set up her computer. She offered to upgrade the internet connection to cable, and after thinking about it, he agreed.

On the evenings she was at work, he marveled at how much more crap was now on the TV, and how much faster his internet was. He wondered why he stuck with his lame dial-up.

That first evening of cable internet, he looked up "Mary Beor" online, and put in last year's date. He'd always been one to subscribe to a computer being only as smart as the person who programmed it. The same was true of the internet: it was only as knowledgeable as what was uploaded online. In the case of his Mary's older version, there was nothing.

He also finally decided to try a vanity search. Surprisingly, there were a few hits for "Joe Beor," but most were ancestry searches, and none of them were him anyway. When he replaced his search terms with his birth name, the search engine he was using proudly told him "*No results found for "Jorund Beor"*" and gave him other options to search on. He almost giggled at that.

After Mary had moved all her things in, they started planning for a date. Joe wanted it in the spring, and Mary liked the fall. After some thinking about it, Joe decided he liked the middle of October. The leaves in this part of the world were awesome colors, and the weather was pretty pleasant. Mary decided she liked it too, so they set a date for then.

Joe kept both watches in a box that at the moment was under his t-shirts again. He wasn't sure why he kept moving it, and why it was hiding under his clothes. The older Joe knew where the watches were, so he didn't really have the need to hide them.

Then he had an idea. He would give her the ladies' watch as a wedding present. The watches were a pair, and so were him and Mary.

The wedding was the following October. Mary's parents were there, and some of her aunts and uncles. Since Mary was an only child, her side of the family was rather small. The only people Joe wanted to invite were Mr. Joe, Bill and Theresa. Joe had asked Bill if he would be able to bring Mr. Joe, since their houses were not all that far apart, and Bill agreed.

By most standards, it was a very small wedding. But it was a gorgeous day for an outdoor wedding, and the park they got married in had a perfect gazebo that overlooked a little stream. White ribbons and bows hung on the gazebo, and all that mattered that day were Mary and Joe.

The reception was also at the park; across from the gazebo there was a picnic area where the caterers (who here hired by Keith and Kathy; they insisted.) served an exquisite luncheon.

By late afternoon, the few guests had all left, and Joe wanted to help clean up the park, but the caterers said they were hired to make sure everything was just as they found it, so Joe and Mary went back to their house to pack for their honeymoon.

Joe hadn't told Mary where they were going, but she had seen many different pamphlets for island cruises and getaways. She knew Joe was very meticulous with his record keeping and how he spent his money. She also knew that he'd won that lottery, and he'd told her about some of his rough times, so she couldn't fault him for wanting to get the best deal on a honeymoon for them.

Their honeymoon turned out to be a cruise from Miami, Florida, to the Bahamas. The cruise itself was four nights with two ports of call in the Bahamas. After they returned to Miami, they would spend another week there and at the Keys too.

It was a glorious honeymoon, and Mary was much less stressed knowing that she was able to take time off from her fast-food job and still have the job when they got back.

It was their first night in Miami that Joe presented her with her watch.

"It has a mate," he said, when he watched her eyes light up at having a gold watch. She looked at him, and he was holding his watch for her to see.

"They're amazing! Wherever did you get them?"

“Would you believe, at the pawn shop Mr. Joe owned?”

“No, I would not believe that. Well, from anyone else I wouldn’t. But you’re you, so I would.” She immediately put it on her left wrist. “I love it!”

“There’s a few things you need to know about it,” he said, smiling as she looked up at him again. “The first is that the battery is 14 karat gold.”

“Really?” she asked, looking back at the watch. “Nice! What else?”

“The second is that it’s not waterproof,” he said, smiling. She looked back at him and laughed. “Guess I won’t wear it on our scuba excursion, then,” she said.

“And the third thing is...” he stopped short. Did he really want to tell her? “Well, it’s complicated to do it, but the third thing is you can use it to travel in time.”

She looked at him, searching his face for a fantastic tale of time travel that he was telling her. She saw in his eyes that he was telling the truth.

“How?” she whispered, staring at the delicate watch, looking at the buttons on the side. He put his hands over hers and they held the watch together for a time.

“Can we talk about that part some other time?” he asked softly.

“Sure,” she said. “In the meantime, it’s just a watch, right?”

“Right,” he agreed.

Just like a honeymoon was supposed to be, those 11 days they were on vacation were spent in glorious luxury. Joe and Mary loved every minute of their time away, and were sad to see it end, and return to their everyday life. But it was the beginning of their life, and it was theirs together.

Over the course of the year, Mary became the manager at her restaurant, but she wanted to do something else. She wasn’t sure what, but she knew there was more than just being a manager. Maybe she’d take some business courses, and own one of the restaurants. Or maybe some day have nothing to do with retail or fast food. But for the meantime, manager wasn’t too shabby for her.

And Joe supported her promotion and business dreams.

“Maybe one day I could own my own business,” she said one night at dinner. “Not sure what I’d sell. Maybe I’ll stumble on an invention that everyone needs and I’ll be rich in my own right.”

“I want you to do whatever make you happy, Mary. You’ve made me more happy than I

can imagine, and I want you to be that happy too,” he said.

Joe continued to work for Mr. Joe, but it was only five days a week now. He coordinated his off days with Mary’s, and worked the other days out at Mr. Joe’s house. It was a warmish day when the younger Joe and Mr. Joe had lunch out on his back patio, when Joe brought up something he’d been meaning to ask for quite a while.

“Have you ever thought of writing your memoirs, Mr. Joe? I think they’d be fascinating.”

Mr. Joe was silent as he ate his lunch, but Joe knew he heard him.

“It doesn’t have to be something to get published, you know. You can even write it in a notebook or on a typewriter. No one even has to read it, but you.”

Mr. Joe was silent, but the younger man knew he’d given the older man something to think about.

After Mary and Joe were married about five years, Mary became the owner of a brand-new bakery in the city. Interestingly enough, it was in the same exact storefront where Mr. Joe had his pawn shop. In those five years, Mary had gone back to college for business classes. She took them at night, since she was still the manager of the fast food restaurant.

But after a few years of classes, and then a sudden inspiration, she opened a bakery that specialized in extraordinary cakes decorated with fondant. Mary was a genius at decorating them to be whatever she wanted, and by the time she had the grand opening of Sweet Treats, she had a dozen orders already to fill. Everyone wanted her cakes, and she had orders for a doll’s house, a faerie mushroom, dragons, toys from popular kids’ shows and movies, props from famous action and scifi movies, even robots from the *Star Wars* movies. Mary was able to make them all.

On a nice warm fall day, when Joe was blowing the leaves in Mr. Joe’s back yard into a huge pile to rake up and put out for collection, Mr. Joe was sitting in the sun on the back patio when he suddenly sagged. The younger man -- who was now 51 -- turned off the leaf blower and ran over to the older man. He wasn’t responding, and Joe grabbed the phone handset from the back patio table and called emergency services. Within moments, an ambulance was there, and the paramedics said Mr. Joe had a stroke.

Since Joe’s timing was quick, Mr. Joe might be able to recover, was what they told him. He wanted to go with in the ambulance, but since he wasn’t family, he could not.

Joe knew the hospital the ambulance was from, and so, after calling Mary and telling her what happened, he walked the short distance to the hospital.

Again, since he wasn't family, Joe had to wait in the waiting room in order to see Mr. Joe. And wait he did. It seemed like he waited for an entire day, when the clock told him that only two hours had passed. But after those two hours, Mary walked in the waiting room. Joe rose when he saw her, and she hugged him.

A nurse came out, and Mary called her over.

"We're here to see Joe Beor, he's about 81, was brought in about 2 and a half hours ago because he had a stroke." She told the nurse in a business-like tone.

"Wait here another moment," she said, and left again.

But a moment later, she came back. "Come with me, please."

They followed her down the hallway.

"How did you do that?" he asked her.

She smiled. "I have no idea," she confessed. "I was surprised it even worked."

A moment later, they were shown into a room. Mr. Joe looked very small on the bed, and he had tubes and things attached to his arms, and he was being given oxygen. When he saw them, he started to sit up. Mary rushed to him.

"Don't get up for us, Mr. Joe, it's ok," she told him, and he sagged back onto the bed.

"They told me I have excellent recovery chances," he said, even though his voice sounded a little strange. "I don't have a lot of paralysis, which is good. It's all thanks to your quick response, Joe," the older man said, turning to the younger man and smiling.

Joe wasn't quite sure how to respond. He was pretty sure blushing and turning away was not quite the right answer for a grown man of 51, but that's what he wanted to do. He ended up going for the humorous reply.

"Thanks, sir, it's what I'm paid for," he said, smiling back at the man in the bed.

"I've told you, you don't have to call me sir," the older Joe reminded the younger man.

"Yes, sir!" the younger Joe said. Everyone laughed, and that was when Joe knew everything would be all right.

The elder Joe was home in no time, if six months was “no time.” But it might as well have felt like Joe had set the time machine watch for six months, pushed the button and just jumped ahead.

But he didn’t, and since he hadn’t told Mary how to use hers to travel through time, he knew she didn’t either. Time just moved too quickly when you really weren’t paying attention to it, Joe had learned.

In the time Mr. Joe was in rehab, him and Mary visited at least twice a week, and Joe still maintained the older man’s house and property. It no longer mattered to Joe if he was getting paid for working for Mr. Joe; he found he rather liked doing what he’d been doing for the last six years.

Mary’s business was booming, and everyone -- even the stuffiest of critics admitted Mary was a wiz with fondant and icing. There wasn’t anything she couldn’t make that *someone* wasn’t impressed with.

And so, the years went by: Mary with her bakery and cakes and cupcakes, cookies and confectionaries; her husband Joe with caring for Mr. Joe and his house and still tinkering and fixing watches for the few people in and around the city who still had watches that needed to be wound; the elder Joe who was now wheelchair bound but still loved sitting on his back patio as the younger man dug in his garden, planting all the vegetables they both loved.

The older Joe and his younger companion would often go on walks through the neighborhood, especially in the fall. There was also a small park near by they went to as well. Well, the younger man walked as he pushed the older man in his wheelchair. They never spoke of anything more than trivial subjects, like the weather, but they were both comfortable with that. Passers-by thought they were father and son, and smiled, waved, or said hello as they walked by.

The younger man wondered if the older man knew the younger had figured out who he really was, as the younger Joe never talked to his older self about it.

It was along one of these walks in the nearby park, five years after Mr. Joe’s stroke, when they had just stopped for a moment next to a park bench for the younger man to sit for a moment and enjoy the cool fall air.

“I love the fall,” Mr. Joe said when the younger man sat on the bench next to the older



man's wheelchair.

"I do too," said the younger man.

"Everything is so pretty," he said.

"I agree," the younger man agreed. This was what Mr. Joe did, this kind of conversation was common these days.

"It's nice out today," the older man said.

"That it is," the younger man agreed, and he meant this reply. Most of the time his responses were just to keep the conversation going, but this one he really did agree with.

"I finished my memoirs," the older man said, in just same tone he'd used with his platitudes about the fall weather.

Joe really wanted to reply that he couldn't wait read them, but he reminded himself that he was the one that said they didn't have to be written for others to read them, just to be recorded somewhere for posterity.

"Wow, that's great," was Joe's reply, and he hoped he didn't sound either too bored or too excited.

"I'm glad you think that, Joe," the older man said. He turned to the younger man and smiled. Then he turned back to watching the path, and the leaves on the ground as they stirred in the cool breeze.

Mr. Joe was silent for a longer than usual moment, and the younger man turned to face the man in the wheelchair. His head was down, as if he'd nodded off for a moment. Joe reached over and touched the older man's hand. It was limp, and fell back into his lap. There was just something about the way the older man's body was, that Joe knew the older man was gone.

It was times like this when he wished he had taken the time all those years ago to finally get a cell phone. Joe scanned the park, and watched some of the people who were there that day.

One young woman, who looked like a new mother, as she was pushing a stroller that was oriented like a carriage walked by the bench where Joe sat.

"Excuse me, miss?" he called out to her.

The woman stopped pushing the stroller at Joe's words.

"Is everything all right, sir?"

"Uhm, I don't think so. Do you have a phone i could use? Or, at least call the hospital for me?"

“Is it you? Are you ok?”

“No, I’m fine. It’s my...” he faltered at what he should call Joe. Finally, when he realised the woman was looking at him oddly, he picked something, “my father. I think...” Joe paused again. They say if you don’t say it, it won’t be true. But he had to say it. “I think he’s gone,” Joe said in a rush.

“Ohmygod!” the woman said, noticing the man in the wheelchair was slumped over.

She got her phone out of what looked like to Joe a duffle bag, but it was probably the baby’s diaper bag, tapped the screen a few times and then spoke on the phone. Her voice was too soft to Joe to hear, but after a moment, she put the phone down and turned to Joe.

“They’re sending someone here, the lady told me,” she said. “I’m so sorry about your dad. Do you want me to stay here?” she asked, but at that moment the baby decided it was time to get fussy. “I’m sorry,” she said again, “But she’s starting to fuss, I should get going.”

Joe stood up and looked into the stroller-carriage. Inside was the cutest pink bundle of baby and blankets. When the baby saw Joe, for whatever reason, she started to smile and gurgle happily.

“She likes you!” the young mother said happily. “She usually cries when she sees faces she doesn’t know.”

“What’s her name?” Joe asked her.

“Mary,” she young mother said.

“It’s a good name,” Joe agreed. “My wife’s name is Mary.” As an afterthought, he added, “I’m Joe.”

The young mother looked as if she were about to say something, when a young man wearing a uniform with a paramedic patch on the left side of his shirt came up to Joe.

“Are you the one who called?” he asked. Joe turned to the young mother, but she was already pushing the stroller up the walkway, and seemed to far for Joe to call out to her.

“Well, yeah,” Joe said, and it sounded rather lame to his ears. “Someone else called, but she’s not here anymore.” The truth sounded better once he said it.

“And this is your father?” the paramedic asked turning to the older man.

“Yeah. Well, he was. He died just a short time ago. Like 5 minutes maybe?” Joe hoped that sounded helpful. The paramedic took the wheelchair and carefully wheeled it and the man who still sat in it to the waiting ambulance.

“Don’t need the lights for this one, Hank,” the paramedic said softly to the driver when they got close enough.

"I should call my wife," Joe said. A second paramedic joined the first, and they helped get the older Joe out of the chair and onto a stretcher in the back of the ambulance. They covered him over with a sheet. The original paramedic turned to Joe.

"Do you want to ride in the back?"

Numbly, he nodded. "But I should call my wife, do either of you have a phone I can use?" One of the paramedics got in the back and closed the door. Once he turned around to face Joe, he took out a phone, pushed a button and did something on the screen, and then handed it to Joe. It was at a screen where all he had to do was enter Mary's phone number.

"Push the phone icon at the bottom of the screen when you have the number entered," the other man said helpfully. Joe nodded, and when he put the phone to his head he heard the other end ringing.

"Sweet Treats," Mary answered the phone cheerfully.

"Hi, it's me," Joe said.

"Everything all right?" she asked.

"No," he said softly. Damn it, he would not cry, he told himself. "It's Joe," he said, afraid his voice was too soft she couldn't hear him.

But instinctively, Mary knew. "Oh, no," she said. Her voice was soft too. "I'm so sorry," she said, and he could hear a catch in her voice. "I'll close the shop right now. Where are you?"

"I'm in an ambulance, we're going to the hospital." Joe supposed it helped there was only one hospital on this side of the city. Well, there was another hospital, but it was over on the western edge of the city, and it was always dirty and overcrowded. Joe couldn't figure out why people were taken to the ER there when the wait was always so damn long.

"I'll be there," she promised, and disconnected the phone line. Joe handed the phone back to the paramedic.

"I saved him once, you know," Joe told the younger man. "It was a long time ago, but I saved him."

The paramedic nodded, understanding what Joe was saying. He, too, had saved many people, but that was his job, his calling. To this man who just lost his father, it was a big thing, to save a man when that's just not what you do. The paramedic let the man talk. Sometimes talking was the best thing, and everyone dealt with death differently.

After what seemed like only a moment, the ambulance stopped at the hospital, and the paramedic who sat up front came around to the back to help first Joe out of the back,

and then the older man. Joe caught a glimpse of him as he was taken out on the stretcher and the sheet slipped a little. It was almost as if he were sleeping.

Joe looked around to get his bearings, and he saw Mary running from her car she'd just parked. She ran to him and wrapped her arms around him, and held on, crying. Joe just held her tightly. And then he too, cried with her.

*Mary was amazing*, Joe thought, *I'm glad I have her*. Mary took care of all the little details, everything that one could imagine, for the elder Joe's funeral. It was beautiful.

Joe and Mary had gone through all of Mr. Joe's papers and couldn't find much to go on when it came time to plan the funeral. The older Joe didn't seem to really have much of a religion, or if he did, he never told anyone his final resting place wishes, not even the younger Joe. Mr. Joe's death was just so sudden.

There was probably some saying about how funerals were for the living, and you could tell what kind of person they were in life by how many people turned out for their funeral when their time came.

If that was the case, then old Mr. Joe was on par with the celebrities. It seemed like the entire city was there at the graveside service, and then some. Since Mr. Joe owned a shop in a central hub of the city, he had apparently touched more lives than was realised. The younger Joe (such as he was at 56) thought he saw Little Jimmy and some of his men at the back of the gathering. But when the casket was lowered and the gathering disbursed to go back to Mr. Joe's house for a time, the men were no longer there.

Joe shook his head to clear the cobwebs before they could form. This was no time to be getting hallucinations, Joe thought. He wasn't old enough for that yet.

After the funeral, people gathered at Mr. Joe's house for a small luncheon. Although, based on the size of the crowd, it looked like a grand-scale lunch. Mary was on the phone with a few people she knew, asking if they might bring over a few dishes and such.

Ten minutes later, when the doorbell sounded, Mary opened it to find a steady stream of friends, restaurateurs, bakers and caterers all bringing in many dishes to help serve all the people who came to pay their respects.

In the front foyer of Mr. Joe's house, there was an easel with one of the few photographs the elder Joe allowed to be taken. Next to the easel was a table, which had a guest register and pen, for the guests to sign, expressing their condolences. Even though the younger Joe had said the elder was his father, the elder Joe didn't really have any family.

Joe listened to everyone's stories as they talked in small groups. Someone got the idea of everyone assembling on Mr. Joe's beloved back patio to gather and tell these stories in a large group. The younger Joe knew he should step in and say something, but didn't think

he'd be able to say anything without breaking down in tears. While he was lingering at the back of the group, listening to some of the anecdotes and incidents, he felt someone beside him. He turned to see Mary, who now took his hand in hers.

"I want to say something, but I don't think I can," he admitted to her.

"It's ok," she said, leaning her cheek against his arm. "They'll understand. And if not, well, they'll just have to deal with it."

"How did I get so lucky to have you?" Joe asked her.

"I'm the lucky one," she said against his arm.

Many people came up to Joe and remarked how much he looked like the old Mr. Joe. Joe just smiled politely and thanked people for coming. Mary stood at his side and many people hugged her, even though they seemed a little awkward doing so.

"I know what you did," Little Jimmy said when he came up to Joe after nearly everyone had left.

For the briefest of moments, Joe panicked. Did Little Jimmy know about the time travel capabilities of the watch? There was no way he could have know about that, Joe reasoned with himself a moment later.

"I know you saved that old man's life all those years ago. We had planned a little chat with your Mr. Joe back then, but when Vinnie here --" Little Jimmy motioned to a man behind him, and who Joe remembered as having the gruff voice all that time -- and timelines -- ago. "--stopped by the store it was all locked up tight. And then you start working there, and I wonder if that wasn't a coincidence."

Joe gulped, and hoped Little Jimmy didn't hear it.

"I'm sure that's all it was, Jimmy, sir. Just a coincidence," he said, sounding more like was trying to reassure himself and not Little Jimmy.

"Well, all right. If you say so."

"Sure, sir. And thank you for coming today," Joe added. Jimmy grunted, and as he turned to leave, Vinnie and two other men, both wearing black leather jackets, followed close behind.

"What was that all about?" Mary asked. Joe took deep breath.

"I guess I ought to tell you about all those years ago, huh?" he said.

"It can wait until later, once we're alone again."

Joe and Mary moved from where they'd been standing on the patio into the house, now at the front door, saying farewell to the last of the guests from the funeral. It had been a long day for both of them.

Mary wasn't sure how well it would be received, but she'd made a cake to serve that day, it had a three layers, and on the side of the second layer, she'd replicated his Second Chance Pawn Shop sign. The top layer showed Mr. Joe's garden when it was in full bloom. Along the edge of the bottom layer, all the way around, showed trees and foliage from his favorite season, autumn.

Joe didn't think it was tacky, he thought it was amazing.

When the last person finally left Mr. Joe's house, Joe and Mary took a brief survey of what needed to be done. There were a few things that could be straightened out and trash bags take out to the end of the driveway to be collected in a day or two.

But most of the things could wait until at least the next day. They would go through all of Mr. Joe's things and decide what to keep, what to donate, and what could be just thrown away.

They turned off all the lights and then locked up the house and headed for home.

In the car, Joe came up with an idea. It was rough for him to even think this, because of all the memories in his house in the city.

"Would we --" he started. "Would we want to move out here, into Mr. Joe's house?" he asked her.

"But, Joe," Mary said, "You've lived your whole life in that house," she pointed out.

"Exactly. I've lived my whole life in that house. I think it's time to leave that house behind."

"Are you sure? That's what you want?" she asked. Joe looked outside before he answered. They were just turning into the front driveway.

"Yes, " he said. "No, I'd miss this place," he said, getting out of the car. "I'd miss working outside, with the hedges and the garden..." his voice trailed off.

"We've both had an exhausting day," she said. "Let's give it some time and then think about it. Mr. Joe was part of our life for a long time, it's normal to feel this way."

Mary was Joe's voice of reason. He really didn't know what he'd do without her.

Later, as they lay in bed that night, after their nighttime rituals, Joe was laying on his back, head flattening his already flat pillow, he put his hands up over his head and stared at the ceiling.

Mary rolled over to face him, and she put her head close to his arms, and her hand on his chest.

“What’s on your mind?” she asked, inviting him to share his thoughts.

“Where do you want me to start?” he asked, half joking, since there were already so many thoughts going through his busy mind.

“The beginning?” she suggested.

“How about I start with this particular Monday, about 11 years ago?”

“What happened on that day?”

“That was the day i stole the gold watch from the pawn shop. I didn’t know it at the time, but Mr. Joe was killed that morning -- right before I came in.”

“That’s awful!” she said. But then thought about what Joe had actually said.

“Wait -- what did you say?” She demanded, and sat up in bed, crossed her legs, and faced Joe, neverminding the fact she was naked. It was not cold night, and nor was it cold in their bedroom.

He turned his head to look at her. It was a much better view than the ceiling.

“I stole the watch, and the next day when I saw the cops, i thought they were after me. So i went out back of Cuppa Java, and when i saw a cop back there, i panicked. I just pressed all the buttons on the watch -- well, a bunch of them anyway, and the cop was gone. I pushed the buttons a few more times, but nothing happened. Or so I thought. When I went back to Cuppa Java the next day, Bill told me an entire week had gone by. Through trial and error, that was how I learned the watch I had was a time travel watch. I couldn’t get it to go back in time though, so i took it apart and tweaked it a little. And eventually, I was able to go back in time to that fateful Monday -- and save Mr. Joe’s life.”

“And that’s how you knew me that first day back at the restaurant!” Mary realised.

“The thursday you came over and talked to me? When you said your boss thought I was a creep? that was the original day I met you. But in my original timeline, one of Little Jimmy’s guys was holding Bill and Theresa captive in their own house, trying to find me. Originally, I was there to try to figure out how to save them.”

“And what about me?”



“You came over and talked to me. I told you that I thought a friend might have been in danger. You came up with a plan to help me get them out of there.”

“I did all that?” she asked. “I don’t remember any of that.”

“You wouldn’t, because I changed the timeline,” Joe explained.

“Why did you save Mr. Joe? You’re not really related to him, are you?”

“I saved him because it was the human thing to do. No, he’s not my father, like everyone thought. I have no idea who my father was.”

“And you never had the desire to find out?”

“Nope,” he said, and turned his head back to the ceiling. “My mom said he was a fool,” Joe continued. “And he was foolish, giving up a kid like me. I don’t think my mother ever forgave him for getting her pregnant. I was just a burden to her then. But that seems like another lifetime ago,” Joe said.

Mary laid back down next to him, and snuggled against him.

“It was another lifetime,” she said sleepily. “Another timeline, too,” she said, and yawned. “You can finish the time travel story in the morning.”

“It is finished. I met you, and stopped tinkering with the watch.” Joe yawned. “Good night, Mary,” he said. “I love you.”

“Love you too,” she murmured.

Over the next several weeks, Joe and Mary cleared out the older Joe’s belongings. They made trips daily to both the dumpster and the local charity shops in the city. And every night they’d bring a few more things home.

Joe stopped thinking about moving into the larger house. His home was here, in this house he grew up in. It was certainly big enough for the two of them. Mary was now 36, and the two decided that having children wasn’t to be in the cards.

The only room they had left to go through was Mr. Joe’s bedroom and private office. The bedroom was just that -- a room with the bed and a closet full of clothes. Most of the clothes were donated as they simply were not the right size for the younger man.

Mary was sitting at the older man’s desk, when she tugged on a drawer that didn’t open. Figuring it was locked, she looked in the other few drawers for a key. When she didn’t find one, she ran her hands on the underside of the middle of the desk. But there still was no key.

“Hey, Joe?” she called across the little room. Joe came in to the office, as it was separated from the bedroom by just a doorway.

“What’s up?”

“This drawer won’t open. I looked through the other drawers for a key. I mean, there’s nothing but current bank statements, bills, and the checkbook in the other drawers. Oh, pencils and a calculator,” she added.

Joe came around to the other side of the desk. It was a deep wood finish, and very slick. When the two drawers on each side were both closed, there was an outline around them that looked like it went around both top and bottom drawers. Joe wondered if at some point there wasn’t raised moulding along the gold lines.

He tried opening the drawer as well, but she was right, it wouldn’t move. Joe took out the drawer above it and placed it on the floor behind him. He was now able to reach into the bottom drawer. He felt the area behind the front of the drawer, where a lock would be.

“Well, it’s not locked,” he announced. “I’m going to go with ‘stuck’.”

Mary agreed, and Joe started taking the papers out of the drawer. And there were a lot of papers. Once the drawer was empty, he looked at the stack of paper on the desk. Enough of the papers had typewritten text on them, enough that Joe figured the entire stack was type on.

“What is it all? Was he working on a novel?”

Joe picked up the top page and looked at it. “No,” he said after looking through some of the pages, “it’s his memoirs. I told him he should write them, and he did. Well, I don’t know how complete it is, but we should take a look at it once we get it home tonight.”

“I’ll get a box,” Mary said, and she brought a document box upstairs. They put all the papers in, and there were quite a bit of them.

“There’s at least four or five reams of paper here, easily,” Joe said. “I’ll go take it out to the car, you finish up here?” he asked.

“Certainly,” she nodded, boxing up the other few items that were left on the desk. Mary wondered if they should sell the furniture online, or include it when they sold the house. She’d have to remember to ask Joe about that later.

Joe put the box with Mr. Joe’s memoirs on the kitchen table at the end they didn’t eat at. Since it was just the two of them, they ate at one end, leaving most of the table empty. Joe

never understood why his mother had such a large table, but he was glad for it now.

Mary made them some sandwiches, as it was close their usual dinner time, as Joe looked through the papers and tried to make some sense of order out of them and get them all going at least the same direction.

“Hey, Mary?” Joe asked as he was still going through the pages, “Did we ever come across a typewriter?” he asked, trying to remember if he saw one or not.

“No, i don’t think we did,” she said, going through her own mental catalogue of memories of the items in the house.

“Well, no worries,” Joe said. “I was just curious, is all. Should we see what all we have here?” he asked, and handed her a sheaf of papers.

As they sat next to each other, they ate, and read through some of the memories of old Mr. Joe’s life.

I.

*I can't believe I was able to steal those watches. No one was in the shop, so I just took them. I had to have the mens watch, though. It kept calling to me, so I just took both. But later, I was to find out what had happened, and why I was able to just walk right in.*

*I found out later that the shop owner had been murdered just before I went in the shop, and it turned out he was already dead in the back room. Well, at least that's what the papers said.*

*I've also found that -- on the mens' watch any way -- pushing four buttons at a time -- mostly two on each side -- will take me a day into the future. Eventually, I was able to tinker with it enough to make it so pulling out four pins at a time -- again, two on each side -- would allow me to travel back in time. But while I could go forward as far as I wanted, I couldn't do the same backwards. The battery had to recharge a day, and even then I could only go back in time three days.*

*I've already won a nice lottery, a few million dollars, that I can save for a rainy day. I know that's a cliché, to go forward in time, learn the winning lottery numbers for a certain day, and then return to your own time and play those numbers on that day to win big. But I figured it might be suspicious if I, a watch tinkerer, won something like a \$60 million lottery, so I went with something a bit more modest*

II.

*I've figured out how to program the watch to take me back or forward in time to a specific date. This is probably because of the fact that the date display includes the year, and it was easy to manipulate.*

*I've also met the most wonderful person, her name is Mary. Even though I'm 20 years older than her, I think I want to marry her and spend the rest of my life with her. I hope she doesn't think I'm a creep.*

III.

*I've asked Mary to marry me, and she said yes!*

*She doesn't know about the time travel watches yet, but I was planning on giving her*

*the ladies' watch as an engagement present. I've also calibrated her watch to the same specifications as my watch.*

*I've also met her parents, and they've accepted me, which is good. They're good people. But i think it's because her dad is a bit older than her mom. But they know i'll take care of Mary too. I told them that I've recently come into some money, but haven't told them how i've come into that money. I figure it's none of their business.*

*I haven't actually claimed the prize yet, the numbers I picked were for a drawing only a few days ago. When I validate the ticket, I plan on asking them for the lump sum, which i know is quite a bit. But i'll have money in the bank to pay for the wedding. Unless, of course, Mary's parents offer to give us the wedding as our present. In that case, I'll have plenty for a honeymoon. I'm thinking about taking her on a cruise.*

IV.

*I've managed to turn a failure in to a profit from one error.*

*I was experimenting with setting the dates and times to go back to. I meant to set the date for three years, but instead, i entered the wrong digit into the tens place, and not the ones. It sent me back 30 years instead of 3.*

*The city looked so different then! The coffee shop was one of those "old time" diners, and there was a barber shop, and the sports bar looked rather respectable. But what was interesting to me was that the place where the pawn shop was was an empty store, with a big "For Sale" sign in the window, and the name of the bank to call if someone wanted information about buying or leasing it.*

*Instead of calling them from the payphone on the corner -- yes, those still existed -- I went over to the closest branch of the bank and talked to someone about buying the building in cash. I told them that I have the money, but it would take me "some time" to get it all together. The man at the bank I spoke to gave me all the details, and, what I thought was a fair price for the building. He said he'd hold my offer as the current one for a week. After that either I'd have to come back with some collateral for them to hold it longer, or it was back on the market.*

*I promised them I'd be back in a week.*

V.

*It took more than a week in my present to obtain that large sum of money. I'd deposited the lump sum into my bank once I got it from the state, and then I withdrew enough cash to get*

*me through a usual week. I called the Y and gave them my notice. My supervisor said “good riddance” and hung up the phone on me.*

*I told Bill at Cuppa Java that I’d come into some money and might be moving. I told him I valued his friendship, and promised I’d write when I moved.*

*I told Mary about the watches -- that they were my engagement present for us, and they were special, but I didn’t tell her how, just yet. I also told her I wanted to hang on to hers for a little bit to make sure all the settings worked, as the watches were old and I’d recently refurbished them.*

*It wasn’t exactly a lie, and I hated lying to her, but I wanted to recalibrate hers in such a way that it would function as a beacon to mine, which was to be a homing device in time.*

*I told Mary I’d found an awesome business opportunity, and it was a place to get in on the ground floor. She was intrigued and curious, but I told her I wanted to make sure I had secured a position in the venture first.*

VI.

*The first thing I did was withdrawal as much as I could from one branch (before they got pissed off at me) in bills that were from 30 years ago or more. The teller looked at me like I was crazy or something, like I’d given her an impossible request.*

*But I got quite a nice size withdrawal, that I took home and put in a briefcase that I’d found out in the garage somewhere. I think it was my mother’s, but since I rarely remembered seeing her not drunk or passed out on the couch, I couldn’t be sure where it came from.*

*I went to several different branches of my bank, withdrawing as much as I could as long as the bills were from 30 or more years ago. And every teller first had to consult with their manager, and every teller thought I was being a serious inconvenience in their day. I’m sure that day I was the topic of many dinnertime discussions.*

*But by the end of the third day, I had the amount I needed to buy the little store. And that night, I also finally calibrated Mary’s watch. When I would go back in time those 30 years, the time travel mechanism on Mary’s watch would be set so that when she would pull the pins to go back in time, it would lock on my watch’s signal and take her to me -- whenever that will be. If she waited one day, one year, or even one decade, it will take her to whenever I am.*

VII.

*Mary didn't want me to go when I finally told her. She thought I was crazy to go back in time to start my life then; I said when was there a better time?*

*It had taken some doing, but I was able to purchase the building for cash within the week the banker had given me. I wasn't sure if the watch would be able to take anything but me back in time, so I hid the money in a canvas bag in one of the many boxes out in the garage that I remembered being there when I was a kid.*

*On the day I bought the building, I went back in time to the day I was supposed to meet the banker, and stopped at my house in the morning. I knew my 15-year-old self was at school. I loved the tech school because it was hands-on learning and doing. I could see immediately if I did something right -- or if it went completely wrong.*

*It was a good thing that my mother was passed out on the couch, but I went in through the lower level, so even if she woke she wouldn't see me. There was a part of me that wanted to go upstairs and see my mother one more time, as she'd died 20 years ago for me. That same part would have wanted to shake her awake, tell she was going to die in five years if she didn't stop drinking, and smack her for not listening to those teachers I had back in middle school that were hoping that I'd be in the gifted program. I wanted to tell her I really did love her, even though she was not really a mother, more of a passed-out housemate.*

*But I didn't do any of those things. I retrieved the canvas bag from the garage, made sure all the money was there, and went to the bank to buy the shop.*

*When I came back to the present, there was a sign on the shop that said "Second Chance Pawn Shop," so I knew that it had done well to still be there in my own present. I didn't stop in, because I would see my older self, and that could have screwed up the timeline.*

*I got to Mary's restaurant to tell her I'd bought the building, but she'd just clocked out like five minutes before I got there. But that didn't mean she'd left yet. She was in her car, playing with the CD player.*

*I told her the secret of the watch, and about its calibration. I told her I was leaving that night, and she said to give her some time, she'd think about it.*

*I wasn't sure if I would ever see her again.*

VIII.

*It took Mary six months to join me in the past. It was the longest six months I'd ever been through. She didn't tell me exactly what she'd told her parents, but they'd given her their blessings.*

*We were married that day in City Hall by a Justice of the Peace.*

*Mary found us a house that very afternoon, and we used the cash from my lottery winnings to buy it that same day. It was the first of many happy nights that we would share together for 29 wonderful years.*

IX.

*The years passed and Mary and I remained happy and comfortable. She helped me at the shop, and I was forever indebted to her for her wonderful recordkeeping. She was the salesman of the pawn shop; when there was someone pawning something for the first time, she explained everything and did everything she could to get them the best price. When an item was past the three month time period, she would talk a customer's ear off to get them to buy an item, even if it was something they didn't need.*

*She was amazing and I loved her more and more with each passing day.*

*We got to know many of the people in town we might not normally have, if wasn't for Mary talking to everyone who came in the store. And over time, more and more people would come in, just to talk to Mary.*

*But one day, after we'd been together for 29 years, she started feeling weak, and didn't really feel like eating anything, not even her favorite foods. She was 54 that year, i was 74, but feeling closer to the same age she was. I suggested she go to our family doctor for a physical. We had always both been healthy, but having a family doctor was important to us. She was a woman by mother had known when I was a kid in my original timeline, but when I was a kid, my mother didn't take me to the doctor. It was a waste of time according to her. Alcohol was a cure-all for Mom.*

*When Mary came back to the shop, she had bad news. The doctor really didn't know what was causing her fatigue and lack of appetite, and wanted her to check into the hospital. Mary didn't want to, but she never told me why she didn't.*

*We closed up the shop at 9 that night, and went out for a late dinner. Our bedtime ritual was always the same, and then we turned out the lights, said "I love you" to each other, and went to sleep.*



*Mary did not wake the next morning.*

X.

*I wanted a small funeral, but once word spread through our part of the city, several of the new friends that Mary had made over the years took charge, and thankfully, took the situation out of my hands and made all the arrangements for me.*

*I was in a fog for many many months. I would go to the shop and stay there for many days in a row. Sometimes I would only go home on the weekends, and my house and yard began to look pretty shabby.*

*And then one morning, a young man came into my shop just before I opened for the day, and told me it was important that he talk to me. I didn't think it was important, I wasn't really planning on talking to anyone that day.*

*After some hemming and hawing, this young man told me I should close my shop that particular Monday, because someone was going to try to kill me. I was all ready to argue with him, for who would want to kill a 75-year old man who really wasn't living as it was?*

*But when this young man told me he had "visions," and that he fixed watches for a living, I knew what had happened. This young man was me, and he, too, had been drawn to the watch I displayed in the window. But this man had figured out how it worked, and must have come from his future to warn me about what might happen in another timeline.*

*I went with this younger version of myself for a cup of coffee, and simply knew he'd already met Mary in one timeline or another, and was in love with her, just like I was.*

*I wish him and his Mary all my blessings that they find the same love I found with my Mary for all those years, and beyond.*

“Wow,” Joe said softly when Mary finished reading the last part she held in her hands. “I never knew.” Joe was glad to finally learn some of the things he’d always wondered about, but didn’t want to ask Mr. Joe the questions, afraid Mr. Joe would freak out again. *And he had good reason too*, Joe thought.

“And I promise to get my ass to the doctor regularly,” Mary said, and even though it was meant to lighten the mood, there was some serious meaning behind them.

“Part of me still wants to move into Mr. Joe’s house instead of selling it -- like a tribute to him or something.”

“No, that was the old Mr. Joe. You are you, and a different Joe. Just as I am a different Mary. We’ll sell his house, and live here. You can help me out in my bakery if you’d like,” she offered.

“Maybe I’ll just live off my lottery winnings. I took it as the annuity, and we do get a nice-size check every month, right?”

She playfully swatted him on the arm with the papers she still held.

“I do love you, Joe.”

“And I love you too, Mary.”

Joe put the two watches in a clear case that was designed to hold model cars, or something like that, and put them on display on a shelf above the TV.

The watches were the talk of their friends they'd made, and Mary's customers at Sweet Treats. Joe was called a romantic by even their most stoic friends, who insisted there was no way they could ever think of something so symbolic like that for their significant other.

One time, Joe even asked Bill about it one of the days Joe stopped in to Cuppa Java during a visit to Mary's shop.

"Why does everyone think it's sweet I gave Mary matching watches for our wedding?" he wanted to know.

"It's simple, Joe," Bill explained patiently, as Joe was now getting old, and Bill thought Joe needed things spelled out more. "You gave her the gift of time -- time with you. And since you also fix watches, if any of that time with you falters, you can fix it," Bill said with a smile.

Joe nodded in agreement.

"Huh," he said, astounded that people could read that much into something so... little. "Never thought of it that way," Joe admitted. "Thanks, Bill," he said, getting up and leaving a tip under the coffee saucer.

Joe nor Mary used the watches to travel in time, not since that last day Joe had gone back in time to save Mr. Joe's life. Time moved slowly forward on its own accord.

And before Joe knew it, he was in his early 70s, Mary in her early 50s.

He asked her every day how she was doing.

"I'm completely fine, Joe," she would reply, and go to the bakery to work her fondant magic on another new cake. She had the energy of someone half her age, and Joe wished he could share her enthusiasm she had every day.

It was morbid, but as he was reading old Mr. Joe's memoirs, he had noted the day Mr. Joe said his Mary had passed away, and Joe became more and more on edge as that day approached.

He had dinner waiting for her when she got home from work. When she took off her light jacket she'd worn, there was a faint flour cloud that followed after it.

"What's the occasion?" she asked, but she had a feeling she knew. Joe had confided in her what he'd read in the memoirs, and about the fateful day of her other self.

He shrugged, trying not to let her see that he was on edge and nervous about what the next day might bring. "Just thought I'd share a nice dinner with you tonight.

"I know what you're doing, Joe," she said. "I've accepted whatever happens tomorrow. It's not like going back in time would prevent me from aging.

He went to her chair at the table, and pulled it out for her.

She went over and stood at the chair, facing Joe. "I love you, you know," she said softly.

"I know," he said back, and kissed her.

She sat at the table as Joe served them a simple but delicious dinner of steak, potatoes and carrots.

Afterwards, they cleaned up together, and watched a silly romantic comedy movie on the DVD player.

It was late by the time they made love and finally went to bed.

"I love you," Mary whispered to Joe in the dark.

"I love you too," Joe said back, trying to sound normal.

When the morning came, a shaft of sunlight fell across their bed. And it was in this morning sunlight, she rolled over and kissed Joe awake.

He was awake instantly, and kissed her back.

"I love you," Joe said, and kissed her again.

"And I love you too," Mary said, the smile as bright as the sunlight that lit their room.

When Joe was 76 and Mary was 56, they went on a cruise for their 30th anniversary. It took some planning, but they used the watches together for their first time.

Their cruise was to the Bahamas, much like the one they took for their honeymoon.

And exactly like on their honeymoon, there was also a newly married couple on this cruise ship as well.

One night after dinner on the ship, Joe and Mary spotted the younger couple, sitting at a table only a few tables away from them. The younger couple leaned into each other, whispered something to each other, and then they kissed.

"We were so cute then," Mary said. "Do we want to go over and say hi?" she asked, mischievously.

Joe smiled at her. "Nah, let's let them have their time. We were like that once, you know," he said.

"We *were* them, you silly man," she said, and playfully swatted him on the arm. "We still are them," she added, leaning in to kiss him. He kissed her back, wrapping his arms around her.

"Want to head back to the cabin?" he whispered in her ear, causing her to shiver in anticipation as to what Joe might want to do in their cabin.

They got up from their table, and walked, arms around each others' waist, past the table where the younger couple sat together. As they passed by, Joe thought he heard the man whisper to his new bride,

"I hope that's us in 30 years."

After a pause, Joe heard the wife's reply,

"Oh, honey, I'm sure it will be."



housing development one-floor anyone As a boy young with wasn't sure got place it was Joe really a but he was bum I've hand-held who did was was the was it was got together a proposal rejected as a way few go something and back seemed like he close some called was ready for closer at When Hi Jeff didn't his time the it two he the raggedly Then didn't give One Two there several again suddenly had a heart attack and died and beyond and then released realised the catch up was an intern everything they weren't spend spilled and was the shop to leave certain like borrow people were using pushing so that was a day two the a but one now it was dark not a paper cup had to have been TV was upset someone agree sticks either So ate back when done they had been right then looking at again for own in a The when found test then the at one from the was a It and a extra women's there a all those headed get and on that day some of were was like seven not But wasn't sure might of Timecop, the of couldn't his foyer a person's life he tried in Each time he took it apart and put it back, it in those four days events and birds went with talk pulling out at his place was murdered stream Thursday to do and aware sure about that many almost could week write stopped existing once the past was changed, and that thought wondered groove another one testing this time the started buttons So it Well might piece was adjacent to the a trip over to got He even Crossed-Arms night a few minutes was most had If can in his tied to college asked either a little turned his The next day the day i learned about the murder the same day i stole the watch Somehow or two about does it to or a tells you asked this afternoon quite back to their at Unless he'd travelled back in time really Bill driving they Friday once and computers to email back it and woman saved the woman's husband young husband it also try to in public was who the from the first time second from the less... reliable actually away may his was whatever went on other legal -- legal When jewelry was stolen from ask someone morning two on her And a few supposed current himself they were what about asked ones they quit the person if it's were able to vigorously again one more The and He rattled off the numbers that had won the fill jackpot the night before. "Dude, you know these were the numbers won last night, right?" "Yeah, I know. Just my luck. But this is a weekly drawing, so maybe i'll get something next week, right?" "Sure, whatever, man," the clerk said, and will he also but it second the clerk unknowingly done for a day again a talked set could Three sets of night minus first 9:30 almost an hour the passed was him site Friday that was in the window watch as the they he had three do Jazzy has a fluffy tummy. Jazzy has a fluffy tummy! it's so fluffy, its a tummy. Its Jazzy's fluffy tummy.was in to A or bleeding street what it chimed usually to to see need I saw that There are are gave offered someone sudden said America In English time traveler mid-60 the time traveler slightly get knew past still there shop though was were phased out did this the may he Now, he'd come into the shop knowing he'd saved the owner of the shop, after he'd visited the shop. But it was yesterday at the crazy tempting fate and the audience be he high many to anything most ones If it was Which that as well as the person the process out was make \*add how pawn shop owner is killed \*change Murder in Legwarmers to have a conditional timeline \*add book with fixed timeline \*eventually: the time streams merge when Joe prevents shop owner's murder; reward is anything in the shop. Also: when takes the watch apart the first time, add something about a unique battery, so that when he does fix it, he can only go back in time 72 hours before it needs to charge 24 hours before it can be used again. managed about knocked in could do at that moment earlier see you in the morning was room act interrupted memoir born of about right the many let know was the this all that or in the tickets this on it mall pretty noted time whenever it became off from the current was not a ago could before that first time and a week before he claimed the watch A year was the he really wasn't here at all, but more of land he after realising he mentioned them for real if he around it sick he was for in her was to might not

take she him man it but store fixtures and that two things can't be in the same place at the same time, and house made earlier But Mr. two the So you had met someone that they all as looked the and it go in of use like moon for many the ocean salt cancer she when they She But and Suddenly, the time cops came up to Joe and put him in their burlap sack. Then they hit him over the head with frying pan. When he woke, he was in an underground lair and a voice old joe writes memoirs young joe and mary get married was now her Twice Upon a Cake it was Joe the moment she saw was it stodgiest that have a seat And it one the moved old joe dies at age 85 in the leaning pushed few so was who along last chapter - ending times it him out few front one of them fall when for the and words just sat facing that you were was many in her mid 30s went to Goodwill either encircled Most joe and mary find memoirs I mean a moment before *back pick didn't think that it* mary at age 55 -- older than previous mary -- joe is 75 that old whirlwind on