

THE LONG LOST FUTURE



Ian Cattell



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The Long Lost Future

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To Mom and Dad. Wherever they are now.

For anyone who's ever looked at the state of the world
and thought... 'Seriously? Are you kidding me?'

Thanks to enthusiasm provider and online joke-tester Mary-Ann Kent -
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Any similarity to persons living or
dead is probably synchronistic.
Perhaps...

...

Time is notoriously tricky stuff.

It's a pretty slippery concept for even the brightest of brainsteins. One of the most difficult concepts there is, in fact. Very hard to grasp indeed - in quite a number of ways.

Where does it come from? Where is it going? Why is it there? What, actually, is it?

Some of the tippy-toppest of top thinkers have even suggested that it doesn't actually exist; that time is an illusion caused by... er, well... they're not quite sure what it's caused by - let's just call it "energy" of some sort, that should cover it. Moving on...

It flows - though we don't know how, or why it chooses to flow in the direction it does; it can be stretched and warped - if luminaries like Roddenberry or Asimov are to be believed; it's very probably infinitely long - not that anybody's ever likely to measure it; it stops when you're in love - which is nice; it slows down when you're moving, and it speeds up when you're not - which is daft, surely.

It also slows down when you're *bored* and speeds up when you're not. And that simply has to be the wrong way round.

Someone should complain.

You can make it, you can save it, you can buy it, you can spend it, you can waste it, you can serve it, you can tell it, and you can run out of it.

But one thing you can't do is escape it.

Or so they say...

Chapter 1.

Randall James lay back on his bed staring absent-mindedly through the window at the sky. He couldn't actually see the sky - the rain was in the way - but he didn't mind; the steady drumming on his roof and gurgle of the gutter was relaxing, and had put him in a nostalgic mood. Happy memories of his school days were playing out in his mind.

Lying in a small boulder-field of self-inflicted biscuit crumbs, on his comfortable but worn out mattress, in the sock-strewn bedroom of his small but acceptably serviceable house on the outskirts of the averagely well-off district he lived in, he was relaxing at the end of a longish day, cheerfully remembering his reasonably happy time at the slightly above average school he'd attended.

He smiled as he remembered the certificates he'd been awarded on his last day. He'd got pretty good grades in the essentials - Penglish, Citizenship, and Media Studies - but as he walked across the stage to collect his recommended vocation from the careerbot, he knew he wouldn't be following its advice. The exciting life in advertising he was destined for didn't appeal to him very much.

Randall had other plans...

He was lucky enough to be a relatively wealthy man, that is to say, his relatives were quite wealthy and he was now a man, and he enjoyed the modest benefits of the moderately affluent - such as being able to avoid having his mind turned to mince working at GloboCo Media, for example.

The family money came largely from his long deceased grandfather, and to some extent his probably deceased father, who had both been successful inventors. In fact, as far as Randall could tell, his ancestral family line was scattered with intellectuals, scientists, and inventors, and he was quietly proud of the fact.

As he rolled over in bed, memories of the time he'd first studied his ancestry, as a gangly, acne ridden, twelve-year-old drifted across his mind. It was a rather odd project he had thought at the time; genealogy was something anyone could do if they had a terminal, and he didn't see much educational benefit in it, but he worked at it diligently anyway, as he always usually sometimes did. Perhaps his teacher, Mr. Han, inspired by Randall's illustrious recent ancestors, thought it would be useful to the class somehow.

Trawling through nearly six hundred years of computer records showed that until fairly recently his family were quite ordinary, but also quite ludicrously lucky over the generations...

According to the databases he'd managed to access, the luck appeared to start five

hundred and twenty-seven years ago, when his ancestor had escaped the utter devastation of the Earth Shifts by choosing that month to go to the newly established Starlight Hotel on the Moon. Had he been at home in California he would most certainly have died - along with the two billion or so others lost in the cataclysm.

It took a hundred and fifty years for the world to recover, and information about the period was unreliable to say the least, but the next notable record of his ancestors' exploits was every bit as fortunate.

Peter Stuart James had been living very happily with his latest wife in an expensive part of Rome for five years when a massive earthquake destroyed most of the city. He and his family would have been killed outright - had it not been for the fact that, once again, they weren't there at the time.

Peter had been something of an amateur historian, and had spent extensive periods in the Vatican Archive studying the history and catastrophic decline of the Catholic Church following the Earth Shifts. Strangely, however, just as he was about to publish his first historical paper (entitled, rather pompously, "The death of religion: Why Pope Boniface ¹ was assassinated") he suddenly upped sticks and went to live with family in New Los Angeles.

In fact, when Randall looked into it, he discovered that they'd left Rome only the day before the quake. "Lucky" isn't the word...

The fifty-odd years that followed Peter's miraculous escape, were filled with stories of bankruptcy magically being turned into fortunes, and vice versa - mostly vice. Allegations were rife. Nothing was ever proven, but that was only because the people involved were subtly persuaded not to look very hard. The sudden and unaccountable increases in the investigators' personal wealth at the time attested to that.

But then, a hundred and seventy years later, the world famous Zachary James developed the first version of what was to become Temporal Vortex Theory; further refined fifty years later by his grandson Jon Z. James, using the new mathematics of Prof. Hochinara. The Hochinara/James effect, of course, being the basis of Randall's grandfather's invention, the Temporal Splitter; a device that enables the viewer to get hazy images of actual events from the past - if the viewer is an authorised, appointed, government sanctioned historian, of course.

The only real anomaly in this long line of illustrious luminaries, limited lawbreaking, and lucky layabouts was his late - or at least no longer on time for anything - father, George James Junior, the actual inventor of the time-travel machine itself; who in most people's eyes was neither illustrious nor lucky. The jury was still out on the lawbreaking too.

George Jr's father - Randall's grandfather - George Z. James, was a mathematics genius who had intimately studied the works of his ancestral namesakes for decades, before finally coming up with his Temporal Splitter and opening up the past for inquisitive (but not too inquisitive) historians. It was only then, at the age of sixty, that he married his long time lab-assistant and subsequently fathered George James Junior.

¹ The Church desperately tried to update its image towards the end. Boniface was just *so* fourteenth century. And there'd already been eleven of them for Christ's sake.

He died eleven years later aged seventy-one, after his third stress induced heart attack.

George Jr, contrastingly, grew up to be "a bit of a fly-by-night" as Randall's mother called him (or "dodgy little bastard", as everyone else called him). Drinking, gambling, womanising, fighting, drugs, shady business deals... the list goes on. If he hadn't actually invented the time machine in a "stroke of genius" at the age of twenty-five he would have been a nobody. And so would Randall. Literally. His mother would never have married his father had it not been for the fame and the money, so Randall wouldn't even exist. Probably.

His dad, like Randall himself, had received a good education, and was no intellectual slouch, but - as is often the case with children of the rich and famous - he lacked ambition. He was cocky and he was arrogant, but he was famous; or, more accurately, infamous. His life was an endless litany of less than flattering news reports about his various nefarious exploits and shameless shenanigans.

Until the "revelation" that suddenly enabled him to build the first time-travel machine in human history, of course. Then everything changed.

How he did it was anybody's guess. He never told anyone while he was alive, and now that he was almost certainly dead he was even quieter on the subject.

The world went completely mental upon the announcement that he had "cracked it" and would produce a working time machine within six months. The press release was met in equal amounts with amazement, bafflement, ridicule, and scorn - but he worked them all like a pro.

Milking the media is a skill few are blessed with, but George Jr seemed to have been touched by angels in this respect. He was on air almost every night for weeks, squeezing the golden teat of celebrity for every last drop. He even appeared on Davdroid Dimblebot's rather appropriately named panel show, Question Time.

His natural charm oozed out of the vid-screens and into the collective mind of the world, and he even became the media's new darling to some extent - but however much he was questioned by the pundits, he tenaciously kept the secret to himself, and would only reveal the science behind his discovery *after* he had built the machine.

Which, surprisingly, he did.

Twenty-seven weeks and a new bride later, he announced that he and his undisclosed contractors had succeeded and were testing the machine. Further announcements would be forthcoming.

If the world went mental last time, this time it went totally fruitcake. The network was full of it. Every ad-board, net-feed, terminal and VidCast in the world featured pictures of George Jr - often accompanied by a suitably alliterative headline like: "Genius or Joke? Is George James Junior Genuine?"

Unfortunately, George then spent a few days getting quite recklessly out of his mind on certain rather expensive illicit compounds his new friends in the media had introduced him to, and after a celebratory drunken binge one evening he jumped into his new time machine, with a mad laugh and a cry of "I'll fuckin' show 'em", before disappearing forever in a blinding flash of light.

He had at least had the foresight to record "The Departure", as it became known, on NetCam for all the world to see, but the date he departed *to* was lost forever due to the chrono-computer blowing a whiskey infused fuse the instant he disappeared.

Fortunately - for Randall at least - this all happened about two months after his father's wedding to his mother, so Randall was well on the way to existence when his father "Departed".

That old school genealogy project was now open on Randall's terminal as he lay in bed at the end of the day feeling nostalgic for his childhood. He scrolled through the pages slowly, with a smile on his face, recollecting the exploits of his early ancestors. It felt good to take his mind off things occasionally, now he was so busy researching all the time.

Time. The one thing he theoretically had in abundance thanks to the dad he'd never met, and the one thing he was forbidden to meddle with.

The whole "Time-travel thing", as Randall dismissively referred to it, was mopped up by the World Police as soon as it happened. The remaining transceiver section of the machine was rather clumsily confiscated almost immediately; leaving severed cables, shattered components, and broken noses strewn all around the contractor's facility.

The technology was then heavily discredited. A disinformation campaign was set up to show that the NetCam video was a hoax, and that George Jr had fled the country to escape his debts to the notorious drugs baron known as "Emperor" Sorosa. Temporal Vortex Theory was subsequently attacked in the popular science journals and it was "proven" shortly afterwards that time-travel was totally impossible. The only people who knew the reality of time-travel from that day forward were his long departed dad, the WP, and possibly some of the very hastily silenced contractors - if they were still alive.

But he was going to change all that...

As far as anyone who'd met him could tell, Randall was a bit of an oddball; understandable given his father's disappearance and the subsequent notoriety, and it was an image he was all too happy to portray. He was polite and respectful, but he came across as a slightly shy kind of guy who was living frugally off family money, and who mostly kept himself to himself.

Caring nothing for fashion, or trends, or sports, or any of the other irrelevances thrown up by his world, he lived a quiet little life in his quiet little house, carefully keeping his secret research hidden from the WP.

What nobody knew - because he made sure they didn't - is that he studied hard on the quiet. He read all his progenitors' works, published and private. Even though most of them had been banned he eventually managed to obtain a complete set. He got good at maths and electronics. He loved physics. He ate it and breathed it and he was going to recreate his father's greatest (and only) invention.

If only his dad had kept some records...

It was as if he'd simply clicked his fingers one day and schematics for the time

machine magically appeared before him in a puff of fairy dust. There were no detailed theoretical descriptions, no notebooks, no rough diagrams on the backs of napkins, no invoices or receipts, and nothing in his diary apart from an entry on the day of the discovery which simply read: "Well that was interesting".

The only other record, apart from the video, was a note written about two hours before the Departure that Randall's mother kept from the World Police by the simple expedient of hiding it in her knickers. He was slightly less drunk and a bit more coherent when he wrote it, but it still didn't make much sense. It was a lot of barely decipherable scribbling about his "amazing revelation", and how the whole thing came to him one afternoon while he was smoking cannabis with an unnamed friend. No details about what actually came to him though, just hyperbole and bluster, but there was an interesting line towards the end of the note that read: "If I'm right, my son will know in twenty-five years".

This cryptic remark had always interested Randall. Firstly, because at the time of the Departure not even his mother knew she was pregnant, and secondly because twenty-five was the age of his father when he Departed.

With a couple of blinks, he closed the old school project down and switched his terminal to Emergency Communications Only mode, or "Ecom", the closest equivalent to "Off" that it would allow. It was his twenty-fifth birthday tomorrow - correction, today, it was already past midnight - so he would perhaps get some answers soon enough.

He awoke briefly only once in the night, when his terminal flashed him the emergency message that his credibility and standing in society would be in serious jeopardy unless he bought GloboCo's new nano-carbon infused socks and boxers set immediately.

It was a justified emergency because the 10% offer was only available until 8.30 am.

Chapter 2.

In the most luxurious hole in the ground in the world, in a perfectly clean, perfectly warm, perfectly adorned bedroom, in a bed that was softer and cooler and more sumptuously comfortable than any other double divan anywhere on the planet, the secretly richest man in the world finally slept the sleep of the righteous.

Almost.

It had been a big day, and it took some time for him to get to sleep because tomorrow was going to be an even bigger day - the penultimate point in the start of the culmination of the end of his life's work, in fact - and the adrenaline had only recently finished coursing through his veins.

Lying there for more than an hour on his majestic mattress, he hadn't, like Randall, been staring out of the window. But only because holes in the ground don't have windows. He had instead been staring at an ancient and now highly illegal device with a faintly glowing screen; a window of a different sort.

Eventually, he laid the device carefully on his bedside table, rolled over in bed, and began dreaming of the ancient past...

... and of his place in it.

It's a good job you can't hear the snoring. Jeez...

Chapter 3.

The next day, Randall woke up a year older.

He showered, shaved, and the other thing beginning with "sh" carefully, rather than his usual half-arsed morning scramble. He was having the day off, and nothing was going to get him thinking about the time machine, or his father, or any of that stuff.

After briefly switching on his terminal to thank the few of his friends who had bothered for their kind words on his birthday - all of them very thoughtfully generated automatically by their own terminals - he switched it to ECom, and prepared to go shopping.

His clothes were getting a bit threadbare, as is often the way with obsessed people, and his house was in need of some new furniture. A visit to The Store ² was in order. Normally he would have made all his purchases through his terminal, but today he was determined to get out and meet people for a change, so he smartened himself up as much as was possible with the limited wardrobe available to him and prepared to go shopping. Even so, he still ended up looking like his clothes had been glued on by a blind monkey in boxing gloves. In a hurricane.

Sticking down the annoying clump of morning-hair that always stuck out at a right angle from his head with spit (even *after* showering, somehow), he put on his tatty jacket and left the house. Almost immediately the hair sprang back into its more customary perpendicular position.

The plan was to have a nice lunch at one of The Store's restaurants and be back home for the early afternoon, when he could install his furniture and try on his new clothes. Then, later on, he would invite his few friends over for a pleasant evening, drinks, and maybe some sex.

It was at the restaurant that his day, and indeed the rest of his life, changed. Well, he wanted to meet people...

With his clothes and trinket purchases tempting him from under the table, he sipped his Water+ (wetter than water - from GloboCo) and waited for his food to arrive.

² 'The Store' now being the only retail chain store available on Earth. Five centuries of piratical corporate mergers had resulted in a behemoth world-girdling retail mega-corporation with a compound name so unwieldy, with so many hyphens and little bits of the original names of the corporations all jumbled together like a random Scrabble game, that they could no longer fit it onto the letter heads. Rebranding as 'The Store' was the result of a two-year series of focus group consultations and marketing think-tank brain-storming sessions.

The Store was swallowed whole by GloboCo the following year, but they wisely chose not to spend another twenty million credits thinking up a new name.

Ordering Water+, rather than a GloboCola or a Gloopy-Shake, was an unusual choice, and garnered the occasional snooty look from the small gaggle of waiterbots gathered by the bar, but Randall wasn't a fan of overly sweet drinks, preferring the subtler taste of Water+ which had only a miniscule two grams of Aspartosweet in it.

He had chosen the old fashioned restaurant of the four available, and would have to wait for up to five minutes before his genuine hand microwaved meal was brought to his table. He didn't mind, he was prepared to wait an otherwise unacceptable five minutes for the historical theme of the decor.

Old artefacts from the last few hundred years of Earth's history were tastefully displayed all over the walls and ceiling. They even had an authentic pre-shift device from the twenty-first century on the wall by the kitchen entrance. It was a gadget he was somewhat familiar with, called a "Smart Phone", which was a sort of primitive early terminal, although not implanted like today's; you couldn't implant something that size. He wondered, and not for the first time, how they managed back then with all the bulky devices they had to carry around.

An interest in history was another offshoot of that old school project he so fondly remembered. The middle-early period - from the late twentieth through the mid twenty-first centuries - was his speciality, and he was quite knowledgeable about the technology of the time. It fascinated him with its embryonic versions of the devices that had now become integrated and implanted.

Unfortunately, knowledge of the period was a bit sketchy. Not a lot of the digital information from that era had survived because it was before the invention of permanent quantum drives, but he had himself managed to unearth some old data from something of that time called, rather strangely, "Facebook". Although it was illegal, it was still possible to buy ancient devices recovered from Earth Shift excavations when they came up at underground auctions, and if you were devoted and had the time, it was sometimes possible to recover data from them.

Randall had done exactly that, and discovered some "posts" on "Facebook". There were three of them in all. Two were in the form of the Japanese (remember them?) Haiku; still a popular poetry form today. He had the full text of the first poem, but it annoyed him that he was missing the end of the last word from the second. They read:

Sleep is elusive.
Haiku poems fill my mind,
but not very good ones.

... and...

The apples are small.
The bananas, not yet ripe,
are pricey. Waitros...

The third post, recovered from the same device, read:

You know you're getting old when shaving takes longer because you have to do your ears :)

If only he could find the name of the owner of the device, he could perhaps do some research and discover more about the context of the posts, because they seemed rather dour and depressing to Randall. Perhaps they were comments by a sad old man nearing the end of his life, lamenting the degeneration of his body and the passing of his intellect. The strange punctuation at the end of the third post seemed to corroborate his theory, but he would probably never know.

As he was mulling over these thoughts, his baked potato with Cheez (now with added Preservamite - from GloboCo) arrived at his table. It took six minutes rather than the advertised five, and he was within his rights to complain, but he was in a good mood and decided to let it go. He cleansed his palate with a sip of Water+ and was about to tuck in, when he was politely but insistently disturbed by a tall elderly gentleman with rather shockingly long grey hair.

He wore old fashioned but obviously well-made clothing, rather refined looking actually, but the long hair in a pony-tail was letting him down badly. Men didn't wear their hair long anywhere other than in historical photographs. He looked like a fool, and an old fool at that.

'Randall James?' enquired the man, pulling out the chair opposite Randall and making motions to sit down. 'I'm Marcus Han,' he said, waving away a stray hair from his face. 'It's a pleasure to meet you. I believe you're acquainted with my brother.' He sat down.

Randall nearly spat his Water+ all over the intruder, but the facial similarity to his old schoolteacher was quite striking now that he looked; and although it was a huge breach of etiquette to pull out a chair and sit down at a stranger's table, he managed to swallow his drink and shake the proffered hand.

'We need to talk,' said Han urgently, before Randall even had time to construct an opening sentence. 'I've been looking forward to this for over thirty years.'

'What? Meeting me? You must be misinformed, Mr Han,' replied Randall. 'Today is my twenty-fifth birthday; you couldn't possibly have been looking forward to meeting me for thirty years.'

'Over thirty years,' said Han. 'Thirty-one to be precise. Ever since I was assigned to your dad in fact.'

Randall was instantly suspicious. He leaned back in his chair. 'What are you? WP? Secret Service?'

'No, no, nothing like that,' replied Han, holding up his hands and looking around nervously. 'And I'll thank you to keep your voice down. The last thing we want is the World Police onto us.'

'Us? We? What do you mean, we? I've only just met you and you're making no sense at all. I don't think there's any call to be using words like "we". I don't even know you.'

'You will. And quite well. And by tonight *we* will have embarked on a journey

together that you couldn't possibly imagine in your wildest dreams.'

Randall leaned forward, relaxing slightly. 'Is this something to do with time-travel?' he asked quietly, as some of the pieces began dropping into place in his mind.

'Yes, Randall. It's something to do with time-travel,' said Han with a huge grin on his face.

A short while later, after repeatedly and rather embarrassingly calling him "Mr Han" on the journey home, Randall felt more at ease and had started to call him Marcus.

They entered Randall's home. Han looked around briefly.

'You could do with some new furniture,' he said, matter-of-factly.

'Yes, well, that was kind of the plan for today, Marcus.'

'Yes I know,' he said, also matter-of-factly.

Randall resisted the urge to raise his hand in the air before asking the next question, something he'd already done twice on the way home. 'What do you mean you know? How could you possibly know my plans for today?' he demanded.

'The same way I knew you'd be at the restaurant. It's all in The Book.'

This time Han was not matter-of-fact. He looked like he was tiptoeing on lit-up lightbulbs, and had a worried, inquisitive look on his face; like this could go one of two ways.

Randall looked him in the eye for a second. The brow above it raised slightly.

'Okay. I'm not rising to your cryptic melodramas any more,' he said. 'Why don't I pour us both a drink and you can tell me all about it?'

Han relaxed, it had gone the way he wanted.

Randall didn't normally drink alcohol during the day, even on his birthday, but this wasn't an ordinary day, or even an ordinary birthday. He grabbed a bottle of Gin, some tonic, two glasses, and directed Han to the threadbare sofa in his cramped and untidy lounge.

'Can I see your shed?' enquired Han, excitedly, as Randall passed him a glass, made a space on the table barely big enough for a bottle, and put the bottle in it.

'Do you want any ice in that? And what's my shed got to do with it?' asked Randall.

'You probably won't have any ice, and everything,' said Han, back to matter-of-fact mode.

Randall went to the kitchen to look in his fridge. 'Okay. Talk,' he said, after confirming that he did indeed have no ice.

Marcus took a deep breath and looked Randall straight in the eye. 'You're not the original Randall James,' he said, bluntly. 'You are in fact the second iteration of Randall James, just as I am the second iteration of Marcus Han and most people are the second iterations of themselves.'

'Iteration,' said Randall.

'That's right. You're familiar with the term "grandfather paradox"?''

Randall nodded.

'Well you can think of our situation as a great-great-great-grandfather paradox. Or something similar. Much worse than a simple grandfather paradox anyway. The

mother of all grandfather paradoxes you might say. The fate of the world rests on our shoulders.'

'Grandfather,' said Randall.

'Yes. We have to travel back in time and alter the future, which is of course our past, and we will do it because we've already done it in the other timeline.'

'Future,' managed Randall.

'No, the past. Are you okay?' asked Han. 'You sound like a defective echo.'

'Oh I'm fine,' replied Randall, snapping out of it. 'Peachy. I've just been told I'm not actually myself and that I am, in fact, a sort of copy of an original time-travelling hero version of me whose fate it is to save the world. Why wouldn't I be okay? And anyway, what's wrong with the world? It doesn't seem like it needs any saving to me.'

'No, it doesn't *seem* that way, but to be honest your thoughts are not your own, and never really have been. You've been trained, just as everyone else has, to think in a certain way that has forever blinded you to the...' he trailed off. Now wasn't the time and he could see Randall wasn't buying it. 'Just believe me when I say you'll understand when you read The Book,' he said.

Randall was doubtful. 'What book? You keep going on about this book like it's sacred or something.'

'This book,' said Han, producing a slim device from his jacket pocket.

'I know that. That's a... a Kandle isn't it?'

'Kindle,' said Han. 'And yes, it is. I'm glad my brother managed to get you interested in history. You're going to need it where we're going.'

Two hours later Randall still hadn't read The Book. They were standing in the shed at the end of the garden, and Han was excited.

'To think this is where it all happened,' he said for the seventeenth time, enthusiasm exuding from every pore.

'Happened?' said Randall, who had caught up with the overall scheme of things but was still quite vague on most of the details.

'You know what I mean,' replied Han. 'Going to be happened, or used to be happened, or something. I never was very good at temporal linguistics.'

'Apparently,' said Randall, who had been reduced back down to single word answers when confronted by Han's exuberance.

So far, Randall had worked out the following things:

1. In an alternate and no longer existent timeline, a family of inventors and scientists, the James family, took it upon themselves to develop a means to time-travel into the past to undo some catastrophic errors made by the people of that era. This destroyed their own timeline and created the alternate one Randall was now living in. This didn't surprise him as much as he thought it should.

2. He would be the one who, along with Marcus Han, would actually travel back to the twenty-first century. He knew this because his counterpart from the lost timeline had done so, and to "ensure the time loop doesn't collapse" (Han's phrase) they must

do so too. He had a lot of questions about this. Worrying ones. An infinite number of increasingly furious looking Randall's were shouting at him in his imagination.

3. Marcus Han, although clearly quite elderly, had almost limitless energy. And it was starting to get annoying.

'Let's go back to the house,' said Randall eventually, after watching Han walk around touching things and exclaiming, "Well, well" and, "Who'd have thought it" for the last ten minutes.

Back in the lounge Randall asked one of the questions he'd been meaning to ask for most of the evening, though he strongly suspected he knew the answer already. And it wasn't a good one.

'So what happens if we don't go back?' he said.

Han glared at him. 'That,' he said, emphatically, 'is something I wouldn't care to speculate about.'

'You don't know?' Randall almost shouted. *He* had a pretty good idea of the consequences, so Marcus must surely know *something* about it.

'Not for certain no. The theory isn't entirely clear on this point, but according to the mathematics we've figured out so far there are three possibilities,' he said. 'One - and this is a very low probability, hardly worth mentioning in fact - nothing happens and we live out our lives as we would have done before. The time loop heals over and the world keeps turning. Two - higher probability - everything we know disappears and the world instantly snaps back to the original timeline. And you wouldn't want that to happen, let me tell you.'

'Why? What's wrong with it?' Randall interrupted.

'Why do you think the original you wanted to go back and change history?' Han replied. 'They were living in some kind of squalid hell hole bunker in their timeline. Do you see much evidence of squalor, hell, holes, or bunkers around you now?'

Randall paused for a moment, thinking. 'But that must mean that they, I mean we, fixed it. Dawkins knows ³ this world isn't perfect, but it works okay. Why should we go back in time and risk messing things up? This world isn't so bad.'

'Because the world isn't fixed, it's just different. And because of the third and by far the most probable outcome if we don't.'

'Which is?' Randall thought he knew the answer but wanted to hear it from Han.

'The instant and total annihilation of the entire Milky Way Galaxy!' he said, managing somehow to pronounce the exclamation mark as he did so.

That wasn't the answer Randall had been expecting at all. The sudden shocked expression on his face gradually gave way to an increasingly furrowed brow. 'The whole Galaxy? I thought maybe the planet, or possibly the solar system... but the Galaxy? Why? How can a localised effect alter reality so much?'

'Time paradoxes are tricky things, Randall. They start off localised to the immediate vicinity of the paradox, but the subsequent paradoxes caused by that location's sudden

³ Like "God knows" but more up to date.

non-existence starts a cascade effect in the Thornhill field ⁴ that ends up short circuiting the intergalactic plasma medium.'

Randall's blank stare spoke eloquently about how much of the last sentence he had understood. Marcus pretended not to notice and ploughed on regardless.

'The maths is complicated, but I assure you it's the most probable outcome. Think of it as a huge computer circuit that suddenly blows a capacitor in one small section. It may only be a tiny defect amongst a billion components, but the computer as a whole will fail. Rather than repair it, we would probably throw the computer away, and it seems the universe does something similar. At least that's what the numbers say.'

Han left a few moments for this to sink in and then said, 'It's all in The Book.'

'Which I haven't had time to read yet,' said Randall, pointedly.

'I know,' Han replied, reaching for his jacket. 'It's time for me to go. We have a busy day tomorrow and you need to rest. Happy birthday by the way.'

'Thanks,' said Randall. What else could he say?

⁴ Named after 21st century physicist Wal Thornhill, who received a posthumous Nobel prize in 2064 - after all the orthodox opponents to the electric universe theory had finally died.

Chapter 4.

Elsewhere - if that's the correct word to describe a field of potential that exists beyond the material universe, where "where" has no real meaning - a mind slowly stirred into awareness. If you could apply the word "slowly" to an event taking place outside of the constraints of time, of course.

From a state of total blankness, utter oblivion, the mind gradually became aware of something. What it was, the mind couldn't tell. It was very bright, and very big, and awareness of it was definitely happening in some form or another, but it struggled with the recognition of the thing it was becoming aware of, and of how it was that it was aware of that thing in the first place. It was something it couldn't comprehend yet, but it was trying.

The realisation that it could sense itself trying, feel the awareness developing, was a revelation to the mind. It could only mean that there were now two things it was aware of: the thing that was there before, and now its own awareness of that thing. The difference between those two things, the mind now realised, could even constitute a third thing, and it paused to consider that conundrum. The considering of the conundrum was the fourth thing it became aware of, and that's when it started to get complicated.

The fact that it was now able to count the things it was aware of became the fifth thing it was aware of, but then, as the numbers grew ever larger, they started to interact with each other, flying off in all sorts of directions, and the mind became lost in them.

Numbers, seemingly, were everywhere.

It was puzzled.

The mind realised that it was using something called "words" to do the puzzling with, and it puzzled over that too. Very quickly, it noticed that the words were occurring one after another, in a sort or sequence that evolved in a linear fashion, and it puzzled even further about that.

Eventually - if that word has any real meaning in this context - a new word popped into its awareness. It was the word "time", and the mind recognised instantly that that was what was now suddenly happening to it; "time" had started to "flow". The next question was, where from? And more importantly, where to? Also, how did it know that? And why was it happening "now"?

Immediately, the mind became aware that it had a memory; a store of its previous experiences. It recalled again the instant of waking, when there was only one thing it was aware of, and it replayed the whole unfolding of its experience from that moment, analysing each new revelation again.

The analysis quickly doubled, and then tripled, the number of things it was aware of, and it started to get terribly confused. The number of things, and the number of relationships between those things, became too enormous.

As more and more concepts, and questions, and scraps of awareness impinged upon the mind, it quickly became overwhelmed and began again from the beginning.

'What was the thing I was originally aware of?' asked the mind, of itself.

... (***I**? What does **that** mean?*) ...

'It was everything that isn't me,' it replied, again to itself.

'What do I call everything else? Does it have a name?' came the next question, almost unbidden from the depths of the mind's... mind.

... (*'Come to think of it, do **I** have a name?'*) ...

'The Universe,' came the answer, from yet another part of the mind; presumably somewhere in the memory, which seemed to be a lot bigger than it should be, given the limited length of its awareness so far.

He began to poke around in its depths...

... (*'He? I'm **Male**?'*) ...

More questions, but fewer answers, followed. Only one thing was certain - he was outside the universe!

The panic of realisation that he must immediately get back into the universe rose unbidden from the depths of his psyche, completely overwhelming him, and he began to move as fast as he could towards it.

Which was pretty damn fast.

... (*'I **think** I begin with a **G**.'*) ...



Chapter 5.

This book is for the eyes of Randall James II.

'A promising start,' thought Randall, 'already I'm Randall James II. Not the original. Not the first. Not the one that was supposed to be. No, I'm just one of a number of Randall James's. Which, if I'm right, could eventually turn into an infinite supply.'

The anticipation made his hands tremble. He steadied himself with a sip of Gin and read on...

I am Randall James, the re-inventor of the time machine. Believe me, I know how you must feel. It must have been a very strange day for you. Happy birthday by the way.

Randall began to wish complete strangers would stop wishing him a happy birthday. Even if one of them was himself.

If I'm right and the changes we made to the twenty-first century pan out as we hoped, then you should be living in a reasonably calm and stable world. If you're not, then we tried our best, I'm sorry. It can't be any worse than the planet we lived on.

I have no idea about your personal circumstances, but if our plan comes to fruition, you should have a strong interest in history and be well versed in Temporal Dynamics, Vortex Theory, Chrono-matrices and the rest. In fact, if you're reading this then you must be well acquainted with those disciplines. Excuse me, it's hard for me to get my head around sometimes, you know?

Of course you do. You're me. Or rather, I'm you.

Sorry. I'll start again.

'This needs a drink,' said Randall to himself. With shaky hands he poured himself another from the half empty Gin bottle on the table. His ECom messages had been ignored. He would explain to his friends another day. Tonight he was keeping his terminal as Off as he could get it...

The world we lived on was a man-made hell. For twenty-five years I lived in one of only seven giant bunker-cities, dotted around the globe, that were the remains of our once great civilization. Ours was called Oceania, and we were three hundred miles from the nearest open water. The surface was virtually uninhabitable. The oceans were dead. The rivers, dried up. The forests were all but gone. The air was virtually unbreathable, and life wasn't worth living. Hope was long since dead.

Wars, over consumption, conspiracies, pollution, and natural disasters had brought

humanity's numbers down to under a billion, and we lived like cockroaches squabbling over the meagre resources remaining. Some of us aspired to live like cockroaches. That's how bad it was.

There were a hundred and fifty million of us crammed into Oceania. There was no privacy. There was not enough food. There was disease, there was crime, and there was death.

Except for the elites. They lived like gods in their fortified palaces.

Our ancestors screwed up, badly. Beginning sometime in the late twentieth century, the governments and corporations of the world were gradually taken over by a super-rich, criminal-elite, who raped the planet for profit and cared nothing for the biosphere. They poisoned the populace with artificial food and brainwashed them with insidious propaganda until they were too weak and too stupid to do anything about it. They tore down mountains and dried up oceans in their ridiculous quest for profit. Nothing was sacred.

They took control of everything. The criminals at the top owned the whole world and everyone on it. A Global Police force kept us subservient and afraid of our neighbours. Pointing out corruption became a crime. Protesting became a crime. Growing your own food became a crime. Even collecting rainwater became a crime. Eventually, having children became a crime - unless you passed the test.

Except for the elites. They bred like rabbits. And they fought like rats...

Randall was entranced and horrified in equal measure. He read on, even though it was late and he was half drunk. His eyes were affronted by page after page of horror stories about this hellish other world that chilled him to the core. More so because the descriptions of their Global Police were spookily similar to the system currently running the show on Earth. The WP weren't as demoniacally corrupt or brutal, not by a long way, but they were similar nonetheless.

He read of his "other" father's disappearance during the testing of their first machine, and how the original Randall had devoted his life to perfecting his work.

Yes. Eerily similar.

He poured himself another drink, most of which actually did end up in the glass somehow, and read on.

... and then, on my twenty-fifth birthday, I was introduced to Marcus - my old teacher's brother, my soon-to-be travelling companion, and friend.

My commander picked him for a number of reasons, not least of which was his incredible historical knowledge; the man is a walking library. He and his ancestors would be our way out of the paradox that would ensnare us if we went ahead with our plan.

Don't worry, you'll understand soon. Your Marcus will explain tomorrow.

So we decided to change the world. Erase it. Wipe that misery out of existence. It was a difficult and dangerous thing to do, for sure, but we were desperate.

Working in total secrecy it took six generations to complete our task. But our family's sacrifice will never be recognised; only the commanders of the resistance knew about our work, and they don't exist anymore. They knowingly ended their own existence and that of all of humanity to escape that hell.

I don't know what kind of world you live in, Randall; I don't even know for sure that you will ever read this, I can only hope. The Han family will be a great help, but even they might not be able to steer events with as much precision as we will need, and their own paradox might come back to haunt us. Again, I can only hope.

You have much work to do. In just six months you must join us here in the twenty-first century and begin the task of altering the future. All the theory and plans for the time machine are contained in the hidden library. Study them well.

If you're anything like me, which I think you must be, then you will be full of questions and probably quite afraid. Don't worry, your questions will be answered, and your fears allayed. But you must know this: you have no future in your current timeline. Your destiny is to live out your life in the twenty-first century and I'm afraid there's nothing you can do about it.

It's not so bad here. Once you get used to the smell.

I'm sorry to have to do this to you, Randall, I really am. But there is no other way. You and Marcus are the two most important people in the world. You must learn to trust him as I have learned to over the last few years.

You cannot fail. The world, and the future, depends upon it.

Randall James - November 5th 2017.

Randall had never really been in a proper state of shock before. It was most unpleasant. He drained his glass, filled it again, and tried to get his thoughts straight.

So many questions. So many variables. So many ways this could go really badly wrong. What if they got caught? The WP would feed them into the algae tanks if they found out what they were up to. Sliced and diced. What would happen to this timeline when they go back? Will it just disappear, like the last time?

"The last time". Strange how a simple phrase can change its meaning so much in just a few hours.

Who was the mysterious Marcus Han really? How did his ancestry fit into all this? Will they be able to build the time machine in time? What will they do when they get to the past? What will happen when he meets his other self? Will he even like himself?

He realised openly what he had known subconsciously for the past few hours: he was resigned to going into the past. He had no choice if he wanted the Milky Way to continue existing. It would be churlish in the extreme to destroy an entire galaxy out of spite.

Switching off the light, he lay back on his bed and knew, half-drunk as he was, that he wouldn't be able to sleep.

Two hours later his terminal flashed an ECom message to him informing him of the relaxing benefits of GloboCo's new Zombinol easy to swallow sleeping aid tablets. He blinked on the "Order Now" button. It looked like he might need them in the coming weeks.

Half an hour after that he was sent an advert for a psychotherapist for some reason.

The next day, at the crack of 11:37, Marcus Han showed up at the house. Randall had finally roused himself just after eleven am, gone through bleary-eyed ablutions,

and was clearing a space in his kitchen to make coffee.

To test a theory, one of many he had formulated during a restless night, he made two cups of coffee. As soon as he'd poured the second cup, his terminal lit up and showed a picture of a smug looking Marcus Han outside his front door.

He blinked on "Open door" and shouted, 'Do you take whitener or sweetener?' He could be smug too.

'No thanks, Randall. I like my coffee as it comes. I see you're beginning to put some of the pieces together. Well done.'

'I have a lot of questions, Marcus. But I suspect you know what they are already,' said Randall, trying to tease some details out of him.

'To some extent yes,' said Han, taking his coffee and raising an eyebrow at the smell. 'The six months our counterparts spent together was documented in great detail, and although we are different people living in a different timeline, we will share many of those experiences with them to differing degrees. It seems the similarity in events is especially great when it comes to those intimately concerned with the potential paradox, so you and I are thoroughly entangled in both timelines. My great-great-grandfather called it Vertical Timeline Synchronicity, but then he always did like high-falutin' terminology. I call it Slippage.'

'Slippage?'

'Yes. It seems there's a connection on the sub-quark level between ourselves and our other selves. This causes significant life events to "slip" between timelines. Yesterday was significant for you, that's how I knew you would be in the restaurant and that you would have no ice in your fridge, because that's how it transpired in the other timeline.'

'Quark,' managed Randall. *Damn*, he thought. It was happening again.

'The details are different of course. In their timeline the restaurant was a café used by the resistance, but it was in the exact physical location that our restaurant is today. In their timeline they went back to "your" quarters and "you" had no ice for the home brewed hooch they drank. Their shed was actually a walled off and hidden section of Oceania that the resistance used as a laboratory, but it was where your shed is now.'

'And they spent six months recreating the time machine together,' said Randall, finally breaking the monosyllabic spell. 'So we have to do the same?'

'That's about the shape of it.'

Randall's brow furrowed as another query formed in his head. Marcus could see the thoughts coalescing but waited until he was about to speak before pre-empting him.

'I know you're worrying about there eventually becoming an infinite number of you, but that isn't how it works,' he began.

'When we go back, we'll give details of our history to our other selves and tell them how our timeline turned out. They incorporate that data into their plans, and with our help a new timeline will evolve from that point, hopefully a better one. Each loop, the equivalent Randall and Marcus of that timeline should live in increasingly better societies.'

Randall's face was a mask of incredulity. Marcus judged the probability of the next

question containing either the word "paradox" or "infinities" to be a certainty, so he ploughed on before he could ask it.

'It may take a few loops before we create the society humanity deserves, but at that point, when our last counterparts travel back from a perfect world for the last time, there will be no need for any extra intervention and so the loop can be gradually broken over time. The other "me" won't pass on any information to my ancestors and so our families will continue as they would have done without intervention. The likelihood of us interacting, or even existing, six hundred years later is infinitesimal. The slippage will cease, time-travel won't be invented, and the paradoxes will resolve naturally.'

'It all sounds terribly risky.' Randall really wasn't sure about any of this. "Terribly risky" was his polite way of saying "Totally bonkers".

'More so if we break the loop now, that would be disastrous.' Which was Marcus's polite way of saying "Utterly catastrophic for the future of humanity and the entire Galaxy".

Randall was deep in thought. *Time for some good news*, thought Marcus.

'This time round, of course, we have the plans for the machine, so it'll be easier for us,' he said.

Randall's thoughts rose from the depths and broke the choppy surface. 'But when you taught my father how to build his machine you knew he'd die in the Departure six months later, didn't you?'

'He's not dead, Randall,' replied Han. 'He's just not here anymore.'

'You know what I mean. You knew he'd disappear never to be seen again.'

'Yes, I knew. But it's not my place to be changing the course of events. He disappeared in the other timeline, so he had to disappear in this one too. Time has a sort of momentum, it was inevitable. Although this time around he did rather shout his mouth off to the world, unfortunately. Caused a few problems for me that did.'

'So tell me about your family, Marcus,' said Randall, after a short, tense, pause. 'How have they interfered in my family history? I presume the miraculous escapes of my ancestors are something to do with your ancestors, correct?'

'Yes, Randall. Our families have been intertwined for over six hundred years. Your very existence in this timeline is down to my family and ultimately to me. Right from the moment when my ancestor persuaded yours to go to the Moon to avoid the Earth Shifts, up to when I introduced your father to your mother and inspired him to build his machine. My granddad taught yours how to build the Temporal Splitter. My six times great granddad worked with Zachary James to develop Temporal Vortex Theory.'

'But that's a paradox,' cried Randall. 'That isn't how it happened in the original timeline. They worked out those things for themselves in a desperate attempt to end their suffering.'

'Yes it's a paradox. But apparently not a serious one. Originally, my family's only contribution was my other self, who travelled back with "you" to the twenty-first century. "My" contribution was to instigate the changes that needed to be made to society and then to pass on all of my information about the future to my ancestor. "I"

made sure they were wealthy enough to look after the passage of your family through time.

'We intervened as little as possible in the beginning, only saving your ancestors from crises that might otherwise have resulted in the extinction of your family line. But then we realised that our Zachary James was never going to discover Temporal Vortex Theory on his own. Though he was a genius in his own right, he wasn't focused on the problem of time in our reality. My forbear, Enoch Han, coaxed Zachary, and little-by-little he got him thinking about the problem.

'Eventually, they formulated the theory together. Only then did Enoch tell Zachary of his real identity. Enoch insisted that his name be removed from the authorship of the paper and Zachary got all the credit. He was sworn to silence of course. As was your father and grandfather.'

'And your family has intervened ever since,' said Randall, 'nudging the development of time-travel in the right direction so that we could eventually repeat our journey.'

'Not repeat, Randall. Remember, that other timeline winked out of existence as soon as they changed their past and created our present. It doesn't exist except as a quantum possibility in the Vortex.'

'Again, a paradox...' Randall interjected.

Marcus cut him off with a gesture. 'Paradox is a word you'll hear a lot over the coming months. You'd better get used to it. Come on, drink up, we have to go.'

'Go where?'

'To my place. I have something to show you,' said Marcus. He didn't drink his coffee.

Twenty minutes later they arrived at Marcus's place, although "place" was probably the wrong word. "State" or "shambles" were more appropriate words to describe the derelict, ramshackle, mess that confronted Randall. "I'm not fucking going in there" would be on the tip of your tongue too.

'Don't be fooled by the shabby building in front of you, Randall,' said Han. 'My place is around the back. It's quite safe.' Randall didn't hold out much hope.

They walked along a dank corridor on the ground floor past half a dozen doors in various states of disrepair. The scent of decay was prominent, but didn't completely dispel the odour of stale urine which predominated. One door advertised a discreet massage service. Randall chose not to speculate about what kind of massage one might receive there; or how likely one was to survive it without being infected with a difficult to explain and embarrassing ailment; or ending up in a number of iced boxes ready for the organ transplant black market; or at least three other things he was desperately trying to stop his imagination from going into in too much detail about.

It was a huge old building, converted at some point in the past (maybe two hundred years ago, thought Randall) into flats. The stonework looked sound but was thoroughly dilapidated, fitting in well with the rest of the neighbourhood, which was also fairly low rent. As they reached the end of the corridor Han took out a bunch of keys and opened the grubby door of the flat they had stopped in front of.

'I have to maintain the illusion of poverty to allay suspicion,' he said as they entered

the flat.

'You're doing a very good job,' replied Randall, looking around. 'The mould on the ceiling is a particularly nice touch. As are the discarded pizza boxes and the dead rat in the corner. At least I hope it's a rat.'

'Thank you, Randall,' said Han, ignoring the sarcasm. 'Despite appearances I live in some luxury as you are about to find out. Would you move away from the window please? Thank you.'

He pressed a button disguised as a knot of wood on the door frame they'd just come through and quickly walked towards the fireplace, where he kicked a tile in the tacky facade surrounding the ancient, lethal looking, gas fire. Suddenly there was a muted clunk and the whir of barely audible machinery. The floor by the window began to slide away to reveal a staircase below.

'My family built this house over three hundred years ago,' said Han, over the faint rumble of gears. 'Very few outside my family in all that time have known of the existence of what I am about to show you. Your father was the last. You will speak of this to no one. Do you understand?'

Randall spotted the note of seriousness that had crept into Han's voice. 'Of course, Marcus,' he said, solemnly.

Lights spontaneously brightened as they descended the stairs, which went down quite a long way under the garden at the back of Han's house and eventually ended after two ninety-degree turns at a thick and obviously very secure door. It had a sign on it saying "HOUSTON".

'Just my little joke,' said Han as he keyed in his entry code to open the door.

Randall didn't get it. 'What's so funny about Houston?' he asked. 'You mean the little town in Texas?'

'Mission Control,' said Han. 'That's where our ancestors threw chemical rockets at the sky in their first attempts to get into space.'

'Of course!' exclaimed Randall. 'I remember now. One Short Leap and all that. What was his name... Buzz Lightyear? Something like that.'

Marcus corrected him as the door swung open. 'Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin,' he said. 'And it's "One Small Step for a Man".'

'Oh ye...' said Randall. He didn't finish the sentence, because that's when his jaw flopped open.