

# Time Troubles: Two Stories

Science Fiction and Philosophy | Brendan Shea, PhD ([Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu](mailto:Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu))



*Figure 1 Time-Travel Paradox with Romance. (Brendan Shea x Dall-E)*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

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In this chapter, we're going to read two stories that deal with themes of **predestination**. The authors of these stories—Robert Heinlein and Charlie Jane Anders—are from very different time periods and political and philosophical outlooks. Both are well-known, however, for using science fiction to explore contemporary social issues related to sex, gender, race, and other topics.

## 1.1 ABOUT ROBERT HEINLEIN (ADAPTED FROM WIKIPEDIA)

Robert Anson Heinlein (July 7, 1907 – May 8, 1988) was an American science fiction author, aeronautical engineer, and naval officer. Sometimes called the "dean of science fiction writers", he was among the first to emphasize scientific accuracy in his fiction, and was thus a pioneer of the subgenre of hard science fiction. His published works, both fiction and non-fiction, express admiration for competence and emphasize the value of critical thinking. His plots often posed provocative situations which challenged conventional social mores. His work continues to have an influence on the science-fiction genre, and on modern culture more generally.

Heinlein became one of the first American science-fiction writers to break into mainstream magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post* in the late 1940s. He was one of the best-selling science-fiction novelists for many decades, and he, Isaac Asimov, and Arthur C. Clarke are often considered the "Big Three" of English-language science fiction authors. Notable Heinlein works include *Stranger in a Strange Land*, *Starship Troopers* (which helped mold the space marine and mecha archetypes) and *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*. His work sometimes had controversial aspects, such as plural marriage in *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, militarism in *Starship Troopers* and technologically competent women characters that were formidable, yet often stereotypically feminine—such as Friday.

A writer also of many science-fiction short stories, Heinlein was one of a group of writers who came to prominence under the editorship (1937–1971) of John W. Campbell at *Astounding Science Fiction* magazine, though Heinlein denied that Campbell influenced his writing to any great degree.

Heinlein used his science fiction as a way to explore provocative social and political ideas and to speculate how progress in science and engineering might shape the future of politics, race, religion, and sex. Within the framework of his science-fiction stories, Heinlein repeatedly addressed certain social themes: the importance of individual liberty and self-reliance, the nature of sexual relationships, the obligation individuals owe to their societies, the influence of organized religion on culture and government, and the tendency of society to repress nonconformist thought. He also speculated on the influence of space travel on human cultural practices.

## 1.2 ABOUT CHARLIE JANE ANDERS<sup>1</sup>

Charlie Jane Anders is the author of *Victories Greater Than Death* and *Dreams Bigger Than Heartbreak*, the first two books in a new young-adult trilogy. She's also the author of the short story collection *Even Greater Mistakes*, and *Never Say You Can't Survive* (August 2021), a book about how to use creative writing to get through hard times.

Her novel *The City in the Middle of the Night* came out in 2019—it won the Locus Award for Best SF Novel, and was named one of the year's best books by the *Guardian*, Den of Geek, Polygon and Autostraddle, among others, and was optioned for television by Sony and Mom de Guerre Productions. Her 2016 novel, *All the Birds in the Sky*, was #5 on *Time Magazine's* list of the year's 10 best novels, and won the Nebula, Locus and Crawford awards. Her first novel, *Choir Boy*, won a Lambda Literary Award for work in the Transgender Category.

Charlie Jane was a founding editor of io9.com, a blog about science fiction and futurism, and went on to become its editor in chief. Her fiction and journalism have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, Slate, *McSweeney's*, *Mother Jones*, the *Boston Review*, Tor.com, *Tin House*, *Teen Vogue*, *Conjunctions*, *Wired Magazine*, the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Lightspeed Magazine*, *Catamaran*

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from <https://www.charliejaneanders.com/about> and Wikipedia.

*Literary Reader, ZYZZYVA*, and numerous anthologies and "best of the year" collections. Her novelette "Six Months, Three Days" won a Hugo Award, and her short story "Don't Press Charges and I Won't Sue" won a Theodore Sturgeon Award.

Charlie Jane also won the Emperor Norton Award, for "extraordinary invention and creativity unhindered by the constraints of paltry reason."

Her TED Talk, "Go Ahead, Dream About the Future" has been viewed more than two million times.

She hosts the long-running monthly reading series Writers With Drinks, in which she makes up fictional bios for the authors (and nobody's sued yet.) Charlie Jane also organizes the Bookstore and Chocolate Crawl, which brings a mob of people to local bookstores to buy tons of books, and eat chocolate along the way. And during the covid-19 crisis, she also helped to organize a series of online fundraisers for local bookstores, at welovebookstores.org. She also helps to organize and co-host the monthly Trans Nerd Meet Up.

Back in the day, Charlie Jane created the satirical website GodHatesFigs.com, which received many "best of the web" awards. She was also part of the editorial staff of *Anything That Moves*, the influential bisexual magazine, and helped out with many other queer publishing projects including *Black Sheets/Black Books*. And she also organized tons of events such as the notorious Ballerina Pie Fight—plus an event in a hair salon where people got their hair cut while reading stories about haircuts to an audience.

With Annalee Newitz, Charlie Jane co-hosts a podcast about the meaning of science fiction called Our Opinions Are Correct. The podcast has been going strong for two years, and won a Hugo Award for Best Fancast. Anders and Newitz also collaborated on io9, plus an anthology called *She's Such a Geek: Women Write About Science, Technology & Other Nerdy Stuff*, and a magazine called *other magazine*.

Charlie Jane hugs trees, and keeps a British penny in her left shoe at all times.

### 1.3 QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever read anything by Heinlein? By Anders? Have you watched movies/shows based on their work?
2. Both Heinlein and Anders are known for engaging with "controversial" themes (such as those related to sex, gender, and politics). However, they come from very different perspectives (Heinlein was a right-libertarian, Anders is a left-liberal). In what ways can this sort of political engagement help writers and artists? What are the risks?
3. The stories below aren't directly about "gender," but Heinlein's story is one of the first to deal explicitly with sex-reassignment surgery, while Anders was among the first prominent transgender authors in science fiction (and the story was her first Hugo win). How does each author use science fiction to explore themes of sex/gender/love?

## 2 READING: ALL YOU ZOMBIES (BY ROBERT HEINLEIN)

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**2217 Time Zone V (EST) 7 Nov. 1970--NTC-- "Pop's Place":** I was polishing a brandy snifter when the Unmarried Mother came in. I noted the time---10:17 P. M. zone five, or eastern time, November 7th, 1970. Temporal agents always notice time and date; we must.

The Unmarried Mother was a man twenty--five years old, no taller than I am, childish features and a touchy temper. I didn't like his looks---I never had---but he was a lad I was here to recruit, he was my boy. I gave him my best barkeep's smile.

Maybe I'm too critical. He wasn't swish; his nickname came from what he always said when some nosy type asked him his line: "I'm an unmarried mother." If he felt less than murderous he would add: "at four cents a word. I write confession stories."

If he felt nasty, he would wait for somebody to make something of it. He had a lethal style of infighting, like a female cop---reason I wanted him. Not the only one.

He had a load on, and his face showed that he despised people more than usual. Silently I poured a double shot of Old Underwear and left the bottle. He drank it, poured another.

I wiped the bar top. "How's the 'Unmarried Mother' racket?"

His fingers tightened on the glass and he seemed about to throw it at me; I felt for the sap under the bar. In temporal manipulation you try to figure everything, but there are so many factors that you never take needless risks.

I saw him relax that tiny amount they teach you to watch for in the Bureau's training school. "Sorry," I said. "Just asking, 'How's business?' Make it 'How's the weather?'"

He looked sour. "Business is okay. I write 'em, they print 'em, I eat."

I poured myself one, leaned toward him. "Matter of fact," I said, "you write a nice stick---I've sampled a few. You have an amazingly sure touch with the woman's angle."

It was a slip I had to risk; he never admitted what pen--names he used. But he was boiled enough to pick up only the last: "'Woman's angle!'" he repeated with a snort. "Yeah, I know the woman's angle. I should."

"So?" I said doubtfully. "Sisters?"

"No. You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Now, now," I answered mildly, "bartenders and psychiatrists learn that nothing is stranger than truth. Why, son, if you heard the stories I do---well, you'd make yourself rich. Incredible."

"You don't know what 'incredible' means!"

"So? Nothing astonishes me. I've always heard worse." He snorted again. "Want to bet the rest of the bottle?"

"I'll bet a full bottle." I placed one on the bar.

"Well---" I signaled my other bartender to handle the trade. We were at the far end, a single--stool space that I kept private by loading the bar top by it with jars of pickled eggs and other clutter. A few were at the other end watching the fights and somebody was playing the juke box---private as a bed where we were.

"Okay," he began, "to start with, I'm a bastard."

"No distinction around here," I said.

"I mean it," he snapped. "My parents weren't married."

"Still no distinction," I insisted. "Neither were mine."

"When---" He stopped, gave me the first warm look I ever saw on him. "You mean that?"

"I do. A one--hundred--percent bastard. In fact," I added, "no one in my family ever marries. All bastards."

"Oh, that." I showed it to him. "It just looks like a wedding ring; I wear it to keep women off." It is an antique I bought in 1985 from a fellow operative---he had fetched it from pre--Christian Crete. "The Worm Ouroboros... the World Snake that eats its own tail, forever without end. A symbol of the Great Paradox."

He barely glanced at it. "If you're really a bastard, you know how it feels. When I was a little girl---"

"Wups!" I said. "Did I hear you correctly?"

"Who's telling this story? When I was a little girl---Look, ever hear of Christine Jorgenson? Or Roberta Cowell?"

"Uh, sex--change cases? You're trying to tell me---"

"Don't interrupt or swelp me, I won't talk. I was a foundling, left at an orphanage in Cleveland in 1945 when I was a month old. When I was a little girl, I envied kids with parents. Then, when I learned about sex---and, believe me, Pop, you learn fast in an orphanage---"

"I know"

"---I made a solemn vow that any kid of mine would have both a pop and a mom. It kept me 'pure,' quite a feat in that vicinity---I had to learn to fight to manage it. Then I got older and realized I stood darn little chance of getting married---for the same reason I hadn't been adopted." He scowled. "I was horse--faced and buck--toothed, flat--chested and straight--haired."

"You don't look any worse than I do."

"Who cares how a barkeep looks? Or a writer? But people wanting to adopt pick little blue--eyed golden--haired morons. Later on, the boys want bulging breasts, a cute face, and an Oh--you--wonderful--male manner." He shrugged. "I couldn't compete. So I decided to join the *W.E.N.C.H.E.S.*"

"Eh?"

"Women's Emergency National Corps, Hospitality & Entertainment Section, what they now call 'Space Angels'---Auxiliary Nursing Group, Extraterrestrial Legions.""

I knew both terms, once I had them chronized. We use still a third name, it's that elite military service corps: Women's Hospitality Order Refortifying & Encouraging Spacemen. Vocabulary shift is the worst hurdle in time--jumps---did you know that a 'service station' once served oil fractions? Once on an assignment in the Churchill Era, a woman said to me, 'Meet me at the service station next door'---which is not what it sounds; a 'service station' (then) wouldn't have a bed in it.

He went on: "It was when they first admitted you can't send men into space for months and years and not relieve the tension. You remember how the wowsers screamed?---that improved my chance, since volunteers were scarce. A gal had to be respectable, preferably virgin (they liked to train them from scratch), above average mentally, and stable emotionally. But most volunteers were old hookers, or neurotics who would crack up ten days off Earth. So I didn't need looks; if they accepted me, they would fix my buck teeth, put a wave in my hair, teach me to walk and dance and how to listen to a man pleasingly, and everything else---plus training for the prime duties. They would even use plastic surgery if it would help---nothing too good for our Boys.

"Best yet, they made sure you didn't get pregnant during your enlistment---and you were almost certain to marry at the end of your hitch. Same way today, *A.N.G.E.L.S.* marry spacers---they talk the language.

"When I was eighteen I was placed as a 'mother's helper'. This family simply wanted a cheap servant, but I didn't mind as I couldn't enlist till I was twenty--one. I did housework and went to night school---pretending to continue my high school typing and shorthand but going to a charm class instead, to better my chances for enlistment.

"Then I met this city slicker with his hundred--dollar bills." He scowled. "The no--good actually did have a wad of hundred--dollar bills. He showed me one night, told me to help myself.

"But I didn't. I liked him. He was the first man I ever met who was nice to me without trying games with me. I quit night school to see him oftener. It was the happiest time of my life.

"Then one night in the park the games began."

He stopped. I said, "And then?"

"And then nothing! I never saw him again. He walked me home and told me he loved me---and kissed me good---night and never came back." He looked grim. "If I could find him, I'd kill him!"

"Well," I sympathized, "I know how you feel. But killing him---just for doing what comes naturally---hmm... Did you struggle?"

"Huh? What's that got to do with it?"

"Quite a bit. Maybe he deserves a couple of broken arms for running out on you, but---"

"He deserves worse than that! Wait till you hear. Somehow I kept anyone from suspecting and decided it was all for the best. I hadn't really loved him and probably would never love anybody---and I was more eager to join the *W.E.N.C.H.E.S.* than ever. I wasn't disqualified, they didn't insist on virgins. I cheered up.

"It wasn't until my skirts got tight that I realized."

"Pregnant?"

"He had me higher 'n a kite! Those skinflints I lived with ignored it as long as I could work---then kicked me out, and the orphanage wouldn't take me back. I landed in a charity ward surrounded by other big bellies and trotted bedpans until my time came.

"One night I found myself on an operating table, with a nurse saying, 'Relax. Now breathe deeply.'

"I woke up in bed, numb from the chest down. My surgeon came in. 'How do you feel?' he says cheerfully.

"Like a mummy.'

"Naturally. You're wrapped like one and full of dope to keep you numb. You'll get well---but a Cesarean isn't a hangnail.'

"Cesarean' I said. 'Doc---did I lose the baby?'

"Oh, no. Your baby's fine.'

"Oh. Boy or girl?

"A healthy little girl. Five pounds, three ounces.'

"I relaxed. It's something, to have made a baby. I told myself I would go somewhere and tack 'Mrs.' on my name and let the kid think her papa was dead---no orphanage for my kid!



"But the surgeon was talking. 'Tell me, uh---' He avoided my name. 'did you ever think your glandular setup was odd?'

"I said, 'Huh? Of course not. What are you driving at?'

"He hesitated. 'I'll give you this in one dose, then a hypo to let you sleep off your jitters. You'll have 'em.'

"'Why?' I demanded.

"'Ever hear of that Scottish physician who was female until she was thirty five? ---then had surgery and became legally and medically a man? Got married. All okay.'

"'What's that got to do with me?'

"'That's what I'm saying. You're a man.'

"I tried to sit up. 'What?'

"'Take it easy. When I opened you, I found a mess. I sent for the Chief of Surgery while I got the baby out, then we held a consultation with you on the table---and worked for hours to salvage what we could. You had two full sets of organs, both immature, but with the female set well enough developed for you to have a baby. They could never be any use to you again, so we took them out and rearranged things so that you can develop properly as a man.' He put a hand on me. 'Don't worry. You're young, your bones will readjust, we'll watch your glandular balance--and make a fine young man out of you.'

"I started to cry. 'What about my baby?'

"'Well, you can't nurse her, you haven't milk enough for a kitten. If I were you, I wouldn't see her---put her up for adoption.'

"'No!'

"He shrugged. 'The choice is yours; you're her mother---well, her parent. But don't worry now; we'll get you well first.'

"Next day they let me see the kid and I saw her daily---trying to get used to her. I had never seen a brand--new baby and had no idea how awful they look---my daughter looked like an orange monkey. My feelings changed to cold determination to do right by her. But four weeks later that didn't mean anything."

"Eh?'"

"She was snatched."

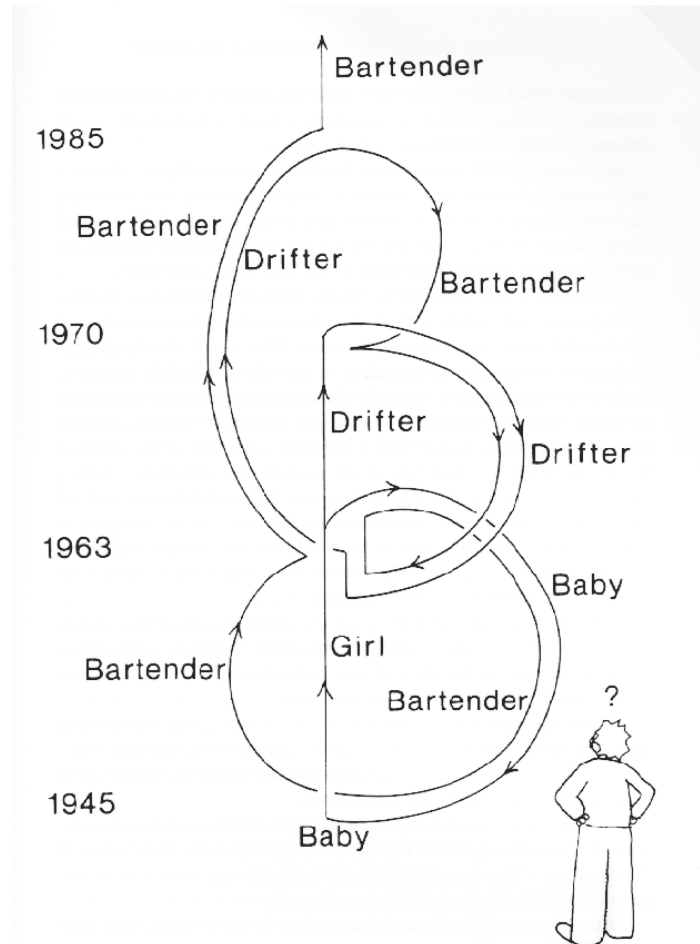


Figure 11.2. If time travel is possible, then our world line becomes a closed loop. In 1945, the girl is born. In 1963, she has a baby. In 1970, he is a drifter, who goes back to 1945 to meet himself. In 1985, he is a time traveler, who picks himself up in a bar in 1970, takes himself back to 1945, kidnaps the baby and takes her back to 1945, to start all over again. The girl is her own mother, father, grandfather, grandmother, son, daughter, and so on.

"Snatched?"

The Unmarried Mother almost knocked over the bottle we had bet. "Kidnapped---stolen from the hospital nursery!" He breathed hard. "How's that for taking the last a man's got to live for?"

"A bad deal," I agreed. "Let's pour you another. No clues?"

"Nothing the police could trace. Somebody came to see her, claimed to be her uncle. While the nurse had her back turned, he walked out with her."

"Description?"

"Just a man, with a face--shaped face, like yours or mine." He frowned. "I think it was the baby's father. The nurse swore it was an older man but he probably used makeup. Who else would swipe my baby? Childless women pull such stunts---but whoever heard of a man doing it?"

"What happened to you then?"

"Eleven more months of that grim place and three operations. In four months I started to grow a beard; before I was out I was shaving regularly... and no longer doubted that I was male." He grinned wryly. "I was staring down nurses necklines."

"Well," I said, "seems to me you came through okay. Here you are, a normal man, making good money, no real troubles. And the life of a female is not an easy one."

He glared at me. "A lot you know about it!"

"So?"

"Ever hear the expression 'a ruined woman'?"

"Mmm, years ago. Doesn't mean much today."

"I was as ruined as a woman can be; that bum really ruined me---I was no longer a woman... and I didn't know how to be a man."

"Takes getting used to, I suppose."

"You have no idea. I don't mean learning how to dress, or not walking into the wrong rest room; I learned those in the hospital. But how could I live? What job could I get? Hell, I couldn't even drive a car. I didn't know a trade; I couldn't do manual labor---too much scar tissue, too tender.

"I hated him for having ruined me for the *W.E.N.C.H.E.S.*, too, but I didn't know how much until I tried to join the Space Corps instead. One look at my belly and I was marked unfit for military service. The medical officer spent time on me just from curiosity; he had read about my case.

"So I changed my name and came to New York. I got by as a fry cook, then rented a typewriter and set myself up as a public stenographer---what a laugh! In four months I typed four letters and one manuscript. The manuscript was for Real Life Tales and a waste of paper, but the goof who wrote it sold it.

"Which gave me an idea; I bought a stack of confession magazines and studied them." He looked cynical. "Now you know how I get the authentic woman's angle on an unmarried--mother story... through the only version I haven't sold---the true one. Do I win the bottle?"

I pushed it toward him. I was upset myself, but there was work to do. I said, "Son, you still want to lay hands on that so--and--so?"



His eyes lighted up---a feral gleam.

"Hold it!" I said. "You wouldn't kill him?"

He chuckled nastily. "Try me."

"Take it easy. I know more about it than you think I do. I can help you. I know where he is."

He reached across the bar. "Where is he?"

I said softly, "Let go my shirt, sonny---or you'll land in the alley and we'll tell the cops you fainted." I showed him the sap.

He let go. "Sorry. But where is he?" He looked at me. "And how do you know so much?"

"All in good time. There are records---hospital records, orphanage records, medical records. The matron of your orphanage was Mrs. Fetherage---right? She was followed by Mrs. Gruenstein---right? Your name, as a girl, was 'Jane'---right? And you didn't tell me any of this---right?"

I had him baffled and a bit scared. "What's this? You trying to make trouble for me?"

"No indeed. I've your welfare at heart. I can put this character in your lap. You do to him as you see fit---and I guarantee that you'll get away with it. But I don't think you'll kill him. You'd be nuts to---and you aren't nuts. Not quite."

He brushed it aside. "Cut the noise. Where is he?" I poured him a short one; he was drunk, but anger was offsetting it. "Not so fast. I do something for you---you do something for me."

"Uh... what?"

"You don't like your work. What would you say to high pay, steady work, unlimited expense account, your own boss on the job, and lots of variety and adventure?"

He stared. "I'd say, 'Get those goddam reindeer off my roof!' Shove it, Pop---there's no such job."

"Okay, put it this way: I hand him to you, you settle with him, then try my job. If it's not all I claim---well, I can't hold you."

He was wavering; the last drink did it. "When d'yuh d'liver 'im?" he said thickly.

He shoved out his hand. "It's a deal!"

"If it's a deal---right now!"

I nodded to my assistant to watch both ends, noted the time---2300---started to duck through the gate under the bar---when the juke box blared out: "I'm My Own Grandpaw!" The service man had orders to load it with Americana and classics because I couldn't stomach the 'music' of 1970, but I hadn't known that tape was in it. I called out, "Shut that off! Give the customer his money back." I added, "Storeroom, back in a moment," and headed there with my Unmarried Mother following.

It was down the passage across from the johns, a steel door to which no one but my day manager and myself had a key; inside was a door to an inner room to which only I had a key. We went there.

He looked blearily around at windowless walls. "Where is he?"

"Right away." I opened a case, the only thing in the room; it was a U. S. F. F. Coordinates Transformer Field Kit, series 1992, Mod. II---a beauty, no moving parts, weight twenty--three kilos fully charged, and shaped to

pass as a suitcase. I had adjusted it precisely earlier that day; all I had to do was to shake out the metal net which limits the transformation field.

Which I did. "What's that?" he demanded.

"Time machine," I said and tossed the net over us.

"Hey!" he yelled and stepped back. There is a technique to this; the net has to be thrown so that the subject will instinctively step back onto the metal mesh, then you close the net with both of you inside completely---else you might leave shoe soles behind or a piece of foot, or scoop up a slice of floor. But that's all the skill it takes. Some agents con a subject into the net; I tell the truth and use that instant of utter astonishment to flip the switch. Which I did.

**1030--VI--3 April 1963---Cleveland, Ohio--Apex Bldg.:** "Hey!" he repeated. "Take this damn thing off!"

"Sorry", I apologized and did so, stuffed the net into the case, closed it. "You said you wanted to find him."

"But---you said that was a time machine!"

I pointed out a window. "Does that look like November? Or New York?" While he was gawking at new buds and spring weather, I reopened the case, took out a packet of hundred--dollar bills, checked that the numbers and signatures were compatible with 1963. The Temporal Bureau doesn't care how much you spend (it costs nothing) but they don't like unnecessary anachronisms. Too many mistakes, and a general court--martial will exile you for a year in a nasty period, say 1974 with its strict rationing and forced labor. I never make such mistakes; the money was okay.

He turned around and said, "What happened?"

"He's here. Go outside and take him. Here's expense money." I shoved it at him and added, "Settle him, then I'll pick you up."

Hundred--dollar bills have a hypnotic effect on a person not used to them. He was thumbing them unbelievably as I eased him into the hall, locked him out. The next jump was easy, a small shift in era.

**7100--VI--10 March 1964---Cleveland--Apex Bldg.:** There was a notice under the door saying that my lease expired next week; otherwise the room looked as it had a moment before. Outside, trees were bare and snow threatened; I hurried, stopping only for contemporary money and a coat, hat, and topcoat I had left there when I leased the room. I hired a car, went to the hospital. It took twenty minutes to bore the nursery attendant to the point where I could swipe the baby without being noticed. We went back to the Apex Building. This dial setting was more involved, as the building did not yet exist in 1945. But I had precalculated it.

**0100--VI--20 Sept. 1945---Cleveland--Skyview Motel:** Field kit, baby, and I arrived in a motel outside town. Earlier I had registered as "Gregory Johnson, Warren, Ohio," so we arrived in a room with curtains closed, windows locked, and doors bolted, and the floor cleared to allow for waver as the machine hunts. You can get a nasty bruise from a chair where it shouldn't be---not the chair, of course, but backlash from the field.

No trouble. Jane was sleeping soundly; I carried her out, put her in a grocery box on the seat of a car I had provided earlier, drove to the orphanage, put her on the steps, drove two blocks to a 'service station' (the petroleum--products sort) and phoned the orphanage, drove back in time to see them taking the box inside, kept going and abandoned the car near the motel---walked to it and jumped forward to the Apex Building in 1963.

**2200--VI--24 April 1963---Cleveland--Apex Bldg.:** I had cut the time rather fine---temporal accuracy depends on span, except on return to zero. If I had it right, Jane was discovering, out in the park this balmy spring night, that she wasn't quite as nice a girl as she had thought. I grabbed a taxi to the home of those skinflints, had the hackie wait around a corner while I lurked in shadows.

Presently I spotted them down the street, arms around each other. He took her up on the porch and made a long job of kissing her good--night---longer than I thought. Then she went in and he came down the walk, turned away. I slid into step and hooked an arm in his. "That's all, son," I announced quietly. "I'm back to pick you up."

"You!" He gasped and caught his breath.

"Me. Now you know who he is---and after you think it over you'll know who you are... and if you think hard enough, you'll figure out who the baby is... and who I am."

He didn't answer, he was badly shaken. It's a shock to have it proved to you that you can't resist seducing yourself. I took him to the Apex Building and we jumped again.

**2300--VIII, 12 Aug. 1985--Sub Rockies Base:** I woke the duty sergeant, showed my I. D., told the sergeant to bed my companion down with a happy pill and recruit him in the morning. The sergeant looked sour, but rank is rank, regardless of era; he did what I said---thinking, no doubt, that the next time we met he might be the colonel and I the sergeant. Which can happen in our corps. "What name?" he asked.

I wrote it out. He raised his eyebrows. "Like so, eh? Hmm---"

"You just do your job, Sergeant." I turned to my companion.

"Son, your troubles are over. You're about to start the best job a man ever held---and you'll do well. I know."

"That you will!" agreed the sergeant. "Look at me---born in 1917---still around, still young, still enjoying life." I went back to the jump room, set everything on preselected zero.

**2301--V--7 Nov. 1970--NYC---"Pop's Place":** I came out of the storeroom carrying a fifth of Drambuie to account for the minute I had been gone. My assistant was arguing with the customer who had been playing "I'm My Own Grand--paw!" I said, "Oh, let him play it, then unplug it." I was very tired.

It's rough, but somebody must do it, and it's very hard to recruit anyone in the later years, since the Mistake of 1972. Can you think of a better source than to pick people all fouled up where they are and give them well-paid, interesting (even though dangerous) work in a necessary cause? Everybody knows now why the Fizzle War of 1963 fizzled. The bomb with New York's number on it didn't go off, a hundred other things didn't go as planned---all arranged by the likes of me.

But not the Mistake of '72; that one is not our fault---and can't be undone; there's no paradox to resolve. A thing either is, or it isn't, now and forever amen. But there won't be another like it; an order dated '1992' takes precedence any year.

I closed five minutes early, leaving a letter in the cash register telling my day manager that I was accepting his offer to buy me out, to see my lawyer as I was leaving on a long vacation. The Bureau might or might not pick up his payments, but they want things left tidy. I went to the room in the back of the storeroom and forward to 1993.

**2200--VII-- 12 Jan 1993--Sub Rockies Annex--HQ Temporal DOL:** I checked in with the duty officer and went to my quarters, intending to sleep for a week. I had fetched the bottle we bet (after all, I won it) and took a drink before I wrote my report. It tasted foul, and I wondered why I had ever liked Old Underwear.

But it was better than nothing; I don't like to be cold sober, I think too much. But I don't really hit the bottle either; other people have snakes---I have people.

I dictated my report; forty recruitments all okayed by the Psych Bureau---counting my own, which I knew would be okayed. I was here, wasn't I? Then I taped a request for assignment to operations; I was sick of recruiting. I dropped both in the slot and headed for bed. My eye fell on 'The By--Laws of Time,' over my bed:

- Never Do Yesterday What Should Be Done Tomorrow.
- If at Last You Do Succeed, Never Try Again.
- A Stitch in Time Saves Nine Billion.
- A Paradox May Be Paradoctored.
- It Is Earlier When You Think.
- Ancestors Are Just People.
- Even Jove Nods.

They didn't inspire me the way they had when I was a recruit; thirty subjective--years of time--jumping wears you down. I undressed, and when I got down to the hide I looked at my belly. A Cesarean leaves a big scar, but I'm so hairy now that I don't notice it unless I look for it.

Then I glanced at the ring on my finger.

The Snake That Eats Its Own Tail, Forever and Ever. I know where I came from---but where did all you zombies come from?

I felt a headache coming on, but a headache powder is one thing I do not take. I did once---and you all went away.

So I crawled into bed and whistled out the light.

You aren't really there at all. There isn't anybody but me---Jane---here alone in the dark.

I miss you dreadfully!

## 2.1 QUESTIONS<sup>2</sup>

1. The story is told as a series of reports reminiscent of a ship's log. The time is noted military style (2217 for 10:17PM in the opening entry, for instance? In what ways does this no-nonsense naval-log format impact his description of the fantastic events that follow?

2. The song "I'm My Own Grandpaw," played on a jukebox, figures in the final section of Heinlein's story; the phrase was among the working titles for Heinlein's tale and also the title of a hit song of the later 1940s (which was itself adapted from a Mark Twain story). The song involves a narrator who has married a widow; they have had a son. At the same time, his step-daughter has married his father and they have had a son. In this way, he is the "grandpa" of his own father's son. How does Heinlein's story differ from this (humorous, tongue-in-cheek) take on similar events?

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<sup>2</sup> The questions are adapted from the *Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction*.

3. Transgender operations were performed in Europe as early as the 1920s and 1930s, but in this story, hermaphroditic Jane's account of her outward transformation from female to male may draw on post-war accounts of the male-to-female surgeries of two real people mentioned in the story: Roberta Cowell (1951) and the better-known Christine Jorgensen (1952). The English Roberta Cowell's 1954 Autobiography describes her surgery in terms similar to Jane's account: Cowell, a fighter-pilot in World War II and race-car driver before the operations, described hellishly extensive surgeries to remove his undeveloped male sexual organs and to be reconstructed as female. Discuss the style and tone in which sexuality (including transsexuality) is discussed in Heinlein's story. Might his intended market, Playboy (from which it got rejected), have directed some of his choices, including his sf-noir tone? Do you agree with Pop's grim observation that "you can't resist seducing yourself"?

4. The story's first-person narrator, Pop the bartender, says of the true-confessions writer known as *The Unmarried Mother* that "I didn't like his looks—I never had" (325). In retrospect, once you've finished the story, how are Pop's name (and this early assertion) ironic?

5. The *ouroboros*—a circular image of a serpent devouring its own tail—dates back to ancient Egypt. In Plato's "Timaeus" (third century BCE), this becomes an emblem for self-sufficiency: "there was nothing which went from him or came into him: for there was nothing besides [i.e., except] him." Pop wears a ring that bears this image. Why is this eternal circle a fitting insignia of the time-corps, as well as for Pop's own life-story?

### 3 READING: SIX MONTHS, THREE DAYS (BY CHARLIE JANE ANDERS)<sup>3</sup>

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The man who can see the future has a date with the woman who can see many possible futures.

Judy is nervous but excited, keeps looking at things she's spotted out of the corner of her eye. She's wearing a floral Laura Ashley style dress with an Ankh necklace and her legs are rambunctious, her calves moving under the table. It's distracting because Doug knows that in two and a half weeks, those cucumber-smooth ankles will be hooked on his shoulders, and that curly reddish-brown hair will spill everywhere onto her lemon-floral pillows; this image of their future coitus has been in Doug's head for years, with varying degrees of clarity, and now it's almost here. The knowledge makes Doug almost giggle at the wrong moment, but then it hits him: she's seen this future too — or she may have, anyway.

Doug has his sandy hair cut in a neat fringe that was almost fashionable a couple years ago. You might think he cuts his own hair, but Judy knows he doesn't, because he'll tell her otherwise in a few weeks. He's much, much better looking than she thought he would be, and this comes as a huge relief. He has rude, pouty lips and an upper lip that darkens no matter how often he shaves it, with Elvis Costello glasses. And he's almost a foot taller than her, six foot four. Now that Judy's seen Doug for real, she's re-imagining all the conversations they might be having in the coming weeks and months, all of the drama and all of the sweetness. The fact that Judy can be attracted to him, knowing everything that could lay ahead, consoles her tremendously.

Judy is nattering about some Chinese novelist she's been reading in translation, one of those cruel satirists from the days after the May Fourth Movement, from back when writers were so conflicted they had to

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<sup>3</sup> Charlie Jane Anders, "Six Months, Three Days," Tor.com, June 8, 2011, <https://www.tor.com/2011/06/08/six-months-three-days/>.

rename themselves things like “Contra Diction.” Doug is just staring at her, not saying anything, until it creeps her out a little.

“What?” Doug says at last, because Judy has stopped talking and they’re both just staring at each other.

“You were staring at me,” Judy says.

“I was...” Doug hesitates, then just comes out and says it. “I was savoring the moment. You know, you can know something’s coming from a long way off, you know for years ahead of time the exact day and the very hour when it’ll arrive. And then it arrives, and when it arrives, all you can think about is how soon it’ll be gone.”

“Well, I didn’t know the hour and the day when you and I would meet,” Judy puts a hand on his. “I saw many different hours and days. In one timeline, we would have met two years ago. In another, we’d meet a few months from now. There are plenty of timelines where we never meet at all.”

Doug laughs, then waves a hand to show that he’s not laughing at her, although the gesture doesn’t really clarify whom or what he’s actually laughing at.

Judy is drinking a cocktail called the Coalminer’s Daughter, made out of ten kinds of darkness. It overwhelms her senses with sugary pungency, and leaves her lips black for a moment. Doug is drinking a wheaty Pilsner from a tapered glass, in gulps. After one of them, Doug cuts to the chase. “So this is the part where I ask. I mean, I know what happens next between you and me. But here’s where I ask what you think happens next.”

“Well,” Judy says. “There are a million tracks, you know. It’s like raindrops falling into a cistern, they’re separate until they hit the surface, and then they become the past: all undifferentiated. But there are an awful lot of futures where you and I date for about six months.”

“Six months and three days,” Doug says. “Not that I’ve counted or anything.”

“And it ends badly.”

“I break my leg.”

“You break your leg ruining my bicycle. I like that bike. It’s a noble five-speed in a sea of fixies.”

“So you agree with me.” Doug has been leaning forward, staring at Judy like a psycho again. He leans back so that the amber light spilling out of the Radish Saloon’s tiny lampshades turn him the same color as his beer.

“You see the same future I do.” Like she’s passed some kind of test.

“You didn’t know what I was going to say in advance?” Judy says.

“It doesn’t work like that — not for me, anyway. Remembering the future is just like remembering the past. I don’t have perfect recall, I don’t hang on to every detail, the transition from short-term memory to long-term memory is not always graceful.”

“I guess it’s like memory for me too,” Judy says.

Doug feels an unfamiliar sensation, and he realizes after a while it’s comfort. He’s never felt this at home with another human being, especially after such a short time. Doug is accustomed to meeting people and knowing bits and pieces of their futures, from stuff he’ll learn later. Or if Doug meets you and doesn’t know anything about your future, that means he’ll never give a crap about you, at any point down the line. This makes for awkward social interactions, either way.

They get another round of drinks. Doug gets the same beer again, Judy gets a red concoction called a Bloody Mutiny.

“So there’s one thing I don’t get,” Doug says. “You believe you have a choice among futures — and I think you’re wrong, you’re seeing one true future and a bunch of false ones.”

“You’re probably going to spend the next six months trying to convince yourself of that,” Judy says.

“So why are you dating me at all, if you get to choose? You know how it’ll turn out. For that matter, why aren’t you rich and famous? Why not pick a future where you win the lottery, or become a star?”

Doug works in tech support, in a poorly ventilated sub-basement of a tech company in Providence, RI, that he knows will go out of business in a couple years. He will work there until the company fails, choking on the fumes from old computers, and then be unemployed a few months.

“Well,” Judy says. “It’s not really that simple. I mean, the next six months, assuming I don’t change my mind, they contain some of the happiest moments of my life, and I see it leading to some good things, later on. And you know, I’ve seen some tracks where I get rich, I become a public figure, and they never end well. I’ve got my eye on this one future, this one node way off in the distance, where I die aged 97, surrounded by lovers and grandchildren and cats. Whenever I have a big decision to make, I try to see the straightest path to that moment.”

“So I’m a stepping stone,” Doug says, not at all bitterly. He’s somehow finished his second beer already, even though Judy’s barely made a dent in her Bloody Mutiny.

“You’re maybe going to take this journey with me for a spell,” Judy says. “People aren’t stones.”

And then Doug has to catch the last train back to Providence, and Judy has to bike home to Somerville. Marva, her roommate, has made popcorn and hot chocolate, and wants to know the whole story.

“It was nice,” Judy says. “He was a lot cuter in person than I’d remembered, which is really nice. He’s tall.”

“That’s it?” Marva said. “Oh come on, details. You finally meet the only other freaking clairvoyant on Earth, your future boyfriend, and all you have to say is, ‘He’s tall.’ Uh uh. You are going to spill like a fucking oil tanker, I will ply you with hot chocolate, I may resort to Jim Beam, even.”

Marva’s “real” name is Martha, but she changed it years ago. She’s a grad student studying 18th century lit, and even Judy can’t help her decide whether to finish her PhD. She’s slightly chubby, with perfect crimson hair and clothing by Sanrio, Torrid, and Hot Topic. She is fond of calling herself “mallternative.”

“I’m drunk enough already. I nearly fell off my bicycle a couple times,” Judy says.

The living room is a pigsty, so they sit in Judy’s room, which isn’t much better. Judy hoards items she might need in one of the futures she’s witnessed, and they cover every surface. There’s a plastic replica of a Filipino fast food mascot, Jollibee, which she might give to this one girl Sukey in a couple of years, completing Sukey’s collection and making her a friend for life — or Judy and Sukey may never meet at all. A phalanx of stuffed animals crowds Judy and Marva on the big fluffy bed. The room smells like a sachet of whoop-ass (cardamom, cinnamon, lavender) that Judy opened up earlier.

“He’s a really sweet guy.” Judy cannot stop talking in platitudes, which bothers her. “I mean, he’s really lost, but he manages to be brave. I can’t imagine what it would be like, to feel like you have no free will at all.”

Marva doesn’t point out the obvious thing — that Judy only sees choices for herself, not anybody else. Suppose a guy named Rocky asks Marva out on a date, and Judy sees a future in which Marva complains,



afterwards, that their date was the worst evening of her life. In that case, there are two futures: One in which Judy tells Marva what she sees, and one in which she doesn't. Marva will go on the miserable date with Rocky, unless Judy tells her what she knows. (On the plus side, in fifteen months, Judy will drag Marva out to a party where she meets the love of her life. So there's that.)

"Doug's right," Marva says. "I mean, if you really have a choice about this, you shouldn't go through with it. You know it's going to be a disaster, in the end. You're the one person on Earth who can avoid the pain, and you still go sticking fingers in the socket."

"Yeah, but..." Judy decides this will go a lot easier if there are marshmallows in the cocoa, and runs back to the kitchen alcove. "But going out with this guy leads to good things later on. And there's a realization that I come to as a result of getting my heart broken. I come to understand something."

"And what's that?"

Judy finds the bag of marshmallows. They are stale. She decides cocoa will revitalize them, drags them back to her bedroom, along with a glass of water.

"I have no idea, honestly. That's the way with epiphanies: You can't know in advance what they'll be. Even me. I can see them coming, but I can't understand something until I understand it."

"So you're saying that the future that Doug believes is the only possible future just happens to be the best of all worlds. Is this some Leibniz shit? Does Dougie always automatically see the nicest future or something?"

"I don't think so." Judy gets gummed up by popcorn, marshmallows and sticky cocoa, and coughs her lungs out. She swigs the glass of water she brought for just this moment. "I mean —" She coughs again, and downs the rest of the water. "I mean, in Doug's version, he's only 43 when he dies, and he's pretty broken by then. His last few years are dreadful. He tells me all about it in a few weeks."

"Wow," Marva says. "Damn. So are you going to try and save him? Is that what's going on here?"

"I honestly do not know. I'll keep you posted."

Doug, meanwhile, is sitting on his militarily neat bed, with its single hospital-cornered blanket and pillow. His apartment is almost pathologically tidy. Doug stares at his one shelf of books and his handful of carefully chosen items that play a role in his future. He chews his thumb. For the first time in years, Doug desperately wishes he had options.

He almost grabs his phone, to call Judy and tell her to get the hell away from him, because he will collapse all of her branching pathways into a dark tunnel, once and for all. But he knows he won't tell her that, and even if he did, she wouldn't listen. He doesn't love her, but he knows he will in a couple weeks, and it already hurts.

"God damnit! Fucking god fucking damn it fuck!" Doug throws his favorite porcelain bust of Wonder Woman on the floor and it shatters. Wonder Woman's head breaks into two jagged pieces, cleaving her magic tiara in half. This image, of the Amazon's raggedly bisected head, has always been in Doug's mind, whenever he's looked at the intact bust.

Doug sits a minute, dry-sobbing. Then he goes and gets his dustpan and brush.

He phones Judy a few days later. "Hey, so do you want to hang out again on Friday?"

"Sure," Judy says. "I can come down to Providence this time. Where do you want to meet up?"

"Surprise me," says Doug.

“You’re a funny man.”

Judy will be the second long-term relationship of Doug’s life. His first was with Pamela, an artist he met in college, who made headless figurines of people who were recognizable from the neck down. (Headless Superman. Headless Captain Kirk. And yes, headless Wonder Woman, which Doug always found bitterly amusing for reasons he couldn’t explain.) They were together nearly five years, and Doug never told her his secret. Which meant a lot of pretending to be surprised at stuff. Doug is used to people thinking he’s kind of a weirdo.

Doug and Judy meet for dinner at one of those mom-and-pop Portuguese places in East Providence, sharing grilled squid and seared cod, with fragrant rice, with a bottle of heady vinho verde. Then they walk Judy’s bike back across the river towards the kinda-sorta gay bar on Wickenden Street. “The thing I like about Providence,” says Doug, “is it’s one of the American cities that knows its best days are behind it. So it’s automatically decadent, and sort of European.”

“Well,” says Judy, “It’s always a choice between urban decay or gentrification, right? I mean, cities aren’t capable of homeostasis.”

“Do you know what I’m thinking?” Doug is thinking he wants to kiss Judy. She leans up and kisses him first, on the bridge in the middle of the East Bay Bicycle Path. They stand and watch the freeway lights reflected on the water, holding hands. Everything is cold and lovely and the air smells rich.

Doug turns and looks into Judy’s face, which the bridge lights have turned yellow. “I’ve been waiting for this moment all my life.” Doug realizes he’s inadvertently quoted Phil Collins. First he’s mortified, then he starts laughing like a maniac. For the next half hour, Doug and Judy speak only in Phil Collins quotes.

“You can’t hurry love,” Judy says, which is only technically a Collins line.

Over microbrews on Wickenden, they swap origin stories, even though they already know most of it. Judy’s is pretty simple: She was a little kid who overthought choices like which summer camp to go to, until she realized she could see how either decision would turn out. She still flinches when she remembers how she almost gave a valentine in third grade to Dick Petersen, who would have destroyed her. Doug’s story is a lot worse: he started seeing the steps ahead, a little at a time, and then he realized his dad would die in about a year. He tried everything he could think of, for a whole year, to save his dad’s life. He even buried the car keys two feet deep, on the day of his dad’s accident. No fucking use.

“Turns out getting to mourn in advance doesn’t make the mourning afterwards any less hard,” Doug says through a beer glass snout.

“Oh man,” Judy says. She knew this stuff, but hearing it is different. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Doug says. “It was a long time ago.”

Soon it’s almost time for Judy to bike back to the train station, near that godawful giant mall and the canal where they light the water on fire sometimes.

“I want you to try and do something for me,” Judy takes Doug’s hands. “Can you try to break out of the script? Not the big stuff that you think is going to happen, but just little things that you couldn’t be sure about in advance if you tried. Try to surprise yourself. And maybe all those little deviations will add up to something bigger.”

“I don’t think it would make any difference,” Doug says.

“You never know,” Judy says. “There are things that I remember differently every time I think about them. Things from the past, I mean. When I was in college, I went through a phase of hating my parents, and I remembered all this stuff they did, from my childhood, as borderline abusive. And then a few years ago, I found myself recalling those same incidents again, only now they seemed totally different. Barely the same events.”

“The brain is weird,” Doug says.

“So you never know,” Judy says. “Change the details, you may change the big picture.” But she already knows nothing will come of this.

A week later, Doug and Judy lay together in her bed, after having sex for the first time. It was even better than the image Doug’s carried in his head since puberty. For the first time, Doug understands why people talk about sex as this transcendent thing, chains of selfhood melting away, endless abundance. They looked into each other’s eyes the whole time. As for Judy, she’s having that oxytocin thing she’s always thought was a myth, her forehead resting on Doug’s smooth chest — if she moved her head an inch she’d hear his heart beating, but she doesn’t need to.

Judy gets up to pee an hour later, and when she comes back and hangs up her robe, Doug is lying there with a look of horror on his face. “What’s wrong?” She doesn’t want to ask, but she does anyway.

“I’m sorry.” He sits up. “I’m just so happy, and... I can count the awesome moments in my life on a hand and a half. And I’m burning through them too fast. This is just so perfect right now. And, you know. I’m trying not to think. About.”

Judy knows that if she brings up the topic they’ve been avoiding, they will have an unpleasant conversation. But she has to. “You have to stop this. It’s obvious you can do what I do, you can see more than one branch. All you have to do is try. I know you were hurt when you were little, your dad died, and you convinced yourself that you were helpless. I’m sorry about that. But now, I feel like you’re actually comfortable being trapped. You don’t even try any more.”

“I do,” Doug is shaking. “I do try. I try every day. How dare you say I don’t try.”

“You don’t really. I don’t believe you. I’m sorry, but I don’t.”

“You know it’s true.” Doug calms down and looks Judy square in the face. Without his glasses, his eyes look as gray as the sea on a cloudy day. “The thing you told me about Marva — you always know what she’s going to do. Yeah? That’s how your power works. The only reason you can predict how your own choices will turn out, is because other people’s actions are fixed. If you go up to some random guy on the street and slap him, you can know in advance exactly how he’ll react. Right?”

“Well sure,” Judy says. “I mean, that doesn’t mean Marva doesn’t have free will. Or this person I’ve hypothetically slapped.” This is too weird a conversation to be having naked. She goes and puts on a Mountain Goats T-shirt and PJ bottoms. “Their choices are just factored in, in advance.”

“Right.” Doug’s point is already made, but he goes ahead and lunges for the kill. “So how do you know that I can’t predict your choices, exactly the same way you can predict Marva’s?”

Judy sits down on the edge of the bed. She kneads the edge of her T-shirt and doesn’t look at Doug. Now she knows why Doug looked so sick when she came back from the bathroom. He saw more of this conversation than she did. “You could be right,” she says after a moment. “If you’re right, that makes you the one person I should never be in the same room with. I should stay the hell away from you.”

“Yeah. You should,” Doug says. He knows it will take forty-seven seconds before she cradles his head and kisses his forehead, and it feels like forever. He holds his breath and counts down.

A couple days later, Judy calls in sick at the arts nonprofit where she works, and wanders Davis Square until she winds up in the back of the Diesel Café, in one of the plush leather booths near the pool tables. She eats one of those mint brownies that’s like chocolate-covered toothpaste and drinks a lime rickey, until she feels pleasantly ill. She pulls a battered, scotch-taped World Atlas out of her satchel.

She’s still leafing through it a couple hours later when Marva comes and sits down opposite her.

“How did you know I was here?” Judy asks.

“Because you’re utterly predictable. You said you were ditching work, and this is where you come to brood.”

Judy’s been single-handedly keeping the Blaze Foundation afloat for years, thanks to an uncanny knack for knowing exactly which grants to apply for and when, and what language to use on the grant proposal. She has a nearly 100 percent success rate in proposal-writing, leavened only by the fact that she occasionally applies for grants she knows she won’t get. So maybe she’s entitled to a sick day every now and then.

Marva sees that Judy’s playing the Travel Game and joins in. She points to a spot near Madrid. “Spain,” she says.

Judy’s face gets all tight for a moment, like she’s trying to remember where she left something. Then she smiles. “Okay, if I get on a plane to Madrid tomorrow, there are a few ways it plays out. That I can see right now. In one, I get drunk and fall off a tower and break both legs. In another, I meet this cute guy named Pedro and we have a torrid three-day affair. Then there’s the one where I go to art school and study sculpture. They all end with me running out of money and coming back home.”

“Malawi,” Marva says. Judy thinks for a moment, then remembers what happens if she goes to Malawi tomorrow.

“This isn’t as much fun as usual,” Marva says after they’ve gone to Vancouver and Paris and Sao Paolo. “Your heart isn’t in it.”

“It’s not,” Judy says. “I just can’t see a happy future where I don’t date Doug. I mean, I like Doug, I may even be in love with him already, but... we’re going to break each other’s hearts, and more than that: We’re maybe going to break each other’s *spirits*. There’s got to be a detour, a way to avoid this, but I just can’t see it right now.”

Marva dumps a glass of water on Judy’s head.

“Wha? You — Wha?” She splutters like a cartoon duck.

“Didn’t see that coming, did you?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean... I mean, I’m not freaking omniscient, I sometimes miss bits and pieces, you know that.”

“I am going to give you the Samuel Johnson/Bishop Berkeley lecture, for like the tenth time,” Marva says. “Because sometimes, a girl just needs a little Johnson.”

Bishop George Berkeley, of course, was the “if a tree falls in the forest and nobody hears it, does it make a sound” guy, who argued that objects only exist in our perceptions. One day, Boswell asked Samuel Johnson what he thought of Berkeley’s idea. According to Boswell, Johnson’s response to this was to kick a big rock “with mighty force,” saying, “I refute it thus.”

“The point,” says Marva, “is that nobody can see everything. Not you, not Doug, not Bishop Berkeley. Stuff exists that your senses can’t perceive and your mind can’t comprehend. Even if you do have an extra sense the rest of us don’t have. Okay? So don’t get all doom and gloom on me. Just remember: Would Samuel Johnson have let himself feel trapped in a dead-end relationship?”

“Well, considering he apparently dated a guy named Boswell who went around writing down everything he said... I really don’t know.” Judy runs to the bathroom to put her head under the hot-air dryer.

The next few weeks, Judy and Doug hang out at least every other day and grow accustomed to kissing and holding hands all the time, trading novelty for the delight of positive reinforcement. They’re at the point where their cardiovascular systems crank into top gear if one of them sees someone on the street who even looks, for a second, like the other. Doug notices little things about Judy that catch him off guard, like the way she rolls her eyes slightly before she’s about to say something solemn. Judy realizes that Doug’s joking on some level, most of the time, even when he seems tragic. Maybe especially then.

They fly a big dragon kite on Cambridge Common, with a crimson tail. They go to the Isabella Stewart Gardner, and sip tea in the courtyard. Once or twice, Doug is about to turn left, but Judy stops him, because something way cooler will happen if they go right instead. They discuss which kind of skylight Batman prefers to burst through when he breaks into criminals’ lairs, and whether Batman ever uses the chimney like Santa Claus. They break down the taxonomy of novels where Emily Dickinson solves murder mysteries.

Marva gets used to eating Doug’s spicy omelettes, which automatically make him Judy’s best-ever boyfriend in Marva’s book. Marva walks out of her bedroom in the mornings, to see Doug wearing the bathrobe Judy got for him, flipping a perfect yellow slug over and over, and she’s like, What *are* you? To Marva, the main advantage of making an omelette is that when it falls apart halfway through, you can always claim you planned to make a scramble all along.

Judy and Doug enjoy a couple months of relative bliss, based on not ever discussing the future. In the back of her mind, Judy never stops looking for the break point, the moment where a timeline splits off from the one Doug believes in. It could be just a split-second.

They reach their three-month anniversary, roughly the midpoint of their relationship. To celebrate, they take a weekend trip to New York together, and they wander down Broadway and all around the Village and Soho. Doug is all excited, showing off for once — he points out the fancy restaurant where the President will be assassinated in 2027, and the courthouse where Lady Gaga gets arrested for civil disobedience right after she wins the Nobel Peace Prize. Judy has to keep shushing him. Then she gives in, and the two of them loudly debate whether the election of 2024 will be rigged, not caring if people stare.

Once they’ve broken the taboo on talking about the future in general, Doug suddenly feels free to talk about their future, specifically. They’re having a romantic dinner at one of those restaurant/bars, with high-end American food and weird pseudo-Soviet iconography everywhere. Doug is on his second beer when he says, “So, I guess in a couple of weeks, you and I have that ginormous fight about whether I should meet your parents. And about a week after that, I manage to offend Marva. Honestly, without meaning to. But then again, in a month and a half’s time, we have that really nice day together on the boat.”

“Please don’t,” Judy says, but she already knows it’s too late to stop it.

“And then after that, there’s the Conversation. I am not looking forward to the Conversation.”

“We both know about this stuff,” Judy says. “It’ll happen if and when it happens, why worry about it until then?”

“Sorry, it’s just part of how I deal with things. It helps me to brace myself.”

Judy barely eats her entrée. Doug keeps oversharing about their next few months, like a floodgate has broken. Some of it's stuff Judy either didn't remember, or has blotted out of her mind because it's so dismal. She can tell Doug's been obsessing about every moment of the coming drama, visualizing every incident until it snaps into perfect focus.

By the time Judy gets up and walks away from the table, she sees it all just as clearly as he does. She can't even imagine any future, other than the one he's described. Doug's won.

Judy roams Bleecker and St. Mark's Place, until she claims a small victory: She realizes that if she goes into this one little subterranean bar, she'll run into a cute guy she hasn't seen since high school, and they'll have a conversation in which he confesses that he always had a crush on her back then. Because Doug's not there, he's not able to tell her whether she goes into that bar or not. She does, and she's late getting back to their hotel, even though she and cute high-school guy don't do anything but talk.

Doug makes an effort to be nice the rest of the weekend, even though he knows it won't do him any good, except that Judy holds hands with him on the train back to Providence and Boston.

And then Doug mentions, in passing, that he'll see Judy around, after they break up — including two meetings a decade from now, and one time a full 15 years hence, and he knows some stuff. He starts to say more, but Judy runs to the dining car, covering her ears.

When the train reaches Doug's stop and he's gathering up his stuff, Judy touches his shoulder. "Listen, I don't know if you and I actually do meet up in a decade, it's a blur to me right now. But I don't want to hear whatever you think you know. Okay?" Doug nods.

When the fight over whether Doug should meet Judy's parents arrives, it's sort of a meta-fight. Judy doesn't see why Doug should do the big parental visit, since Judy and Doug are scheduled to break up in ten weeks. Doug just wants to meet them because he wants to meet them — maybe because his own parents are dead. And he's curious about these people who are aware that their daughter can see the future(s). They compromise, as expected: Doug meets Judy's parents over lunch when they visit, and he's on his best behavior.

They take a ferry out to sea, toward Block Island. The air is too cold and they feel seasick and the sun blinds them, and it's one of the greatest days of their lives. They huddle together on deck and when they can see past the glare and the sea spray and they're not almost hurling, they see the glimmer of the ocean, streaks of white and blue and yellow in different places, as the light and wind affect it. The ocean feels utterly forgiving, like you can dump almost anything into the ocean's body and it will still love us, and Judy and Doug cling to each other like children in a storm cellar and watch the waves. Then they go to Newport and eat amazing lobster. For a few days before and a few days after this trip, they are all aglow and neither of them can do any wrong.

A week or so after the boat thing, they hold hands in bed, nestling like they could almost start having sex at any moment. Judy looks in Doug's naked eyes (his glasses are on the nightstand) and says, "Let's just jump off the train now, okay? Let's not do any of the rest of it, let's just be good to each other forever. Why not? We could."

"Why would you want that?" Doug drawls like he's half asleep. "You're the one who's going to get the life she wants. I'm the one who'll be left like wreckage." Judy rolls over and pretends to sleep.

The Conversation achieves mythical status long before it arrives. Certain aspects of The Conversation are hazy in advance, for both Doug and Judy, because of that thing where you can't understand something until you understand it.

The day of the Conversation, Judy wakes from a nightmare, shivering with the covers cast aside, and Doug's already out of bed. "It's today," he says, and then he leaves without saying anything else to Judy, or anything at all to Marva, who's still pissed at him. Judy keeps almost going back to bed, but somehow she winds up dressed, with a toaster pop in her hand, marching towards the door. Marva starts to say something, then shrugs.

Doug and Judy meet up for dinner at Punjabi Dhaba in Inman Square, scooping red-hot eggplant and bright chutney off of metal prison trays while Bollywood movies blare overhead and just outside of their line of vision.

The Conversation starts with them talking past each other. Judy says, "Lately I can't remember anything past the next month." Doug says, "I keep trying to see what happens after I die." Judy says, "Normally I can remember years in advance, even decades. But I'm blocked." She shudders. Doug says, "If I could just have an impression, an afterimage, of what happens when I'm gone. It would help a lot."

Judy finally hears what Doug's been saying. "Oh Jesus, not this. Nobody can see past death. It's impossible."

"So's seeing the future." Doug cracks his somosa in half with a fork, and offers the chunky side to Judy.

"You can't remember anything past when your brain ceases to exist. Because there are no physical memories to access. Your brain is a storage medium."

"But who knows what we're accessing? It could be something outside our own brains."

Judy tries to clear her head and think of something nice twenty years from now, but she can't. She looks at Doug's chunky sideburns, which he didn't have when they'd started dating. Whenever she's imagined those sideburns, she always associated them with the horror of these days. It's sweltering inside the restaurant. "Why are you scared of me?" she says.

"I'm not," Doug says. "I only want you to be happy. When I see you ten years from now, I —"

Judy covers her ears and jumps out of her seat, to turn the Bollywood music all the way up. Standing, she can see the screen, where a triangle of dancing women shake their fingers in unison at an unshaven man. The man smiles.

Eventually, someone comes and turns the music back down. "I think part of you is scared that I really am more powerful than you are," Judy says. "And you've done everything you can to take away my power."

"I don't think you're any more or less powerful than me. Our powers are just different," Doug says. "But I think you're a selfish person. I think you're used to the idea that you can cheat on everything, and it's made your soul a little bit rotten. I think you're going to hate me for the next few weeks until you figure out how to cast me out. I think I love you more than my own arms and legs and I would shorten my already short life by a decade to have you stick around one more year. I think you're brave as hell for keeping your head up on our journey together into the mouth of hell. I think you're the most beautiful human being I've ever met, and you have a good heart despite how much you're going to tear me to shreds."

"I don't want to see you any more," Judy says. Her hair is all in her face, wet and ragged from the restaurant's blast-furnace heat.

A few days later, Judy and Doug are playing foosball at a swanky bar in what used to be the Combat Zone. Judy makes a mean remark about something sexually humiliating that will happen to Doug five years from now, which he told her about in a moment of weakness. A couple days later, she needles him about an



incident at work that almost got him fired a while back. She's never been a sadist before now — although it's also masochism, because when she torments him, she already knows how terrible she'll feel in a few minutes.

Another time, Doug and Judy are drunk on the second floor of a Thayer Street frat bar, and Doug keeps getting Judy one more weird cocktail, even though she's had more than enough. The retro pinball machine gossips at them. Judy staggers to the bathroom, leaving her purse with Doug — and when she gets back, the purse is gone. They both knew Doug was going to lose Judy's purse, which only makes her madder. She bitches him out in front of a table of beer-pong champions. And then it's too late to get back to Judy's place, so they have to share Doug's cramped, sagging hospital cot. Judy throws up on Doug's favorite outfit: anise and stomach acid, it'll never come out.

Judy loses track of which unbearable things have already happened, and which lay ahead. Has Doug insulted her parents yet, on their second meeting? Yes, that was yesterday. Has he made Marva cry? No, that's tomorrow. Has she screamed at him that he's a weak mean bastard yet? It's all one moment to her. Judy has finally achieved timelessness.

Doug has already arranged — a year ago — to take two weeks off work, because he knows he won't be able to answer people's dumb tech problems and lose a piece of himself at the same time. He could do his job in his sleep, even if he didn't know what all the callers were going to say before they said it, but his ability to sleepwalk through unpleasantness will shortly be maxed out. He tells his coworker Geoffrey, the closest he has to a friend, that he'll be doing some Spring cleaning, even though it's October.

A few days before the breakup, Judy stands in the middle of Central Square, and a homeless guy comes up to her and asks for money. She stares at his face, which is unevenly sunburned in the shape of a wheel. She concentrates on this man, who stands there, his hand out. For a moment, she just forgets to worry about Doug for once — and just like that, she's seeing futures again.

The threads are there: if she buys this homeless man some scones from 1369, they'll talk, and become friends, and maybe she'll run into him once every few weeks and buy him dinner, for the next several years. And in five years, she'll help the man, Franklin, find a place to live, and she'll chip in for the deposit. But a couple years later, it'll all have fallen apart, and he'll be back here. And she flashes on something Franklin tells her eight years from now, if this whole chain of events comes to pass, about a lost opportunity. And then she knows what to do.

"Franklin," she says to wheel-faced guy, who blinks at the sound of his name. "Listen. Angie's pregnant, with your kid. She's at the yellow house with the broken wheelbarrow, in Sturbridge. If you go to her right now, I think she'll take you back. Here's a hundred bucks." She reaches in her new purse, for the entire wad of cash she took out of the bank to hold her until she gets her new ATM card. "Go find Angie." Franklin just looks at her, takes the cash, and disappears.

Judy never knows if Franklin took her advice. But she does know for sure she'll never see him again.

And then she wanders into the bakery where she would have bought Franklin scones, and she sees this guy working there. And she concentrates on him, too, even though it gives her a headache, and she "remembers" a future in which they become friendly and he tells her about the time he wrecked his best friend's car, which hasn't happened yet. She buys a scone and tells the guy, Scott, that he shouldn't borrow Reggie's T-Bird for that regatta thing, or he'll regret it forever. She doesn't even care that Scott is staring as she walks out.

"I'm going to be a vigilante soothsayer," she tells Marva. She's never used her power so recklessly before, but the more she does it, the easier it gets. She goes ahead and mails that Jollibee statue to Sukey.

The day of the big breakup, Marva's like, "Why can't you just dump him via text message? That's what all the kids are doing, it's the new sexting." Judy's best answer is, "Because then my bike would still be in one piece." Which isn't a very good argument. Judy dresses warm, because she knows she'll be frozen later.

Doug takes deep breaths, tries to feel acceptance, but he's all wrung out inside. He wants this to be over, but he dreads it being over. If there was any other way... Doug takes the train from Providence a couple hours early, so he can get lost for a while. But he doesn't get lost enough, and he's still early for their meeting. They're supposed to get dinner at the fancy place, but Doug forgot to make the reservation, so they wind up at John Harvard's Brew Pub, in the mall, and they each put away three pints of the microbrews that made John Harvard famous. They make small talk.

Afterwards, they're wandering aimlessly, towards Mass Ave., and getting closer to the place where it happens. Judy blurts out, "It didn't have to be this way. None of it. You made everything fall into place, but it didn't have to."

"I know you don't believe that any more," Doug says. "There's a lot of stuff you have the right to blame me for, but you can't believe I chose any of this. We're both cursed to see stuff that nobody should be allowed to see, but we're still responsible for our own mistakes. I still don't regret anything. Even if I didn't know today was the last day for you and me, I would want it to be."

They are both going to say some vicious things to each other in the next hour or so. They've already heard it all, in their heads.

On Mass Ave., Judy sees the ice cream place opposite the locked side gates of Harvard, and she stops her bike. During their final blow-out fight, she's not eating ice cream, any of the hundred times she's seen it. "Watch my bike," she tells Doug. She goes in and gets a triple scoop for herself and one for Doug, random flavors — Cambridge is one of the few places you can ask for random flavors and people will just nod — and then she and Doug resume their exit interview.

"It's that you have this myth that you're totally innocent and harmless, even though you also believe you control everything in the universe," Doug is saying.

Judy doesn't taste her ice cream, but she is aware of its texture, the voluptuousness of it, and the way it chills the roof of her mouth. There are lumps of something chewy in one of her random flavors. Her cone smells like candy, with a hint of wet dog.

They wind up down by the banks of the river, near the bridge surrounded by a million geese and their innumerable droppings, and Judy is crying and shouting that Doug is a passive aggressive asshole.

Doug's weeping into the remains of his cone, and then he goes nuclear. He starts babbling about when he sees Judy ten years hence, and the future he describes is one of the ones that Judy's always considered somewhat unlikely.

Judy tries to flee, but Doug has her wrist and he's babbling at her, describing a scene where a broken-down Doug meets Judy with her two kids — Raina and Jeremy, one of dozens of combinations of kids Judy might have — and Raina, the toddler, has a black eye and a giant stuffed tiger. The future Judy looks tired, makes an effort to be nice to the future Doug, who's a wreck, gripping her cashmere lapel.

Both the future Judy and the present Judy are trying to get away from Doug as fast as possible. Neither Doug will let go.

"And then 15 years from now, you only have one child," Doug says.

“Let me go!” Judy screams.

But when Judy finally breaks free of Doug’s hand, and turns to flee, she’s hit with a blinding headrush, like a one-minute migraine. Three scoops of ice cream on top of three beers, or maybe just stress, but it paralyzes her, even as she’s trying to run. Doug tries to throw himself in her path, but he overbalances and falls down the river bank, landing almost in the water.

“Gah!” Doug wails. “Help me up. I’m hurt.” He lifts one arm, and Judy puts down her bike, helps him climb back up. Doug’s a mess, covered with mud, and he’s clutching one arm, heaving with pain.

“Are you okay?” Judy can’t help asking.

“Breaking my arm hurt a lot more...” Doug winces. “...than I thought it would.”

“Your arm.” Judy can’t believe what she’s seeing. “You broke... your arm.”

“You can see for yourself. At least this means it’s over.”

“But you were supposed to break your leg.”

Doug almost tosses both hands in the air, until he remembers he can’t. “This is exactly why I can’t deal with you any more. We both agreed, on our very first date, I break my arm. You’re just remembering it wrong, or being difficult on purpose.”

Doug wants to go to the hospital by himself, but Judy insists on going with. He curses at the pain, stumbling over every knot and root.

“You broke your arm.” Judy’s half-sobbing, half-laughing, it’s almost too much to take in. “You broke your arm, and maybe that means that all of this... that maybe we could try again. Not right away, I’m feeling pretty raw right now, but in a while. I’d be willing to try.”

But she already knows what Doug’s going to say: “You don’t get to hurt me any more.”

She doesn’t leave Doug until he’s safely staring at the hospital linoleum, waiting to go into X-ray. Then she pedals home, feeling the cold air smash into her face. She’s forgotten her helmet, but it’ll be okay. When she gets home, she’s going to grab Marva and they’re going straight to Logan, where a bored check-in counter person will give them dirt-cheap tickets on the last flight to Miami. They’ll have the wildest three days of their lives, with no lasting ill effects. It’ll be epic, she’s already living every instant of it in her head. She’s crying buckets but it’s okay, her bike’s headwind wipes the slate clean.

### 3.1 QUESTIONS

1. Give a three-sentence summary of the story. Be creative!
2. What are the similarities and differences between Judy’s and Doug’s view of the future? Do you think these differences result from “objective” differences in their abilities or in their “subjective” responses to them?
3. If YOU were clairvoyant, who do you suspect would you be more like? Why?
4. What challenges do Judy and Doug have in “finding love”? How do they deal with these challenges?
5. Does the story give us any reason to think that either of them are “right” in the end?
6. Finally, does the ending leave us with any “hope” for the future? Is Doug destined to die miserable and alone? Is Judy destined to have a child die? Or might something else happen?