

Fast Forward

by R Brent Smith

In a medical lab at a mid-west university two researchers are intensely studying the readouts on an array of medical machines. These machines are all hooked through wires and tubes to a man in a bed. The man in the bed is clothed in a bluish-silver, tight-fitting body suit. The man, named Jason, their boss, is asleep. The two researchers, Sarah and Ramesh are anxious, focused on what the readouts are telling them. They are busily writing notes on clipboards, held tight. They periodically glance to Jason, their facial expressions a mix of worry and hope. They worry that they have committed an ethical blunder that will destroy their young careers and reputations before they have barely started. They worry that the man on the bed may never wake up or will wake up disabled. Their hope is that the man in the bed will revive, none the worse for his journey, and their nightmare will be over. They are calling out numbers and acronyms to each other, meaningless statistics to all but these two. Something in the numbers must be positive as their mood is swinging from worry more toward relief with an undertone of excitement. They are thinking, “We’ve done it!”

Sarah and Ramesh are two young post docs working on a game changing technology for space flight. Their boss, Jason, only a few years older than them, is the man in the bed. At the

thought that Jason will soon be revived, a new emotion surfaces in Sarah. She sighs, “It was kind of nice not having Jason around all this time.”

Ramesh puts a finger to his lips, raised eyebrows, eyes indicating Jason. A sign to say, “Careful, we don’t know whether he can hear us.”

Sarah instantly regrets her admission, but she knows that Ramesh knows exactly what she means. Jason is driven and expects his colleagues to share his passion and drive. He is harsh toward mistakes and unaccepting of failure. If he can’t solve a problem through his genius, he seems to think that he can beat it out of sheer will. He pushes Sarah and Ramesh hard, unrelenting and often cruelly; seemingly expecting them to pull off the impossible. But in the end, the tyranny of working for Jason has resulted in impressive results. Moreover, it will pay off in the future. Sarah already has a position with NASA waiting for her. Ramesh has an assistant professorship at a prestigious school awaiting him come fall.

The man on the bed moans. The two glance toward him. Sarah steps to the side of the bed and calls out, “Jason, Jason, are you awake?” She picks up his right hand and slaps the back of it gently at first. There is no reaction. The hand feels cold and lifeless. She rubs the back of the hand, squeezing the man’s fingers. “Jason, come back to us.” She sees his eyes rolling around under his closed lids. She calls out excitedly, “REM”. Ramesh moves to the bedside.

Ramesh scans the readouts on the devices before him. He says in a voice that is a mix of worry and hope, “All the numbers are normal. His heart rate, blood pressure, alpha waves are all normal. He should be waking up any moment now. Let’s remove the feeding tube.”

Sarah pulls at the tape holding the feeding tube. She grimaces as the tape rips at the short whiskers that have grown during Jason’s month ‘away’. She mutters, “This is gonna hurt.” She gives a quick tug and the tape rips from Jason’s cheeks. Sarah grasps the feeding tube and pulls it

free in one smooth slow pull. The tube slides out effortlessly. Jason, still not awake, coughs and groans at this uncomfortable procedure. Sarah tosses the tube and tape onto the floor and grasps Jason's hand. She rubs the back of his hand vigorously. "Jason, wake up."

Jason's eyes suddenly open. His blue eyes dart around the machinery stacked around him. His eyes lock on Sarah and he attempts to speak but he can't coordinate all the muscles needed to form words. A mash of unintelligible sounds result. Hearts miss a beat. This frightens his colleagues. Has the man become a babbling idiot? Has his motor function been damaged? Their fears are allayed when Jason tries again. He asks haltingly, "Did I do it?"

Ramesh and Sarah exchange glances, they heard the first person pronoun; Jason claiming their success for himself – the old Jason is back. Jason's ego aside, they have done it. What would normally be an exciting eureka moment worthy of fist pumps and jigs of joy is tempered by the relief that Sarah and Ramesh feel. The ordeal is finally over. The risk of being caught doing unauthorized human testing has evaporated. Jason has gone into deep human hibernation and come out the other end. Jason anxiously asks, "How long?"

Sarah smiles, "A month. You have slept for the full month, as planned."

Jason smiles a satisfied grin. He has done it. He has solved the puzzle of putting humans into a hibernative sleep, so-called suspended animation. His NASA sponsors are going to flip out. This will enable human travel to the planets, maybe even the stars.

Final checks done, they allow Jason to sit up. He feels dizzy at first. His systems need to re-adapt to wakefulness. Recovered from the spinning sensation, he asks, "So what did I miss?"

Ramesh gives a quick rundown on recent politics, sports and world affairs. Jason grunts, "So not much has changed then."

Ramesh shrugs, “It was only a month, man.” He glances at Sarah. She rolls her eyes. That month was a living hell. They lived in fear of being caught. Many times they had to lie to cover up Jason’s absence. Jason had cajoled and bullied them into putting him under against all their professional instincts. Human trials were not a part of their research contract with NASA. Getting such authorization could take years. Jason in his arrogance wanted to by-pass all of that. He wanted to try out his new invention. Unauthorized human testing, if caught, would ruin their careers and reputations. That month was the longest month of their lives.

Jason pumps a fist and mutters to himself, “I’ve done it!”

His colleagues keep Jason late into the night to ensure that he is suffering no ill effects from the long sleep. Finding nothing worth noting, they finally agree to let him go home. Jason stops on his way home for groceries. He has cravings for particular foods which he purchases in bulk sizes.

Once home, he tears into the things he has purchased, seemingly insatiable, he moves from one treat to another. Finally filled, he settles in front of the television. He flicks through various news feeds in order to catch up on what has happened since he ‘left’. Not long into the news he feels a rumble in his belly. This is followed by a belly ache with a sharp edge and more grumbling. Jason tosses down the remote and rushes off to the washroom. “Oops, time to pay the piper.” He knows exactly what is happening. After a month of liquid food, the sudden intake of processed food snacks has created chaos. His body is doing its best to flush out the offending input. Jason experiences explosive diarrhea that seems to have no end. While held in place he thinks about his recent experience. A cascade of meandering thoughts comes to him. His thoughts come to a moment just before he woke. A voice remarks, “It was kind of nice not having Jason around all of this time.” The comment stings him. It was Sarah who said it. Was

she just joking? Does she really dislike him so much? If so, why? What has he ever done to her? He resolves to ask her about it. Should he? Maybe he should let it slide; they are almost done with the project and will be going their separate ways. He certainly doesn't consider her to be a friend, just a professional colleague. Come to think of it, he doesn't have any friends. Is that odd? He doesn't need social interaction. He doesn't crave company. This gets him thinking about his future. Will he always be a lone wolf? Maybe he needs to make more connections with people. His shell is cracking but then he thinks that the effort to create and maintain relationships may be too much for him. With the storm in his guts having passed, he exits the washroom and returns to the couch to watch more news. He is still hungry and an internal debate rages on whether it is worth eating more just to end up back on the toilet. He decides to abstain and give his guts a chance to start recovering from the long sleep. He makes a mental note to himself to have lots of probiotics on hand if he ever does this again.

As he catches up on the news, noting the changes, he mumbles to himself, "Now I know what it must be like emerging from a coma." He mulls this thought over in his head and then expresses to himself, "or being a time traveler, emerging into the world at some future date." He thinks about this. This thought, this perspective, excites him. His pulse quickens and he feels a rush of adrenalin. "Yeah, a time traveler. I emerged a month into the future, not having aged at all. He rubs his chin. After a month in hibernation, there is the stubble of only a couple of day's growth, evidence of the bending of time and aging that his sleep has accomplished. He imagines skipping through time, stopping now and then to catch up on what has changed in the world. The news channels are telling him that precious little has changed in the time he was 'away'. There is still tension in the Middle East, war in Europe, the planet is still overheating and storms are worse than ever. Yada, yada, yada. Jason flicks off the TV and sits thinking about his new

perspective – time traveler. “I’m a frickin’ time traveler.” He begins to think about what would be needed to sleep longer, for years. Animals who hibernate can build up enough body fat to last one winter season. For his month away, his colleagues had to feed him a slurry of requisite proteins and vitamins. In order to go years, nourishment would have to be provided for the entire time. He would need machines, technology to create a system to do this autonomously. His musings slowly transition from speculating on the idea to planning for the reality. By sunrise, he has the outline of a plan. He has much work to do.

Jason reluctantly drives to the lab for further testing of his physical health by Sarah and Ramesh. He considers skipping the testing so that he can get started on his new project, but he knows that Sarah and Ramesh will fear that something has gone wrong if he doesn’t show up. When he arrives at the lab, Sarah and Ramesh are waiting. They have been messaging him every ten minutes, not willing to wait for him to arrive to ease their worried minds.

Ramesh runs a series of basic health checks. The only thing to note is a lot of rumbling in Jason’s digestive tract. “What the hell did you eat last night? Your guts are rumbling up a storm.”

Jason laughs, “Just about everything, all night. Never been so hungry. But most of it didn’t stop at the station.” Jason grimaces, “Now the amount of gas is shocking. Don’t put me near any flames.”

Once Ramesh is finished with his testing, Sarah runs Jason through a series of physical and mental tests. Jason breezes through these. At several points in the testing, Jason considers asking Sarah about her comment. Sarah catches Jason looking at her in a strange way a number of times. It makes her uncomfortable. Jason decides to let the comment ride. He doesn’t bring it up. As they are finishing up, Jason ventures, “This hibernation thing, it is like time travel.”

Sarah and Ramesh are finishing their notes and don't take much notice of the comment. Jason tries again. "I'd like to sleep longer. Travel further into the future. Long enough that substantial changes can happen. After all, to travel to the stars, the astronauts will have to sleep for years, decades even."

Sarah feels a flush of anger and says, "I'm not sitting around while you sleep for ten years. The single month just about killed us." The anger in her voice is clear.

Jason senses the anger directed toward him and mutters, "Well, at least you didn't have me around riding your ass."

Sarah looks at Ramesh. He returns her look with raised eye brows. They are both wondering if Jason's remark is because he had heard Sarah's comment when he was still not fully awake.

Jason doesn't want a fight and regrets his comment. He changes his tact, "I'm just saying that this, this lab, - it's a time machine."

Ramesh comments, "Except the trips are one way. You can never go back to where you started. Never back up in time."

Sarah adds, "You have lost that month when you were sleeping."

Jason shakes his head, "I don't look at it that way. I see it as a month gained – a month put in the bank for later. You guys are a month older, while I am what, a couple of days older?"

Ramesh snorts, "Sounds to me that it is a tedious way to achieve immortality."

Jason nods, "But doesn't everyone want to know what is in the future? We already know what happened on the past."

Sarah agrees, "Certainly, but the one-way nature of the time travel you are talking about is too permanent. I would want the option to come back."

Jason is an optimist. “Not me, I want to experience the future.”

Sarah jokes, “But what if the future you wake up to is dark – say AI has taken over and has enslaved humanity?”

Jason laughs at this preposterous future, “I am sure that is not going to happen.”

In reference to the Terminator movies, Ramesh suggests, “Don’t be so sure. You could find yourself being hunted by AI-piloted hunter-killer drones amid the ruins of civilization.”

Jason shakes his head. “You guys are ridiculous.”

Sarah offers, “Well, it doesn’t have to be dark. Maybe you will find your Weena and live happily ever after.”

Ramesh laughs at the reference. Jason gives Sarah a sour look for her trivializing his version of time travel.

Ramesh puts an end to the conversation. “Well as they say, no one can predict the future.”

The conversation has Jason ever more determined to explore the future. What will he find in the future? How will things turn out? Will the future edge toward utopia or will it head toward apocalypse? Who will he meet in the future? As Jason ruminates on these ideas about the future, Sarah and Ramesh return to their activities in the present. They don’t catch on that Jason is seriously committed to the idea of travelling into the future.

In the days that follow, Jason drops into the lab at random times and only for a few hours at that. He is distracted, barely interested in the work that needs to be done for the submission of the final report to NASA. Sarah is a little worried. She expresses her concern to Ramesh. “You’ve noticed that Jason is acting weird. Do you think it is a result of his hibernation, something we should be concerned about?”

Ramesh shrugs and chuckles, “Maybe it is a reaction to your comment about how nice it was not having him around. I kind of like the new Jason. He is chill, not constantly riding us. You should speak your mind more often.”

“But seriously. There is difference, right?”

“Yes, definitely. But all the tests that we can do appear normal. If it has affected his personality, for instance, that is beyond what we can test for. Besides, the change is for the better, if you ask me.”

“So, what do we do?”

“Well, we can’t put it in our reports because no one can know that we put Jason into hibernation. Let’s talk to him about it.”

Sarah is nervous about the suggestion. Jason was never one to share his personal life and even became angry if either of them brought it up in jest. “And how well do you think that is going to go?”

The following day, Ramesh manages to get the distracted Jason to sit down with them. Ramesh begins the conversation. “Jason, since you returned from your sleep, you have been different; distant, uninterested in our work.”

Jason looks to Sarah. She expects the worst, a vitriolic outburst. Instead, Jason sighs. “Sorry about that. I have a new project.” Jason sees the surprise and curiosity in his colleagues faces. He tries to downplay it. “It is just a concept that I am thinking about. Nothing that I can share with you yet. Besides you both have new jobs to go to. I have to work on getting my next project funded.”

Sarah is scrutinizing Jason's expressions. He is hiding something. She knows Jason and sees that this is the same old Jason. She says, doubtfully, "I see. You have a new project that you don't want to share with us so you are giving us this distracted act."

Jason would normally have been angered by such an accusation, angry that he could be read so easily. But he has already, in his mind, cut the cords with his colleagues. He is out of step, feels disconnected. In his mind, he is on a different timeline. To Jason, his colleagues know too much and their involvement, their knowledge of his plans could cause problems. In fact, they are a threat to his plans. He wants this discussion to end. He simply nods. Without apology he replies, "That's basically it."

Ramesh and Sarah look at one another. Ramesh shrugs and Sarah voices the thought, "Nope, the same old Jason." Jason lets the comment slide. Ramesh and Sarah return to their work, ignoring Jason and he likewise, ignores them, buried in his computer screen where he is planning his new project.

By the end of the week all of the equipment has been packed up. Jason has signed off on the final reports and they are sent to NASA. NASA will arrange a final briefing some weeks from now. The team goes out for a final celebratory dinner. At dinner, Jason is outgoing and friendly. The three talk about their successes on the project and what the future for this technology might hold. They talk about what each will be doing in the future. Sarah and Ramesh have their plans in place; jobs waiting. Jason, being vague about what he will be doing, says, "Other than the little project I am working on, I think I will rest a lot and do some travelling."

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The lecture hall at NASA headquarters is packed. The future of manned deep space exploration depends on a successful outcome from the research on human hibernation. The

crowd is getting restless. The NASA scientist overseeing the hibernation research, Dr. Liu is impatiently checking the time. He looks to Sarah and Ramesh, “Well, it looks like Jason is a no-show. Unbelievable!” Sarah and Ramesh are as exasperated as Dr. Liu. His would normally be a moment for Jason; a chance to bathe in the stardom of their achievement. It is a chance to take credit for cracking this tough nut. But he is AWOL. Jason, committed to his new project, has seemingly lost interest in this achievement. This is the height of irresponsibility. They just don’t understand Jason. He hasn’t been ‘present’ ever since he came back from his long sleep. Sarah assures Dr. Liu, “Something must have delayed him. We can start without him if you’d like.”

Dr. Liu checks the time once more and then agrees, “Yes, let’s get this moving.” He takes to the podium and addresses the assembled group of NASA’s top scientists and administrators. “I’m so sorry ladies and gentlemen for the delay but the lead researcher on this project has been delayed. Rather than wait any further, his colleagues, Dr. Sarah Green and Dr. Ramesh Patel will do the presentation.”

There is a grumble of relief from the audience. A researcher who knows Jason quips to his colleague, “Maybe now we will find out who really did the work.”

His colleague responds in fake astonishment, “Are you suggesting that Jason takes too much credit for the work of his team?” They both chuckle and then turn their attention to the podium where Sarah and Ramesh are beginning their presentation.

The presentation goes well. There are dozens of questions at the end. One senior administrator asks, “How confident are you that this work can be applied to humans?” This is a key concern for all since future plans for manned space flight depend on this technology.

Sarah leans to the microphone, “Humans have the same dormant genes that were activated in the test animals. The very same processes that we used to induce hibernation in the

test animals should work on humans. We see no reason to delay the start of human trials.”

Having given such a confident and measured response to this question, Sarah glances to Ramesh. He returns a slight nod of approval. They both know that a human trial has already been completed successfully but they can't reveal this to anyone. Keeping this a secret is killing them.

After the presentation, there is a light lunch served in an adjacent foyer. There, various people take the opportunity to congratulate Sarah and Ramesh on their success. There is an excited buzz about the place. The successful results of their research move the needle. If it can be successfully carried out on humans, it opens the door on deep space human exploration. It opens the door for possible colonization of Mars, exploitation of the resources of the solar system and travel to other star systems and other earth-like planets. All of which is impossible for humans without this technology.

One scientist confides to them, “You seem to be very confident that this can work on humans. Perhaps you have already done this and Jason's absence is because he is asleep somewhere?” Sarah and Ramesh see the smirk on the man's face and realize that the man is just jokingly speculating as to why Jason is missing. They both force a laugh at the man's joke while internally, their hearts are pounding.

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Ten days after the presentation at NASA, Jason suddenly wakes, unable to breath. His throat is raw. His eyes are caked in the dried fluids of an infection. His mouth is dry and nose plugged with mucus. He tugs at the feeding tube that runs up his nose and into his stomach. The tube is glued in place by the accumulated, dried mucus in his nose and sinuses. With a final painful tug, he rips the tube from his passages. He is immediately hit by a fit of coughing. He gags on the thick mucus and dry heaves. Several minutes of coughing and gagging follow. He

feels as if he is drowning. He rolls from the bed and is on his hands and knees. The coughing racks his frame. Between coughing fits, he is moaning, feeling worse than he ever has. Clearly a virus has been working on his sleeping form, doing its damage unchallenged by a sleeping immune system.

Several hours later, Jason is huddled in his bed, shivering from a high fever as his immune system has revved up and is fighting back against the invader. Jason has two layers of clothes on and several blankets in an attempt to stop the shivering.

Several days go by. The fever rages. Jason, in his youthful stubbornness, decides to wait it out rather than seek medical attention. He does no more than eat and sleep. His hunger is insatiable, compounded by a raging immune response burning calories that he doesn't have. Jason is worried that the fever is not dissipating. It could indicate a deep infection, something more life threatening than a viral infection. He has an internal debate about seeking medical help or at least calling Ramesh or Sarah to come and help him. In the end, fearful of too many questions about what he is up to, he decides to give it one more sleep before seeking help.

He sleeps for 16 hours. He awakes to find that he has kicked off his blankets during the sleep. The chills are gone, the aching muscles are quiet. His head is cleared of the pressure and throbbing ache. The fever has broken. He smiles to himself and stretches a long, luxurious stretch, welcoming the return of his health.

Jason curses himself for the thousandth time for skipping the quarantine period before putting himself into hibernation. This was the protocol that he and his team had established to ensure that just such a thing didn't happen. A full ten day quarantine is needed to ensure that the subject was perfectly healthy before entering hibernation. A sleeping immune system provides a weak response to any sort of infection.

Jason checks the status of his monitors and feeding systems. Except for the cold virus which was his fault for being so careless, everything worked perfectly. He had lost only a few pounds during the two week sleep. He was dehydrated upon waking but that probably had to do with the virus. Seeing that his automated setup worked so well, he decides to go for a longer sleep, six months.

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Jason wakes suddenly. His mouth is dry and his throat tight. He fears that he is once again waking to the ravages of some viral infection. He pulls the feeding tube. He lies on the bed for some time, taking stock of his condition. He has no infection in his eyes, no soreness in his throat other than discomfort from it being very dry. He stretches out, works his joints, they are stiff. He looks to his chronometer – a screen displaying the date and time. He smiles. He is six months into the future, right on schedule. He did it! He watches the screen displaying his vital signs. His core temperature is still below normal. Blood pressure and heart rate are normal. He pulls a blanket up over his body, he is feeling chilly.

Several hours later, Jason is sitting at his desk watching a screen showing the news. His stomach is rumbling and he is craving food but he first wants to check on how the world has changed. As he watches the news, he grows increasingly frustrated. He could be watching the news from six months ago – nothing much has changed.

He goes out for a long walk, he needs to move, stretch his muscles. He stops at the corner store for a large tub of pro-biotic yogurt. He passes people, many on their phones, engaged in their business of the day. He smirks at this. These people are trapped in their present. He is free of that, he transcends time. He is feeling special, superior, disconnected, out from under the temporal demands of life. He is free of deadlines, appointments, schedules and calendars. He is

free of that most tyrannical member of the four dimensions of space time; the only one that insists that we follow its arrow, never deviating, speeding toward our destiny, a train with no brakes.

It is a particularly pleasant day and he enjoys the sunshine and fresh air. He stops on a park bench. He observes the trees and grass. These go about their business of growing, absorbing sunshine and building matter from water and carbon dioxide. They are in no hurry, they slowly live their lives while generations of humans rush past, driven by the demands on their time. He now feels free of these demands. This gives him a peace of mind that he has never felt before. He feels more of a kinship to the trees, timeless. He is no longer driven by deadlines, project demands. There are no finish lines to cross. He has time to reflect. Sarah's comment comes to mind. He smiles as he realizes what a demanding prick he was. How did they put up with him? It was all about time. He was caught up in the race. Personal interactions and relationships were in the way. It was easier for him to just demand things, like a spoilt two-year old.

On further reflection, he thinks that modern humans are prisoners of their own industry. The society that they have created controls their lives from birth to death. They are trapped. There is no leaving that treadmill. Their personal commerce must be satisfied in order that they have food and shelter.

Before heading back to the lab, Jason pays a visit to the bank. There he moves all of his savings into long term investments. Returning to his lab, Jason begins preparations for his next time away.

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Fifteen years into the future, Jason emerges to the strangest scene. Exiting the university biology building where his lab is hidden below, he sees several people walking across the

campus. They are wearing helmets. They look like football helmets with the dark-tinted visor except the face mask has been removed. The helmets are brightly coloured. Jason dismisses these as some sort of strange university experiment. He scans the portion of the campus before him. He sees changes. A tall white marble residence building has sprouted up behind the biology building. Trees have been planted along the walking path, shading it from the sun. A bus station has appeared opposite the biology building where several dome covered cars are sitting. Within the bus shelter are two people. Curiously, they too are wearing the helmets. Jason walks the short distance to the entrance to the university grounds. Across a wide street is the town centre. He sees that the skyline of the town centre is quite different from when he last saw it. Several tall glass and steel condominium building are new. The sidewalks are crowded with people moving to and fro, quite normal for this busy location. What is strange is that here too everyone is wearing the helmets that he saw on the campus. These are also brightly coloured, yellow, pink, silver, gold, sky blue, all bright colours. One helmet has a cellophane look to it that reflects changing rainbows of colour. The helmets give everyone a bulbous head look. It reminds him of the character Gazoo from the old Flintstones cartoons. Children are also wearing helmets, a scaled down version, apparently. It is more of a head band with a small screen over one eye. Helmets-in-training, he thinks to himself with a smirk. On the road, sleek cars speed by. These all have a glass dome for a roof. In the sky, some 50 ft above there is a stream, no a river, of drones whirring by. Staring at the scene before him, he hears a loud beeping, like that of a truck backing up. Looking toward the sound, he sees one drone drop to the sidewalk. A man in a yellow helmet walks up to it and extracts a package. The drone waits for the man to back away and beeping once again, the drone rises back into the sky, package delivered.

Jason steps onto the sidewalk and begins moving with the flow of people. He is moving slowly, looking around in dismay. Most people, moving faster than he, have to flow around him. He can't see the eyes of the people because of the dark visors they wear. He finds this very disconcerting. Despite not being able to see their eyes, he gets the feeling that he is being stared at. There are slight tilts of the head toward him; people take a wide berth as they pass. He hears voices. They are talking to him. No, to themselves, no, to someone on the other end of the line. As a woman passes, Jason gets a view from the side. He can see that the inside surface of the visor has the image of another person. He gazes into the side of another passers-by helmet and sees a document on display. While distracted by the scene inside the helmet, he walks into a sign post. He stumbles back into a woman who is passing by. She shouts, "Hey!" just before Jason knocks her to the ground. On landing on her back, her pink helmet flies off and crashes into the wall of a building. It ends up upside down, performing a wobbly spin.

Jason falls into the woman, ending up on top her. He frantically climbs off of her while apologizing profusely. "I am so sorry. I should have been watching where I was going."

The woman is pissed. This clod not only knocked her down but then violated her personal space. Her PIC was tossed aside just as her boss was speaking to her. Jason offers a hand up. She waves him off and rolls onto her knees before regaining her feet. Angrily she spits, "What the hell! Watch where you're going." The woman is attractive, lots of red hair, pale skin and intense green eyes. Her red lips are pursed in anger.

Jason fetches her helmet and is handing it to her. As she takes it, she demands, "Where is your PIC?" The tone is one of disapproval, distrust, perhaps suspicion.

Jason has no idea what she is talking about. "My what?"

"Your PIC – personal intelligent cap."

“Oh that helmet thing. I don’t have one.”

The woman scoffs, “That’s absurd. Everyone has one.” She seems to be looking around for his PIC.

“No, really. I am not from here.”

Again she scoffs, “Not from this world maybe.”

“That’s it. Really, I am not from this world.”

The woman stops her huffing and puffing and looks at Jason dubiously. “That’s your excuse? You’re not from around here?” She locks gaze with Jason.

He feels uncomfortable in her intense gaze, like she is scolding him. This woman is a force. He shrugs, “Why else would I not have a helmet.”

“Maybe you are one of those Objectors or a criminal.” She says this with a tone of disgust in her voice. She is inspecting her PIC. It is not working. She drops her arm in frustration, letting the non-functional device dangle. “Damn! It’s busted.”

Desperately, Jason offers, “Let me buy you a new one.”

She looks at him strangely. “You can’t buy these. The government issues them. They are probably freaking out because I am suddenly off line.”

Jason is confused. “The government cares that you are not on-line? Are you somebody important?”

The woman sighs, “Nobody important, just me, but they track everyone.”

Jason is shocked by this admission. He has visions of ‘1984’, except this version of the world is bright and colourful. He is both intrigued and worried. Has the world become one where the government controls everything you do? He looks about, half expecting men in black uniforms to sweep down on them. It doesn’t happen. Another thought pushes the paranoia from

his mind. He has finally arrived in a time that is different from his. He needs to know more. Perhaps this woman can help him learn about this world. He ventures, "Can I buy you a coffee?"

She looks at him as if he has two heads, "Coffee? No one drinks coffee anymore. You can buy me a zoom juice." She points to a shop just behind them. She leads him into the shop. They enter. Jason sees a room filled with dark pillars rising up from the floor to stand seven feet high. They are spaced out so that one can easily walk around them. The woman approaches one. She shakes her busted PIC and grumbles, "Have to do this the old fashioned way." She touches a panel on the pillar and a screen lights up. It appears to be a touch screen as she touches it several times in response to prompts. Images of drinks appear on the screen and she touches one of the images twice. Seconds later another panel opens and two cups are sitting there. She reaches in and extracts one of the cups and hands it to Jason. While she is reaching for the second cup, Jason inspects the liquid in the cup. It is green and thick like a milkshake. He involuntarily makes a disgusted face. The woman catches the expression. "What, you've never had a zoom juice before?"

Embarrassed to be caught prejudging the liquid he raises it to his lips and takes a tentative sip. The texture is that of slime and he almost gags. The taste however is wonderful. In his surprise and relief his reaction is overblown, 'Hey, this is actually good.'

The woman laughs. "Come, let's sit in the corner over there." He follows her like a puppy. Halfway to the table he realizes that he is depending on this woman a little, no, a lot, too much. He recomposes himself, tells himself that he is in charge.

Sitting at the table, she holds out a fist, "My name is Rebecca."

Jason completes the fist bump and says, “Jason, pleased to meet you.” She makes eye contact. Those green eyes are smiling back at him. He shivers with delight, can’t help but smile. “I’m sorry for bumping into you like that. I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going.”

“Obviously.” After a pause she offers, “I’ve never met anyone like you. You seem really distracted, almost lost. It’s like everything is new to you.”

“Like I said, I am new around here. Your world is quite different from where I came from.”

Rebecca voices what she has been wondering since she first bumped into Jason. “I’ve never met an Objector before.”

“Objector? I don’t even know what that means.”

She shoots him a surprised, thoughtful look. Maybe this guy really is from somewhere else. “Objectors are those renegades who refuse to wear a PIC. They refuse to be under government watch. It’s a crime. You could be arrested walking around like you are.”

“I’m not an Objector. Well, maybe I would be one. I wouldn’t want the government tracking my every move, every word. Haven’t you read the novel 1984?”

Rebecca shakes her head, “Never heard of it.”

“Hmmm.” Jason is thinking that she may be living it.

“What does that mean?” Rebecca feels judged for not knowing some obscure book with a number for a title.

Jason senses the irritation in her voice. In the past, he would have been oblivious of such reactions but his perspective is different now. It is outward looking, ready to absorb input from others. Besides, this woman of the future intrigues him. Her emotions are easy to read, in this case, annoyed. He decides to change the subject, but to what? He blurts out, “Are you married?”

Rebecca is taken aback by such a sudden turn into her personal life. “What is it to you?”

Jason blushes. “Sorry. I wanted to change the subject. A bit too personal, I guess.”

“Yes it was.” She gives him a coy smile, “Single, I’m not seeing anyone.”

Jason adds awkwardly, “Me too.”

Now Rebecca attempts to change the subject. “So where are you from?”

Jason is vague, “Near here.”

“Never seen you before.”

“How could you. You’ve got your head buried in that PIC.”

Defensively Rebecca responds, “The visor superimposes my work/calls over a display of my immediate surroundings. I would have seen you. You stand out with that scruffy beard, messy hair and those ... clothes.”

Jason acts insulted, “Hey. Easy. I’ve been away for quite some time. Just got back. I’m a traveler.”

Rebecca snorts in disbelief, “No one travels without a PIC. You’re putting me on. In fact, you seem to be one big lie.” She smirks. Who is this strange man? Why is he so odd? Why is he lying? What is he hiding? Why does she find him so intriguing? Any other time or place she might run away in fear.

He responds, apologetically, “Not lying. Just being evasive.”

“Why?”

“Well, I am on a personal adventure and the less people know about it the better.”

“Okay, so you can tell me. I am only one more person and we will probably never meet again.”

Jason snorts. “With that helmet thing, you can blast my story across the planet in seconds.”

Rebecca responds ruefully, “Remember, you broke it.”

“Yeah, there is that. Well, you won’t believe my story anyway.”

“Try me.” She looks at him, a twinkle in her green eyes.

He likes this woman. She has a spirit about her. He takes this as a challenge. In a lowered voice he confesses, “Okay, I am a time traveler.”

Rebecca breaks into a broad smile and adds a derisive laugh, “Nice try. You’re trying to see how gullible I am. What’s the real story or are you just stalling for time until you can think of something?”

Jason sits back in his seat, “See, I told you that you wouldn’t believe me.”

“Yeah, but that’s just crazy.”

“Okay, have you ever heard of suspended animation – like in space travel?”

“Oh, sure. They used it when people travelled to the Mars colony.”

Jason asks, excited that his invention is being used. “There is a colony on Mars?”

She looks at him, surprised that he wouldn’t know this. “Not any more. It was just too hard to maintain it and people didn’t do well there. They called it Mars psychosis.” Jason’s excitement fades. He is disappointed and sits silently brooding for several seconds.

Rebecca breaks the silence, “Hello, I’m still here.”

“Oh sorry. It’s just that I invented suspended animation.”

She looks dubious. Will the lies never stop? “Is anything you say truthful?”

“No, I mean, yes. I developed it for NASA some years back. I tried it out and slept for a month. When I woke, I was in the future by a month. Since then, I have been taking longer and

longer sleeps. A year, several years, and now fifteen years to arrive here in your time. Boy, things have changed, maybe not for the better.”

“What do you mean?”

“1984.”

“I still don’t know what that means.”

“You say the government issues those PICs and expects everyone to wear one. It seems to me that they are keeping tabs on everyone. Keeping everyone in line. How does a criminal commit a crime these days?”

In a tone that indicates that her comment is directed at him, she says, “They take off their PIC.”

Jason suddenly feels judged. “That would explain the sense that people were looking at me, avoiding me. They were wondering if I was an Objector or a criminal avoiding observation.”

“Could be. You do look the part. You are lucky the police didn’t pick you up.”

Jason snorts, “What, it’s a crime to be out without a PIC?”

“Uh, yeah. It can carry a serious penalty depending on whom you are and why you don’t have your PIC. For you, it would probably be pretty stiff – nothing you say is truthful or makes sense.”

“Good thing I didn’t run into any cops then.”

“Or drones.”

“Drones?”

“Yeah, drones patrol the sky, they have cameras on everything. You must not have been wandering around for very long or surely they would have spotted you.”

“I wasn’t out for long, maybe five minutes before I knocked you down. The picture you paint of a society that watches and knows our every move disturbs me.”

“Hey, as long as you do nothing wrong, there is nothing to worry about.”

“I suppose. Big Brother has arrived.”

“What?”

“Another reference to that book that you have never heard of.”

“What’s with this book and you?”

“It’s just that in that book, written long before technology arrived, the government controlled everyone and those who didn’t toe the line were arrested and reprogrammed, taught how to behave in the way the government expected. Sounds a lot like now. It wasn’t a nice world to be in.”

She shrugs. “My world is just fine. I think I was about to receive a big promotion from my boss when you crashed into me.”

“Congrats.”

“Thanks. I hope he doesn’t give it to someone else while I am off line.” She decides to test Jason’s story. “So, let’s say I believe you about this time travelling. Why do you do it?”

“I am curious about the future and it gives me a sense of immortality. Everyone I knew is now much older while I have aged very little. I have visited several futures, this being my latest. On my other stops, not much had changed. Your time however, is quite different.”

Sarcastically, she says, “I feel special. So now what?”

Jason wants to continue interacting with this interesting woman. “Maybe you could show me around, teach me about your time, and get me a PIC, teach me how to use it.”

She looks at her broken PIC. “Well, my day is shot now. I have some free time. What do you want to know?”

“Everything.”

“Well, I could take you on a tour of the city but without my PIC, we can’t get a ride and walking around with no PIC could get us arrested.”

“Wow, you really are helpless without that thing. Let me look at it.”

“Why?”

“Maybe I can fix it. Maybe there is just a loose connection.”

Thinking that she has penetrated his lies, she asks, “How can you fix something that until a few hours ago, you said you had never seen?”

He shrugs, “Electronics are all the same. It is usually a bad connection that causes a failure.”

She passes him the PIC. He looks inside. There are no wires or connections visible, all of the electronics must be inside the PIC itself. He is pulling at the foam lining to get at the underlying wires when the visor screen suddenly lights up. With a satisfied grin, he passes the helmet back to Rebecca. “There, it is working now.”

Rebecca takes the PIC, not taking her disbelieving eyes off of Jason. “How?”

Jason plays it cool. He has no idea why the helmet suddenly started working again. “I’m a genius.”

Rebecca inspects the PIC, slips it over her head. “Damn. Thanks.” She says, “Ride to my location.” She then excuses herself and calls up her boss. She apologizes for the sudden disconnect saying some clod crashed into her while she was walking. While saying this to her boss, she winks at Jason. She explains that it temporarily put her PIC off line. Her boss then

reschedules her for the next day. Rebecca signs off and stands, offering Jason a hand. “Come. Our ride is outside.”

By the time they exit the shop, there is a car sitting at the curb. They climb in and Rebecca says, “Ocean City Five.” The car pulls out from the curb and joins the traffic. Jason is fascinated. The car has no driver. The inside has two benches facing one another. The glass dome of the vehicle gives a 360 degree view.

Jason asks in dismay, “Are all cars self-driving?”

Rebecca replies as if the answer should be obvious, “Of course.”

Jason feels a little uncomfortable. “Is it safe?”

“Would you rather I drive the car?”

“Do you know how to drive?”

“No one does anymore.”

“Then I guess I don’t want you driving.”

“Smart choice.” Rebecca looks at Jason, thinking that this strange man really is out of place. His curiosity about everything is child-like.

Jason is looking up through the dome of the car when he sees a car-sized craft fly over head. This draws his attention to the sky. Looking around, he sees several similar craft speeding by over head. “What are those?”

Rebecca looks up, wondering what he is referring to. On seeing a craft fly past she catches on, “Oh, those are sky cabs.”

Jason is like a kid in a candy store. He asks enthusiastically, “Can we go on one.”

Rebecca sighs, “They are usually only for the rich and famous but yes, we can take one. They are expensive. I hope you have some coin on you.”

Jason, like a child denied a sweet treat says sadly, “No, I don’t have any money on me, but I can get some. I have investments. Is there a bank we can go to?”

Rebecca informs Jason that the banks are all virtual. He needs to contact the bank through a PIC with his ID information.

“But I don’t have a PIC or any ID. Is there another way?”

“Hmm. Maybe we do need to get you a PIC.” Believing that a ride on a sky cab is out of the question, Jason’s expression drops. Seeing this, Rebecca relents. “I’ll pay for one short sky cab ride but you have to pay me back.”

Jason thanks her profusely and she feels good about her generosity. She has to laugh at Jason’s boyish enthusiasm. Jason reacts to the laugh, “What’s so funny?”

“You are. It’s your enthusiasm and your way of convincing me to do things against my will.”

Jason thinks about his past and his bullying behavior toward his co-workers. He feels a bit of shame. He says concerned, “I don’t want to bully you. If you don’t want to do it, just say so.”

“No, no. I’ve always wanted to ride in a sky cab. I just never had a good enough excuse.”

Some twenty minutes later they are seated in a sky cab. The body of the sky cab is almost identical to that of the car they rode in except for the four rotors mounted to the corners of the vehicle.

The sky cab takes off vertically, accelerating upward. Jason’s stomach drops. He can see from Rebecca’s expression that she has the same sensation. Once at altitude, the sky cab moves toward their destination, weaving around several particularly tall buildings. They pass a number of other sky cabs, passing overhead or below them at a comfortable distance. This being the first

sky cab ride for either of them, the two share the emotions of the ride, the adrenalin rush and the stunning views. Both are disappointed when the sky cab lands atop a high rise building.

Climbing from the cab they are facing one another. Each wears a broad grin and they laugh together, still feeling the excitement of the ride. Jason gushes, "Thank you so much. That was worth every dollar."

Rebecca reminds him, "Every one of my dollars. But, thank you for encouraging me to do that. It was fantastic."

Jason looks around at the rooftop and asks, "So where are we?"

"This is my parent's apartment building."

Jason is confused. "Why are we here?"

"You wanted to go for a sky cab ride. I needed to give it a destination to take us to. Come." She takes him by the hand and leads him to a door across the roof top from where their cab landed. As they enter the doorway to the building, a drone hovers over the building. This drone is collecting information; sending a video of a man without a PIC to the Department of Compliance.

Inside the door are several elevators. They take one down to the 24th floor. There is something odd about the building. Jason struggles to put his finger on it. Arriving at her parent's floor, they enter a hallway. They walk past several doors. Jason stops and stares at one of the doors. The door looks industrial, like the door to an office. He comments, "Looks like an office door." She laughs, "That's because it is. This used to be an office building. With the PICs providing us with everything we need to do our jobs, no one uses brick and mortar offices anymore so they have all been converted to apartments."

"All of them?"

“Yes, it solved the housing crisis. People can once again afford accommodation.”

“Genius. What an unexpected twist – computer tech solving the housing crisis.”

They continue down the hall and stop at a plain brown door. Rebecca places her hand on a metal plate that is imbedded in the door at shoulder height. Instantly, Jason hears a soft click and Rebecca reaches down and turns the door knob.

Jason asks, “Are we meeting your parents?”

‘No. They are not home. But we can get some lunch while we are here.”

They enter the apartment. Inside is a bright, but tiny room. Floor to ceiling windows line one side of the room. Through the windows Jason sees a vast panoramic cityscape. “Wow. Look at that view.” He steps to the window but notices something odd about the image. There is no sensation of moving within the scene, no parallax, no three dimensional perspective.

Rebecca sees the puzzled looks on Jason’s face. “It is an image. They have no actual windows.”

Jason steps back and scans the image once more. “Damn, that ruined the illusion.” He turns from the image to take in the rest of the apartment. To the left is a kitchen. The entire kitchen consists of a single wall of cabinets, fifteen feet long. A countertop protrudes at waist level. Built into the wall of cabinets are appliances, a stove, a fridge, microwave, and several other appliances that Jason doesn’t recognize. Below the counter top are more cabinets. Jason is impressed with the efficient use of space. Rebecca moves swiftly from cabinet to fridge to counter, assembling the ingredients for a couple of sandwiches. The living room where Jason is standing is large enough for a single couch and coffee table, facing the fake windows. At one end of the room is a wall with shelving. At the other end of the room in a doorway, Jason assumes

this leads to washrooms and bedrooms. As he looks around, Jason nods, “Nice place, for an old office.”

Rebecca smiles, “Because of my parents’ income, they have one of the fancier apartments.”

Jason snorts and says sarcastically, “What, the cheaper apartments get real windows?”

Rebecca is a little confused by his tone. “Yes, no one wants real windows. You get drones and sky cabs flying by at all times of the day and night.”

Jason nods as he now better appreciates the value of the fake windows.

“So what is it you do?”

“A lot of everything. I work for a large corporation. I am their marketing department. I create audio-visual content for their on-line presence. I advertize their products, communicate with shareholders, manage and monitor social media traffic.”

“Sounds like a lot for one person.”

Rebecca realizes that Jason doesn’t understand what the PICs do. “That’s where my PIC comes in. It has an AI that does all the leg work for me. It writes copy, generates original images and videos all at my direction. With my PIC, I can do it all very efficiently. My skill is managing the activities of the AI to get maximum output. Those who can best use AI will never have to worry about a job.”

“Interesting. In my time, AI was just emerging on the scene and there was a lot of conjecture about how it would shape the world.” There is silence as Jason absorbs this new insight to this future world. Rebecca is telling herself that this time travel thing can’t be real but Jason’s reactions and statements all seem to make sense only under the assumption that he is telling the truth about being from the past.

Sitting down to eat, Rebecca asks, “So how does this time travel thing work?”

“I use suspended animation, hibernation to sleep through the years. I hardly age and when I awake, I am in the future.”

“But why would you leave your life behind, everyone you know and love.”

Jason feels the sting of loneliness at this. He avoids answering directly. “But who wouldn’t want to travel into the future, to see what wondrous changes have occurred.”

Rebecca admits, “I guess so if you are willing to leave everything behind. You know, I looked up who developed human hibernation. There is a picture of the team. You look the same.”

Jason smiles, his point proven. “See, I wasn’t lying.”

“But this is fantastic. You should tell someone about it.”

Jason smirks as he looks at Rebecca. “I did and they didn’t believe me.” Rebecca gives Jason a playful slap on the side of the head. “Besides, I don’t want the attention. I want to be able to live my life as I please.”

“Interesting.” Rebecca seems to be in deep thought. Her world isn’t perfect. Maybe there is something to be said for seeking a better future. When Rebecca finally resumes her meeting with her boss, she learns that the company has deemed that her AI is ready take over her role. Just like that, she is unemployed. The AI is downloaded from her PIC and she receives a new AI, having all of her personal history but none of her work history. Her employment profile receives a gold star rating from her employer that she will use to find a comparable job elsewhere. She sets about reaching out to a number of employment services and within a mere three days, she has an interview appointment for a promising new job lined up.

Jason is curious about the sudden change in fortune. He asks, “I thought you said you were good at your job. Why would they suddenly terminate you?”

“I *am* good at my job.”

“Then what happened?”

“They determined that my AI was ready to take over.”

“What?”

Rebecca realizes that Jason doesn’t understand the relationship between the AI and its ‘host’. “The AI that I use to do my job is a learning program. As it works with me, it learns how I interpret things, how I react to inputs and the decisions I make. Before long, it can simulate my actions; do the job just as well as I do. The AI keeps score, once it reaches the point where it can accurately model my reactions, it is ready to take over. I am no longer needed.”

“Sounds harsh.”

“Well, I am paid for how well I use the AI. The company benefits because I train the AI well and quickly. In a relatively short time, they have an AI that can run their marketing – a perfect employee, no salary, no benefits, and no HR issues.”

“I get it. But now you have to find a new job.” Jason has a sudden realization. “In fact, your employer, through this AI, has you still working for them but are not paying you for it.”

Rebecca nods, “Basically. It works out well for companies. Those companies who can attract the best talent to train their AI’s have an advantage. I demand a high salary because of my skill in training AI’s. I will also get a new job quickly.”

“Interesting. So companies are run by AI’s while the human work force is transient, temporary. That minimizes salaries and they are not paying for office space either. Wow.”

#

Rebecca lives in a low rise apartment building near the university where they ‘bumped’ into one another. Jason ends up staying with Rebecca for several weeks. While there, he spends several frustrating days attempting to access his funds. But without a PIC and an official identification, the bank will not recognize his claim. The technology has locked him out, put a firewall between he and his funds.

#

While Jason is enjoying his time with Rebecca, the wheels are turning at the Department of Conformity (DoC). His image, captured by the drone, matches no one in the data bases. The sudden appearance of this unidentifiable man attracts the attention of the DoC. The job of the DoC is to ensure that everyone is connected and providing useful input to those in charge, ultimately making them richer. Those who don’t cooperate are targeted by the DoC, arrested and reprogrammed. It serves a dark purpose that no one talks about. The DoC is this world’s bogeyman. Its’ very mention kills conversations and is met with frightened stares. It is this society’s version of Orwell’s Thought Police. To mention the DoC in polite company is considered crass and vulgar. Perhaps by never mentioning it, it seems a little less real and more of a fable. Free runners like Jason, are not allowed. The DoC is coming for him.

#

What starts as two strangers enjoying touring around town grows into something much more. Jason falls hard for Rebecca and her for him. Their romantic adventure comes to a screeching halt when Rebecca receives a pair of message. In the first message, her interview has suddenly been cancelled. No reason is given. Attempts to contact the potential employer for an

explanation go unanswered. She later receives a call from a friend, Ashley, who works for her former employer. “Rebecca, I received a call from the Department of Compliance.” In Rebecca’s world, hearing from this government agency is never a good thing.

Concerned, Rebecca responds, “Oh, my God. What did you do?”

There is silence for a moment and then Ashley sets Rebecca straight, “He wasn’t asking about me. He is interested in you and your new friend, Jason. He wanted to know about your relationship with him.” Then in an apologetic tone, she says, “I had to be honest with him.”

Rebecca is suddenly in a fog of shock. After a moment to gather her thoughts, she responds, “Yes, of course. What did you tell him?”

“That you have been seeing Jason for a few weeks. I told him that I knew nothing much about Jason, just that he seemed to be a nice guy. He mentioned that Jason has no official identification. Is that true?”

Rebecca bites her lip. She doesn’t want her friend to get into trouble. “I think the less you know the better.”

“Rebecca, I’m worried. What are you doing?”

“I’m not doing anything. I’m sure this is some mistake.” Rebecca suddenly understands why her job interview was cancelled. No one wants anything to deal with the DoC. The man must be poking around a lot. “Thanks for the warning. I really appreciate it.” She disconnects the call before Ashley can respond.

This gets Rebecca worried because of the stories she has heard about the DoC. She has heard stories of people disappearing after being visited by the DoC – a sort of modern day Bogeyman for adults.

She turns to Jason and in a voice filled with worry, “They are coming for you.”

“Who is coming for me?”

“The DoC, Department of Compliance. They ensure that everyone follows our societal norms.” She points to her head.

“And societal norms include wearing and using your PIC?”

“Exactly. Those who don’t are arrested.”

Jason gives a knowing nod. “I knew there was something off. No government provides technology to the people without an ulterior motive. My instincts were right.” Jason is quiet for a moment, and then he asks, “So how does this play out?”

“Well, you will be arrested and charged with the crime of non-compliance. I might be arrested for my association with you.” Jason wonders just how serious a crime such a violation could be but the look on Rebecca’s face tells a story.

“I take it this ‘crime’ is taken very seriously.”

Rebecca is pale, “Very. People disappear.”

Anger rises in Jason at the thought of such an omnipresent authority. In a snarky tone he says, “I am not purposefully non-compliant. I would take a PIC if I could.”

Rebecca’s frustration is rising. Jason is not taking this seriously. “I don’t think the defense that you are from another time will work with these people.”

Jason finally realizes how worried Rebecca is. He tones it down. “So what now?”

Rebecca feels helpless, “Well, they are coming. There is not much time.”

Jason suggests, “What’s to stop us from running away, going into hiding?”

“There is nowhere to hide, surveillance is everywhere.”

Jason is quiet, thinking. “I have an idea.”

“What?”

“We could escape in time. Jump to a new world in the future.”

“We could do that?”

“Yes. You could come with me. We awake in a few years’ time and your DoC will have forgotten about us. Perhaps society will have changed for the better by then – be more tolerant of personal choices.”

“Or be more oppressive.”

“That’s a risk, but then we just jump again.”

Rebecca is excited at the idea. “Yes, Let’s do it. I have nothing here. Now I can’t get a job and face possible discipline from the DoC.”

The two are excited at the idea of travelling into the future together.

Rebecca asks, “So how does it work, your time travel?”

“Well, I put you into a hibernative sleep. Machines monitor your life signs and will wake you up if anything goes wrong. Tubes feed you. I wake every six months to service the equipment. How far into the future should we go?”

Rebecca, being nervous about the long sleep, suggests, “How about a year?”

Jason shakes his head, “In my experience, nothing much changes over such a short time. I’d suggest a couple of years. By then, maybe they will have forgotten about me.”

Rebecca reluctantly agrees. Jason generates a list of the items he needs to create the nutrient rich solution for the intravenous feed. Rebecca orders the items. They will be delivered by drone. Once they have the supplies, they will go to Jason’s lab and spend their quarantine time there before going to sleep.

It takes several days for all of the items to arrive. Jason and Rebecca are getting more anxious as the days pass, fearing an uninvited knock on her apartment door. On the second day

of waiting Rebecca grows quiet, moody. Jason puts it down to the stress of waiting with the threat of a visit from DoC at any moment. One day an unexpected delivery arrives, a new PIC for Rebecca to replace her broken one. It is the same pink colour. Her old PIC is to be shipped to a government depot for repair or disposal.

Several days later, the last delivery of items needed for their sleep arrives. Rebecca receives a message that the drone has arrived. She asks Jason to go up to the roof to retrieve the package. He has to wear her old PIC so that the drone will communicate with it and release its cargo to him. Returning to the apartment moments later, delivery in his arms, he calls to Rebecca, "Okay, I have the stuff." Hearing no reply, he calls again, "Rebecca." Still no answer. Puzzled, he puts the delivered package on the kitchen counter and calls once again. It is then that he spies the small piece of paper on the counter. Nerves tingling, Jason suspects the worst. He picks up the note, written in Rebecca's looping hand.

Dearest Jason,

It is with a broken heart that I have to tell you that I cannot come with you. But you must continue with our plan before the DoC come for you. Please do this; it is your only way out. Do not come looking for me, I have gone to a friend's home. Please respect my decision and save yourself.

Later, Love Rebecca

While Jason was retrieving the package, Rebecca had slipped out and boarded a waiting car. Jason rushes down to the street to stop her but on arriving there, she is nowhere in sight. In shock, Jason returns to the apartment. He rereads the letter. In disbelief, he collapses to the couch. "No, no, Why? We had it all figured out." Jason begins to weep. He is deeply frustrated. His frustration turns to anger. In his disappointment and anger he fails to read the love that is in

the note, only the rejection. He doesn't take note of the sign off, 'later', an indication that she is not rejecting him, just putting them on hold. In his rage, he says to himself, "She planned this. She waited until I left and then ran away." Jason angrily packs up his last few items, jamming the now crumbled up sheet of paper into his pocket.

Just then there is a loud knock on the door. It is a brisk, hard rap, transmitting authority. The screen on the wall of the living room shows a scene just outside the apartment door. It does this automatically, any time someone comes to the door. There in the hallway are three men dressed in black. Their PIC's are black with the DoC logo clearly emblazoned on them. Jason's heart jumps. He freezes, not knowing what to do. The officer closest to the door knocks again, louder and more intense. Jason instinctively scans around the small living quarters for somewhere to hide. One of the other officers at the door pulls his comrade back from the door. "Hold on, she is on the move. Her new PIC has been picked up on Center Street. She's on foot." Officers turn from the door and rush back down the hallway. Jason, heart pounding, sits on the couch in Rebecca's apartment watching these men disappear down the hallway. Jason doesn't know what to do. Does he run after Rebecca? Her note is adamant that he not try to follow her. What happened? What did he do wrong? Feeling double crossed, rejected, his anger rises. His logical mind tells him that now is the time to slip away to the lab while the DoC men are in pursuit of Rebecca. But his emotional side worries what will happen to her when they catch her? He sits in indecision for many minutes, his window to escape shrinking with each moment's delay. Finally, he packs up all of the supplies, puts on Rebecca's old PIC and heads off to the lab. He makes sure the PIC is switched off; he doesn't want to be tracked through its signals. The PIC is just to allow him to remain inconspicuous. It is a short walk to the university from Rebecca's apartment. The entire time, Jason expects DoC officers to appear around each corner.

It feels like the longest walk of his life. He is a broiling cauldron of emotions. These emotions help speed him to his destination.

Jason reaches the university without seeing any DoC officers, a puzzlement to him. Unknown to him, the DoC officers have by this time captured Rebecca and she has led them on a false trail, claiming that Jason was still in her apartment. She worries that he may actually still be there but to her, her note was clear. Save yourself. He should be well on his way by now.

Jason, arriving at the university, enters the engineering building. He then descends stairs to the basement of the building. The basement is seldom visited area, only building maintenance ever goes down there. Jason makes his way to a doorway. Spray painted across the metal door are the words “No Access”. Jason extracts a key from his front pants pocket. He inserts it into the lock in the door. With some effort, he manages to turn the key in the lock until the raspy locking mechanism releases. With a final click, the door is unlocked. Jason opens the door to reveal a dark tunnel ahead. This is the entrance to one of the tunnels running under the university buildings, constructed to give staff and students a way to move about campus during inclement weather. However, in years past, gangs started using the tunnels for their illicit activities and after a particularly disturbing attack on several coeds, the tunnels were closed and forgotten. When Jason was looking for a place to hide his lab, he found a maintenance room inside this part of the tunnels. It was perfect. It had electrical power, and no one ever came there. The tunnel is unlit, the bulbs having long ago failed. Walking some distance down the tunnel, Jason arrived at the door to a long forgotten maintenance room. He unlocks the door and enters. He switches on the lights and surveys the tiny room. The fact that he is alone there is driven home.

Jason makes his final preparations. He is still angry, fuming. In a dark mood, he decides to skip the quarantine. He doesn't care for his own future safety at this point. As he slips into his sleep he weeps, "Goodbye Rebecca."

#

Jason wakes. It takes seconds to orient himself. He pulls the feeding tube from his throat, swallows and feels the irritation of a dry throat. He tosses the tube onto the floor and closes his eyes. Waking from six months sleep is difficult. It is hard on the body and things are out of sync. After several minutes he begins flexing his limbs, fingers, working out the stiffness. He rolls onto his side and pushes himself into a sitting position. He is six months into the future, leaving Rebecca behind. He feels a sharp emotional surge at the thought. The pain of the rejection floods back. Six months of sleep has done nothing to dull the pain. It is as if it was just yesterday. Normally he would get right to the business of cleaning his feeding tube, checking himself for any infections but the thought of Rebecca stays with him. He wonders what has become of her. Is she sitting in a DoC cell, has she been reeducated, has she resumed her normal life? Jason sits on the edge of the bed for a long time thinking about what he should do. Eventually the still raw pain of her rejection decides it for him. He gets to work cleaning his equipment so that he can resume his sleep.

#

Two years later, Rebecca is waiting anxiously. Her Jason should be arriving back from his 'journey' soon. She waits day in and day out, week after week. Jason does not come to her. She thinks of the note she left him. She couldn't tell him the real reason for her not travelling with him, so she had to make the note vague. She remembers it word for word. She begins to doubt herself. Was she too vague in the note? Should she have made it more clear as to what her

intentions were? As a result of her vagueness, did Jason misunderstand her message? Did he think that she had left him for good? She wishes that she had been more certain in her sign off – say something like “I will be waiting”. She frets over this. As time moves on with no Jason, she becomes more convinced that she sabotaged their future. Rebecca waits and wonders.

#

After two years of sleep Jason almost convinces himself to leave the lab in search of Rebecca. He pulls the crumpled note from his pants pocket and gently unfolds the crumbling paper. He begins to read it but the feelings of rejection flood back. He stops reading, crumples it back into a wad and jams it back into the pocket. He decides to continue his journey.

#

Several more years of indecision, grief and sleep pass when Jason wakes with a start. The lab is dark. Something has gone wrong. After several moments of flexing his muscles and joints, he pulls the feeding tube from his throat. The darkness is absolute. It draws out dark fears. Perhaps he has lost his sight. How long has he slept? He fears that he has over slept; done a Rip Van Winkle and is now old and grey. As his thoughts clear, he calms. He feels his chin, there is a short stubble there, a sign that he has not been asleep for too long. Not Rip van Winkle after all. He attempts to see something, anything to dispel the sense that he has lost his sight. None of his instrumentation is operating, no power lights lit. Jason sits up on the edge of the bed. He strips off his metal body suit and dresses. He shuffles his way through the darkness to where he thinks the door should be. He misses it to the right and walks into a chair. Fumbling along the wall to his left, he finds the door’s latch. He feels his way up to a dead bolt and sides it out of the way. He rotates the lock by the door knob and turns the knob. The door opens to more darkness. Entering the hallway outside his lab, Jason scans right and left. To the left, he can see a dim

glow. He rejoices to himself, he is not blind – of course he never was, just his own stupid fears. Jason feels his way down the dark corridor toward the light. Before long he can see well enough to make out the wall and the door ahead. Light is leaking around the door through the door jam.

Jason reaches the door and finds the handle. This handle is difficult to turn. Applying considerable force, he feels the handle move to a grinding sound. He has to work the handle back and forth several times to convince it to turn enough to release the bolt. When the bolt does release, there is a pop and the door shoves in toward him. A brilliant flood of light fills the tunnel, blinding him. Jason waits for his eyes to adjust to the sudden brightness. Door open, he sees before him a pile of debris that was stacked up against the door. Splintered wood and broken concrete choke the exit from the tunnel. The stairway up to the building above is choked with debris, as if a bomb had gone off. Jason's emotions move from puzzlement to alarm very quickly. "What the hell?" As he peers up through the rubble, he fears that things have gone terribly wrong. His heart is pounding in his chest. He climbs up over the debris to a hazy sky. A weak sun is attempting to break through the haze. He is so focused on making his way over the debris that he doesn't look out to the world above until he is at ground level. Where once stood the university engineering building is now a burned out concrete shell. The library building next to it as collapsed in on itself. A tall residence building behind the library has huge holes blasted up and down it. The previously white marble stone cladding is cracked and stained black from fires. The effect of this scene is that of cataclysm. Other buildings are fractured and crumbling. The once neatly groomed grounds of the campus are flooded with the debris of every collapsed building. Like Burgess Meredith emerging from the bank vault, Jason finds a devastated world. Rather than finding his futuristic utopia, he finds ruin. Jason is dumbfounded. What could possibly have happened? His visions of the future never included something like this. In his

optimism, he always expected a better, more advanced world. Here is utter ruin, a scene from any number of post apocalyptic films. He steps onto a fractured cement walkway, his boots kicking up a fine layer of white dust. There is no sign of another human being. There is silence, no traffic, not the twitter of a bird or the chirp of a cricket. He stands confused, unsure what to do. The words of Ramesh come back to him. It was something about drones hunting him in the ruins of civilization. Jason nervously glances to the sky. He immediately scolds himself for being so paranoid.

Jason feels suddenly very alone. He thinks once again of Rebecca, and the hurt and anger flood back. He remembers the note she left him. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a folded wad of paper. He attempts to unfold it but the paper crumbles. A breeze catches the flakes of his love's note and scatters them into the air. His heart sinks as he tries to recall the precise wording of her message. Looking at the devastation before him, he wishes that he had been by her side to protect her from what has happened. This thought stings him.

The world appears to have gone to hell and his 'time machine' is without power. He is trapped in a future that he never anticipated. He feels helpless for the first time in his life. No force of will is going to change this outcome. He has lost his one love, left her in the past and now is trapped in a world destroyed. He remembers Sarah's comment about his time travel: his travels in time can't be undone. It has all gone wrong. He drops to his knees and sobs. Looking up at the devastation before him, he is Charleton Heston looking at the ruins of the Statue of Liberty. "You blew it all up! Damn you, damn you all to hell!" But where Heston was talking to those who he had left behind, Jason is cursing himself.

Alone and looking at the wreckage before him, he decides find someone who can tell him what has happened. A new guide for a new time. First, he heads to a part of the campus where

there used to be a pond. He is filthy and stinks. He needs to wash years of microbial growth from his skin. He finds the pond, little more than a dirty puddle. He strips and washes as best he can in the brown water. Beneath a grey, crumbling layer of dead skin is soft pink flesh. Feeling somewhat refreshed, he leaves the grounds of the university and enters the streets of the city. Ruin seems to be everywhere. He walks several blocks along the town's commercial area. Many buildings are burned and collapsed. The only sound is his footsteps scuffing through the debris that reaches far into the street. As he walks, he hears something; a sound like someone running. He stops and scans the area. There is no sign of any activity; all he sees is the end of the world. He continues on his way for several more minutes. His ears are on high alert. He hears the shuffling sound once more. He turns to look behind. Again, he sees nothing but the devastation he just passed.

Jason's nerves are getting the better of him. Something terrible happened, the city is in ruins. Did they finally do it? A nuclear war? There was clearly a battle of some sort – the buildings carry the scars. Are there still soldiers, Russian or Chinese lurking about, ready to shoot first and ask questions later? Was it an alien invasion? Are there still aliens hiding in the rubble? Jason decides to lay low, find a place to call home base and limit his exposure until he understands more of what the situation is. He finds a house, undamaged except for shattered windows. It is a two story, white clapboard house with green shutters on the windows. The glass panes are all shattered. The lawn is overgrown. It looks as if it hasn't been mowed in weeks. He enters the house and calls out. "Anyone home?" Hello!" There is no answer. Inside, the place is dark; the curtains have all been pulled. He opens the curtains. The light streaming in through the windows shows a home in immaculate condition, everything seemingly in its proper place. It feels weird to be in someone else's home when it looks as if they still live there. Jason does a

quick exploration of the house to ensure that there is no one there. The place is empty. He heads back to the kitchen, he is starving. He opens the fridge and is assaulted by the most disgusting odour. The inside of the fridge has unrecognizable things, brown rot and green, fuzzy mold. Brownish fluids have dripped onto the bottom shelf. He quickly closes the fridge door, waving a hand in front of his nose. Jason checks the cupboards. They are empty. Not so much as a crumb remains. Jason looks out the kitchen window. It is late afternoon; shadows are spreading across the yard. If he is to find some food, he needs to do it soon. He decides to check the houses in the neighbourhood. The first three houses that he enters are likewise cleaned out. The fourth, with light fading, seems similarly picked over. He is standing in the kitchen wondering what to do, looking at a particularly old looking dishwasher, when he recalls something that Sarah had once told him. She had said that she once dated a man whose family kept snack foods in their broken dishwasher. Jason chuckles to himself and reaches for the dishwasher door. He opens the dishwasher door and to his surprise finds a single small bag of pretzels deep down inside. There is time for a single fist pump before he rips into the bag and is moaning over the salty deliciousness of this snack. Bag finished, he says a silent thank you to Sarah. He heads back to his new home base.

The next morning, Jason's stomach wakes him early. He prepares for a full day of foraging. No dishwasher will go unchecked, or oven for that matter. Jason is getting used to being the only man alive and upon entering a house, he no longer calls out to check if anyone is home. He searches almost a dozen houses without finding anything. He decides to start looking in those houses that look to have sustained damage. Perhaps here, the occupants didn't have time to pack up their food. His strategy bears fruit almost immediately as a house whose front is burned and roof partially collapsed has an intact kitchen in the back. He no longer checks

fridges. Nothing good can result from opening a fridge that has been without power for weeks or months. He opens a cupboard to find a neat line of various breakfast cereals. In another cupboard he finds some cans of beans and soup and some unopened condiments, relish, ketchup, BBQ sauce and containers of spices. He fills a pillowcase he brought and heads back to home base. On the way, he hears the sound of running feet once more. He scans in the direction of the sound and sees nothing. It is as if there is a ghost. Jason debates between investigating the sound and returning to his home base to eat. His stomach wins out and he heads for home.

So goes Jason's life for the next few days. He never gave it any thought before but finding food once society has collapsed is hard. Imagine suddenly having no grocery stores, no quiki-marts, no markets of any kind. He hopes that he doesn't have to regress to hunting and eating rodents and bugs. Already, the best before dates on some of the food he is finding have expired. At some point in the future, even if he finds food, it will have spoiled. This thought gets him wondering what is outside the city. Perhaps there are farms or orchards where there is still fresh produce growing. He plans on stocking up on food that he can travel with.

Ending 2

Jason is once again searching houses for scraps of food when he hears a door slam. The sound came from further down the street. Jason instinctively ducks behind a hedge. Peering down the street he can't believe his eyes. There, loading items into a large wagon is a woman with full head of red hair. Jason's heart quickens. Could it be her? How could it be possible? He is too far away to get a clear view. He works his way up to street, crouching. After advancing a couple of houses closer, he realizes that he is crouching. He stops, wondering why he is being stealthy. He is close enough now to be certain that it is indeed Rebecca. He stands and is about to

call out to her when the door of the house she just left opens and a small boy exits. The boy calls, “Mommy, look what I found.”

Jason’s shout catches in his throat. Rebecca has a child! Stunned, Jason now dugs behind a hedge. He has been gone too long. She has moved on with her life, she has a boy, a family. Jason wants to cry out in his disappointment. He collapses onto the long grass. Rebecca and the boy examine what he has found. She places it in the wagon and takes the boy’s hand. They walk off down the street, leaving Jason sobbing on the grass. As they walk down the street, the boy asks, “Is daddy ever going to come back?”

Rebecca sighs. She feels guilt for creating expectations in the boy that his father would return to them. It has been years now. It is time to give up that hope. ‘I don’t think so. Something has happened. I don’t think he will come.’

Jason rises from the grass. He looks down the street in the direction of Rebecca and her boy. He can see her and the little boy well down the street. He debates on whether to engage her anyway but the letter was clear, she was leaving him. Clearly she has moved on and has a different life now. Jason walks back to his home base. On the way he resolves that it is time for him to move on, leave his old life behind and start a new life away from this city of ruins.

Rebecca and the boy continue to search for several more hours. Today was not a great day. They found barely enough to feed themselves. There are many more hungry people back at the school. At least her son, Tyler will be bringing some toys back for the children to play with. They make their way back to the school, hoping that some of the other searchers were more successful at finding hidden caches of food and drink.

Jason sets out the next day on his journey from the city. Walking up Main Street, he passes a familiar store front. He pauses in recollection. It is the booster juice shop where he and

Rebecca had a drink when they first met. He checks his watch; it is 8:00 am. He remembers that they were to meet here if they ever were separated. He peers in through the shop's cracked, dirty window. The shop is deserted, has been for months. As he draws away, he notices a piece of paper taped to the window. He is shocked to see his name written in thick pencil across the top of the sheet. He reads what is written there.

Jason,

If you find this note, come to me at Elm Street Public School.

Rebecca.

Jason is confused. If Rebecca had ditched him, why later would she want him to find her? He tries to recall the wording of the note she had left him. He can't. His recall of those precise words is blocked by his emotional response to the words. Doubt creeps in. Did he somehow misinterpret the words there? Has he made a huge mistake? In frustration, he curses himself, curses his poor recall. He examines the note taped to the window. He rereads it. The note is lacking in emotion of any kind, just a factual invitation. He wonders how old the note is. The paper is yellowed from exposure to the elements. It could be very old. As old as the boy, perhaps. She has moved on. This note is no longer relevant. He turns to continue his journey. He grumbles, "My old life is haunting me, tormenting me."

Several blocks up the street he sees a school crossing sign. He looks down the crossing street and sees a high chain link fence, the kind that frame many a school yard. He says to himself, "What the hell. If I am going to leave this town, I shouldn't leave any loose ends behind." He turns down the street toward the school. As he nears the school he hears voices, the sounds of children playing. His curiosity is peaked and he increases his pace. Arriving at the school, he sees a dozen or so children playing in the yard. Among them is Rebecca's son. Jason

stands at the fence watching the children play, feeling an outsider, a man out of sync with time and life. Eventually, the boy spots Jason and calls out, “Mom, there is a man at the fence.”

Jason steps back from the fence. He is near panic. He is not ready to face his destiny, to hear from Rebecca that he is no longer in her life. He has nowhere to run, Rebecca steps from behind the corner of the school and looks toward where Jason is standing. Her hands go to her face. Her heart skips and her breathing stops as she recognizes Jason. She rushes toward him, calling, “Jason. Oh my Lord, you’ve come back.”

Jason stands awkwardly. This is not the reaction he expected. By the time Rebecca reaches the fence, tears are streaming down her face. A broad smile is trying to break through the crying as her emotions let loose. Jason’s heart is pounding but his is more out of fear. Fear that he will learn the unpleasant truth that Rebecca has moved on without him. Reaching the fence, Rebecca vaults to the top and crashes down on the other side, landing on Jason. The two topple to the ground. Rebecca ends up sitting on top of Jason. She grasps his face in both hands and begins kissing and hugging his head. Laughing with joy, she moans, “I have waited so long for this day!”

There is no doubt that Rebecca is happy to see Jason. This pushes back against all of his assumptions and beliefs; a wall constructed by his doubts. But there is still the unavoidable elephant in the room – the boy. By this time the boy has reached the fence and asks, ‘Mommy. Is this man daddy?’

Jason is stunned by the question. Could it be? He looks at the boy and sees his own blue eyes looking back at him. Rebecca addresses the boy. “Yes, yes, this is your father.”

All of Jason’s fears melt away. There is no other man, Rebecca has been waiting for him and she still loves him. The thought that he was about to walk away, leaving town, horrifies him.

It would have been the last in a long series of mistakes on his part. He wonders what is wrong with him that he seems so capable of blowing up this relationship.

Rebecca's weight on his chest seems lighter now, the weight of all of his fears and doubts about their relationship gone.

Rebecca reaches toward the boy. "That is your son, Tyler."

Jason was never one to engage with children. He doesn't know how to connect with them. He simply says, "Hello Tyler."

Tyler voices the question that he and his mother have discussed so many times before, "Where have you been?"

Rebecca has moved off of Jason and he sits up to face the boy. "Well, I made a mistake and decided to stay away a little longer than planned." He glances at Rebecca. She is watching him closely. "I am so sorry."

It suddenly occurs to Jason why Rebecca ran out on him. "Wait. I see now. You knew you were expecting and couldn't go into hibernation like that. You assumed that if I knew, I would insist on staying. But to stay would guarantee my arrest by the DoC. So you ran away, insisting that I continue with the plan."

Rebecca tears up. "It was the only way. I figured that a year without you was better than having you disappear into the system of the DoC. But then you never came back. We waited..."

Jason turns red. "It was the note. All I saw in that note was rejection. I thought you didn't love me anymore. It broke my heart. Every time I awoke, it was just easier to go back to sleep, put more time between us than face the heart break."

"Damn that note. I wrote it in such a rush that I didn't look and make sure that I clearly expressed my intent. I blame myself. I am so sorry to have put you through that."

“Never mind that. Tell me, what has happened here?”

Rebecca sighs, “Your book, 1984. I managed to track down a copy of it. You know it is not available for download. I had to find a paper copy. It was strange reading a physical book. Anyway, it revealed the truth to me. You were right. The PIC’s had a nefarious purpose.”

Jason nods, avoiding saying, “I knew it”

The rich autocrats had a plan to replace all of their workers with AI and keep all of the profits. Funny thing though is that those people never give credit to society for their wealth. They stand on the shoulders of society. Their plan was doomed to failure. A growing class of unemployed people was gaining power in numbers. The unemployment class grew too big and strong and as they say, the pitch forks came for the autocrats. It started in France where the autocrats were well aware of what happened during the French revolution. They packed up and got out as fast as they could. The revolution spread from there across Europe, and the other continents. Here in America, the autocrats were better prepared and more stubborn. It took a civil war to take them down. That war raged through the country, leaving places like this in ruins.”

“Why haven’t you left this place?”

Rebecca gives Jason a withering look. “I was waiting for someone.

Jason is embarrassed for his lack of awareness. “Oh, I am such an idiot.”

Rebecca takes his hand and leads him toward the school. “Let me show you something.” They enter the school yard and the children gather round, peppering Jason with questions. Rebecca attempts to calm the excited gang of curious children. “Please, guys. Jason just arrived. Give him some time and space.” Her plea has no effect, the children talk over her. Jason laughs, “I can see who is in charge here and it isn’t you.”

They reach the school house door and Rebecca pulls Jason inside, telling the children to stay outside. It is quiet inside. Far in the distance Jason can hear a piano playing. Rebecca tugs on his arm, "Come."

Jason follows her down the hallway. Although he hasn't been in a public school since he himself was a child, the place seems oddly familiar. Rebecca leads him to the gymnasium. Here Jason finds a remarkable sight. There are dozens of people sitting around the gymnasium. A woman is playing piano and a small choir is singing. People are sitting on bleachers listening and singing along. It is a joyful, peaceful scene. Jason notices that some of the people there are in wheelchairs. Rebecca waves an all encompassing arm, "This is our community."

Jason speculates, "Survivors of the war?"

"Well, most people got out of the city before the war came and haven't come back. These are people who did not want to leave their homes, or were unable to. We encounter people while we are out hunting supplies. We invite them to join our community. Many do, some don't."

"How do you feed such a big group?"

"Tyler and I discovered something early on. There were a lot of people who were doomsday preppers. These people squirreled away food and water, tools, fuel, batteries in their garages, basements and backyard bunkers. Tyler is particularly gifted at sniffing these out. There are also lots of backyard gardens and green houses. We are able to grow a lot of food."

"Amazing. What about power, lights, running water?"

Rebecca shakes her head. "Not yet. There is no power in the grid but we have been eyeing some solar panels."

Jason is impressed with how well people were surviving after such an apocalypse. He wasn't doing nearly as well on his own. "I think I can help."

“Fantastic. We need all the help we can get.”

Over the ensuing months, Jason takes the lead on installing power and running water in the school. He trains a team on how to install and maintain a system of solar panels. The team harvests solar panels from various locations in the surrounding areas along with battering systems and converters. Jason is not an expert on such systems but one of the older men was an electrical engineer. He fills in the details for Jason and his team. The day comes when they plug their electrical system into the power grid of the school. The lights come on in the gymnasium to the cheers of those there. With power, there is suddenly a long list of items to collect – battery powered tools, kitchen appliances, entertainment systems, etc. A group of teenagers are tasked with collecting such items from the local area. Unfortunately, gaming systems seem to take priority over kitchen appliances and tools.

Having an electrical supply to charge batteries for various uses, the group finds a number of electric scooters. With these, they can travel farther in their search for supplies. Connecting wagons to the scooters, they are able to haul bigger loads of scavenged items. E-bikes allow the entire community to become mobile.

Jason next sets about planning for a system to provide running water. They find 1000 litre water tanks at a nearby garden centre. They place one tank on the roof and another on the ground. Piping from a building centre allows him to connect the tanks to one another and to connect the tank on the roof to the school’s plumbing system. From local grocery stores, they fill the water tank on the ground with water from 20 litre water jugs. A pump transfers the water from the tank on the ground to the rooftop tank. From there, gravity feeds the taps and toilets in the school. Life returns to the modern age. Stunned at how quickly the toilets drain a 1000 litres of water, they had to place restrictions of the flushing of the toilets.

With a wider range of coverage, they encounter more people eking out a living in the city. When these people learn of the modern conveniences at the school, it is easy to convince them to join the group. As the community grows, the school becomes quite crowded. The group works on installing solar panels and water tanks on addition buildings. Soon, they have a growing section of the city returning to the modern age. For Jason, the work is deeply fulfilling and satisfying. Life is full of close friendships, interesting work and free of timelines. Jason and his son become close inseparable buddies. One night Jason expresses his feelings to Rebecca. “Here I was skipping through time looking for a perfect utopian society. Who would have ever guessed that I would find such satisfaction in a post-apocalyptic world?”

Rebecca teases, “No further thoughts of jumping ahead in time?”

Jason shakes his head, “Nope, I am good. I love the here and now. Without deadlines and finish dates, this life feels timeless.”