



A Matter of Time

by David L. Erickson

From across the bay I could hear a half dozen sirens, all mixed up and overlapping. Then I saw maybe the strangest thing I'd ever seen. Out of the woods down the old mill road leading to the public boat landing came this sky blue boxy looking thing kicking up a cloud of dust. Making not a whisper, it leaped down that gravel boat ramp and just plowed into the water. For a couple seconds all I could see was dust and a sheet of spray jumping outward.

Bubbling through the still morning mist, that blue thing thrummed and bobbed away from the shore. It looked like it was coming my way. From here to there was near on eight hundred yards, but I could make out only one person inside as the water settled back. It was going fast enough to generate a bow wake and its slab sides only rose a couple feet above the surface. Seemed like thin air was all that supported its flat blue top.

In no time it was halfway to Marker's island, and out of the trees by the landing came five black sedans just tearing up the gravel like there was no tomorrow. The first car skidded sideways and came to rest short of the water. As the rest scattered to either side, a cloud of dust engulfed them, but quickly drifted south. I heard the sharp bark of nine millimeter handguns – I used to deer hunt in the Catskills – then the rat-tat-tat of a two point two three automatic. Bullets skipped off the surface of the bay and I was sure a few hit that blue box, but it kept on coming.

The driver, I could see him better now, kept looking back, but he made no attempt to evade the fire, just came straight on. I figured he'd come ashore not far from where I stood with my mouth hanging open. When I realized how stupid I must look, I shut my mouth. And thinking maybe I might be in danger, I squatted down beside the rotted old trawler where I'd been digging for worms.

Where I was, I was pretty much hidden by the overhang of pine and cypress, and my dark shirt and green coveralls blended well with the moss and vine encrusted hull. A few bullets ricocheted off the rocky shoreline some ways down, but from the angle the cops, I assumed they were Feds, were firing from, I wasn't likely to get hit. Just like that, they stopped firing, jumped back in their sedans and roared off back into the woods.

I could make out the car's driver much better now, as he was nearing the shore no more than fifty yards from me. That blue box with the floating top swerved and wallowed, like the driver was looking for a better place to come ashore, but there wasn't any. The bank rose sharply a few inches from where the

A Matter of Time - A Short Story

gentle waves lapped the waterline and the rocks were anywhere from gravel size to as big as bowling balls. Unless that little car had knobby truck tires, it wasn't going to get it up that bank.

Best I could tell, the guy was wearing a dark jean jacket and a black baseball cap, on backwards. Now under the shadows cast by the island's trees, it wasn't easy to make out details. I couldn't even tell if he was white or not.

About fifty yards away, that little thing hit something and about flipped over. Its right side came out of the water and I could see the driver fighting for control. A few seconds passed before it righted itself and plowed up on shore. Like some kind of miracle, the nose came up and I could hear the tires squealing as they tried to get a bite on the rocks. They weren't truck tires, not by a long shot. They were skinny little things and I swear I saw paddles slide back into the treads as, rocking and swaying, that blue box jerked its way up on the shore. With water streaming from everywhere, the driver stalled it long enough for him to methodically scan the beach and tree line.

I don't think he saw me and I was sure hoping he wouldn't.

The thrumming ended and after maybe ten seconds of near silence, a high pitched whine, like a turbine would make took over. I heard something clash, like an old standard transmission being jammed into gear with trashed synchros. At least that's what it sounded like to me.

A glance in my direction and a look behind him and he was off. Before I could do anything, the car slipped into the scrub pines and undergrowth and was gone. I could hear it thrashing away, but before long, I was left with just the lapping of the water against the rocks, and the thin chatter of insects.

What in thunderation, I thought as I rose kind of stooped and stiff-sore – bad bad back from being hunched over a computer monitor for years, you know. I gathered my gear: a slim rod and reel, a camper's shovel and a net bag for the fish I wasn't going to catch that day. Something told me I'd best be getting over to the landing, maybe get a gander at them Feds. I figured they'd be coming over on the ferry. Most excitement this backwater had seen in near forever.

They'd have to get around on foot though. The ferry only carried people and bikes, and light stuff. No vehicles, except maybe old Brad Lederben's electric wheelchair. Only a handful of us actually lived on that scrap of land near the west bank of the fresh water harbor, but there was a sandy beach beside the campground that drew maybe a hundred people on a mid-summer day. This was late August and a nip in the air warned that cold weather would soon be here. Odd thing was, the trees hadn't started changing yet, but then it had been an odd summer. The heat and humidity had come on way too early. And July was more like April with light morning showers and early evening downpours. The past two weeks had also been unseasonable, with temperate breezes, clear skies and just enough moisture in the air to leave the grass damp at dawn.

I'd seen a few of the more hardy family types come in on the ferry that morning, but I'd wager a weeks worth of fish that not a one would do little more than wade until well past noon. Hadn't seen all that many tourists either, which made the shopkeepers across the bay kind of prickly. None of that mattered

A Matter of Time - A Short Story

to me a lick. I was, as the few islanders I'd gotten to know labeled me, independently wealthy.

Fresh out of college at twenty-two, I'd hooked up with a Palm Beach millionaire and learned how to build and organize corporations of all kinds. Three years apprenticeship on Palm Beach and three years in New York and the old codger up and died on me. So I hung out my shingle and struck out on my own. For the sake of brevity, I got in on the dot.com fad before they were called dot.coms and got out just before eighty percent of them went belly-up in 2001. By then I was burnt out, fried to a crisp. My brain turned to mush. I left to get my head back together and make a life for myself outside the crazy mixed up greed-driven tempest of corporate America.

I ended up here, on Marker's Island, a little spit of sand and rock and scrub pine not far from the Eastern seaboard, but far enough from New York and Washington D.C. that nobody I knew tried to look me up. Of course, without a phone, modem or fax, I'd become pretty much invisible – just the way I wanted it.

Now, at forty-three, I was semi-retired and living a quiet, backwoods life hobnobbing with small town folk, most of whom never made it through high school. Some of the kids call me the professor. Now and then one of the shopkeepers runs an idea by me, but I make it clear that I'll give advice, but I won't get involved. Don't even have a TV, just a radio and a collection of records and tapes and CDs. After eight months, I'd even picked up the local lingo hanging out at Ada's Place listening to the regulars as they got drunk on depth charges – a shot of sour mash whiskey dropped into a mug of Red Eye.

I found the track that blue car gouged out of the woods and followed it inland for a short piece. It ended abruptly, but the car wasn't there. I could see the undergrowth pushed over like it came to a stop dead up against a giant elm, one of the few scattered about the island, but that was it. No way I could miss where he might have backed it up and taken another route.

It took no time to find which way the driver went as he'd made no effort to hide his trail. Broken branches and flattened brush led toward the ferry landing, but the car not being there puzzled the bejesus out of me. How could it just vanish like that? Out of curiosity, I looked up, but there were no holes in the canopy large enough for it to escape vertically. Not that any sane man would even consider that possible.

With sunrays slanting through the pine boughs and the smell of the woods thick and refreshing, I filled my lungs and let it out with a whoosh, satisfied with the self-important sound it made. Do that in New York and everybody would look at you like you'd just blown the biggest deal of your life.

I took the path the driver had bludgeoned and came upon the rutted, weedy lane that paralleled Marker's shoreline, maybe a hundred feet inland. Been twenty years since a wheeled vehicle been on it, back when Malcolm Anderson built his summer home on the eastern shoreline down a piece from the concession stands at the public beach. He died a couple years later and the inheritors had it boarded up. Seems his kids had the place locked in litigation and none of the seven wanted to budge an inch. So there it sat, rotting away.

A Matter of Time - A Short Story

My place was a little shack no more than a couple hundred yards further on and a ways inland. Not much to look at on the outside, but inside it had all the usual conveniences, like indoor plumbing, a/c, and a well-appointed kitchen, the biggest room in the house. I like to eat well, but I rarely had guests over.

Didn't take me long to reach the landing, though I guess I was hurrying a bit. I could hear the clinks and thumps of the ferry ramp being lowered before I broke into the graveled clearing. There were maybe a dozen locals sitting on the weather-beaten pine benches that encircled the landing, chatting about this and that. I didn't see the driver among them. Without exception, they had on jeans and short sleeve plaid or plain colored shirts and the kind of laced boots people like to hike in. Not unusual, they were all women. The men left early for jobs on the mainland.

Laughing and boisterous, the tourists emptied down the ramp and turned up the gravel path running along the shore leading to the public beach. Unlike the locals, they wore gaily-patterned shorts, colorful shirts and flip-flops or beach jackets over bathing suits. Mostly grandparents with children. The kids raced on ahead, squealing and hollering and calling for the grownups to hurry.

As the ferry emptied, I noticed some commotion across the bay. Old Barton's trawler was churning up a bow wave like I'd never seen before and headed right at the landing. There must've been twenty black suits hanging over the sides. Ashore, those black sedans I'd seen chasing the blue car were lined up beside the town's wharf with more suits looking our way with binoculars. They'd attracted quite a crowd.

One by one, locals boarded the ferry. I sauntered up to the ramp, smiled and nodded to the ones I knew, which was almost everybody. The last one, a girl, seemed to have just appeared. Maybe thirty, swept back straw colored hair and shocking blue eyes. Tight jeans and a loose, long sleeved white cotton shirt wasn't enough to make her stand out, but the look in her eyes was something different.

Now, I'm a darn good judge of people, made my living doing it, and I can size someone up in a few seconds. Got the nickname 'cold-hand Luke' because I wouldn't put up with the bottom ten percenters and weeded them out within days of taking charge of a budding operation. I built dot.coms, providing the management expertise the techno geeks couldn't wrap their minds around.

She looked right at me and smiled warily. I saw terror, and intelligence, and I knew right then she wasn't a mad bomber or a criminal...and that she was the driver of that blue box. Intuition and experience are useful tools.

I nodded and smiled. "Morning."

"Good morning," she chirped, her voice a tad too high.

I looked over my shoulder at the trawler tearing up the bay waters. It would make shore in a minute or less, and I made a decision. Not to brag, but I never wasted time weighing options and such.

"Take a walk with me?" I kept my voice level and friendly, standing relaxed, with my feet spread for

A Matter of Time - A Short Story

balance and quick to react. Her eyes darted nervously past me. I knew she was figuring them Feds would pick her out like black on white. What other option did she have?

“Sure.” With a tentative nod, she turned away. One step I was beside her and offered the crook of my arm. She slipped her hand through and pressed a little too close, like we were a couple, and together we strode off like we had nowhere to go and all the time in the world to get there. I led us to a narrow path leading inland. No way we’d have blended with the beach goers.

As we disappeared into the woods, I could hear the trawler’s diesel cut back and moments later the grinding of the hull against the rock and sand close offshore. Barton must’ve been promised a king’s ransom to treat his boat that way.

Once out of sight, we broke into a sprint. She stayed no more than a step behind and in a hundred yards or so we reached the tri-fork. I turned left. Didn’t look back to see if she was still with me because I could hear her breathing just as hard as me. Have to admit I wasn’t in the best of shape, having spent years at a desk. Can’t say I remember ever taking a day off, though I ate right and got into a morning exercise routine using videos of pretty young things in tights for motivation.

A quarter mile and two minutes later, we broke out of the woods and into the tiny village that formed the social center of the island. The path led between the Olgelvane’s cottage and Martha Perkin’s place and on to the gravel lane bisecting the hamlet. Quaint white clapboards with tin roofs and ornate trim porches and loads of hanging planters. Most were built back in the 20s, and looked it. Though the residents kept them up pretty well, age took its toll. Screen doors didn’t quite match their frames, with bricks and shims shoved beneath sagging porches and open pile concrete block foundations. About twenty homes in all. At least that many more were scattered elsewhere on the island, but spaced well apart.

I slowed to a fast walk. She came up beside me.

“Who are you?”

“I should ask the same, seeing as how I live here and you arrived with that entourage of Feds hot on your heels.”

There was no guile in her eyes as she answered. “Amanda.”

“Not much to go on.” I slowed a bit more and looked her over at some length. She seemed okay with that.

“Morris...from Enger...England...south Wales.”

Now, I know that Wales is part of the isle of Great Britain, as is England. Odd that she would describe her homeland as she did.

A Matter of Time - A Short Story

“I’m Lucas Ericcson, one of the locals.” I gave her a guarded look, though I honestly wasn’t trying to be deceptive.

“No you’re not. You sound and dress like the locals, but you aren’t from here.”

“How do you know that?”

“Your boots...and your fishing gear.”

She had me at that. My gear, state-of-the-art and my boots, brown leather with Velcro straps, cost what would be a week's salary for the local shop workers.

“Been here for eight months.”

“Hiding out?” Her blue eyes pierced me with an intelligence uncommon around these parts. I had that look too. Probably why some of the locals called me the ‘Professor’. That, and the few visitors to my home were impressed by the stacks of books in the main room I hadn’t bothered to build shelves for yet.

I laughed. “No...well yes, sort of. I got burnt out and needed a place a long way from anywhere that mattered to the kind of crowd I once hung with.”

“Not enough. You have a problem with the ‘Feds’. The way your mouth tightened and your eyes narrowed when you looked at that boat.”

“They tried to nail me for insider trading. One of their own boys had gone dirty and planted evidence pointing to me...to throw them off the scent. It didn’t stick, but there are hard feelings.”

“Wealthy too, I’ll bet.”

“No worries anyway. Yourself?”

“Not something I worry about.”

“Why are those suits after you?”

“Long story.” She shot me a curious look, like she couldn’t make up her mind how much to let on. And anyway, why should she tell me anything, let alone the truth. Not like I was somebody to her.

“I figure we have the time. You know you’ll have to hide out until they leave.”

“Now that they know where I am, they’ll turn this island inside out.”

“Not a problem on this end.”

“Okay.”

We arrived at my place and I have to say it sure looked decrepit. I’d planned on replacing a few rotted boards, do some scraping and painting, frame up a new front door, but hadn’t worked up the desire to get started. I wasn’t much of a fisherman either. Threw back most of what I did catch. Still and all, it gave me time to unwind and to wander about in my own mind. Kind of solitary, but it was what I’d needed a whole lot more than anything else.

My shack was nestled in a picturesque pine-shrouded glade with an overgrown garden off to the left, picket fenced with weather beaten gray boards. About hidden by encroaching grass and weeds, the cobblestone walkway leading up to the front porch circled to the right to hook up to the kitchen door around back. I’d made some effort to clean the place up, as piles of brown pine needles raked up against the woods to the right attested. Beside the needle piles was a dilapidated skiff on blocks left by the previous owner.

“Nice place,” she said with not a hint of approval.

“It works.” I reached the front door and swung the screen wide to let her pass. She caught it with ease and slipped inside. Nice figure, I noted. Slim, but not skinny, with an hourglass backside. Her shoulders could’ve come from swimming, or a lot of upper body work. And she had hips, unlike the shapeless straight lines aspired to by most girls these days.

“Wow.” She stopped just inside, such that I had to squeeze past her.

“It works.” I dodged the polyurethaned oak stump table in the middle of the cramped main room, went into the kitchen and yanked open the fridge door. “Beer?”

“No.”

“Tea, lemonade, orange juice?”

“Tea would be fine.”

I grabbed a pitcher of pekoe tea from the fridge and two tumblers from the open-faced cabinet where I kept what few dishes I had – an eclectic collection the previous tenants picked up at garage sales. I cracked a tray of ice cubes into the tumblers and tossed the empty into the finely polished stainless steel sink beneath the kitchen’s sole window.

When I turned around, I found her stooped over a stack of books in the corner, mostly hard-backs. I set the tumblers and pitcher down and eased myself onto the rust-colored divan separating the room from the kitchen.

“You read quite a variety, sci-fi, mystery, adventure, biographies...”

“My only recreation for many years, except an annual hunting trip each fall.” With a grunt, I pushed myself forward and filled the tumblers. Unusual, they actually matched – decorated with the Looney-toon characters, Sylvester and Tweety Bird. I had a million questions, but if I’d learned nothing, I’d learned that most people will spill their guts if you give them enough time. I wasn’t sure about her though. She wasn’t like most people.

The terror had faded from her eyes. She settled into the matching reclining rocker across the table from me and brought the tumbler to her lips. She held it there and tipped it just enough to sip from it a few times, then took a long slug and set it down.

“How long you think before they arrive here?”

“It’s a small island with plenty of places to hide, so no telling. When they do get here, there’s a hidden compartment beneath my waterbed.” I watched her movements and the way her eyes seemed to gather in her surroundings as if every detail was important. “The sensors will give us ample warning.”

“Sensors?” A brow arched and she looked at me, studied me.

“Here and there. No locks.” I waved a hand to indicate the doors and windows. “Just one of those precautions I brought with me. Hard to leave the city and let go of those things that helped keep me safe from my fellow man. Call it paranoia or maybe a sick response to a bad situation. I’d considered removing the sensors, but hey, why bother?”

“Pretty sophisticated...for this...where you live.”

“I do what I can. No telling...some fugitive might try to use my place for a hideout.” My attempt at humor didn’t seem to register. I rolled my tumbler in my hands and sipped from it to keep from blurt-ing out what was really on my mind.

“Couldn’t find my ‘porter...uh car, could you?”

“Porter? No. Just where it disappeared. I’m sure you have a credible explanation.” It was the opening I’d hoped for. Guessed maybe she was ready to take me into her confidence. Well, maybe not completely. I also sensed she needed something from me. She’d been sizing me up since I picked her out at the landing. Just like me. Seemed only fair.

“No.” Her eyes bored into me and for a fleeting moment, I felt what it was like for those ten-percenters who had come before cold-hand Luke to learn their fate.

“Try me. My colleagues tell me I’m fair and open minded.”

A somewhat tense silence filled the room. Outside, birds chirped and insects twittered. A gentle breeze stirred the treetops and a long way off I heard children playing at the beach. The attic fan sputtered to

A Matter of Time - A Short Story

life and abruptly shut off. A faint whiff of rotted undergrowth teased. I sipped my tea and focused on the ice as it shifted, melting. She was testing me.

At last she sighed, set her tumbler down and buried herself in the recliner. "It's out of phase."

"Come again?"

"With this time. You can't see or feel it because it's here, but it's not," she answered as if it were as normal as paint on a wall.

"You're a magician?"

She laughed. It filled my little shack with a cheery timbre long absent. Sure, I laugh out-loud sometimes, but the place was somehow less empty than it had been a moment before. "I suppose it would seem that way."

"Out of phase, hummm... Heard that on Star Trek more than once." I rolled the tumbler slowly back and forth between my hands, allowing the silence to grow. Preposterous seemed to be the order of the day, so I took a long shot, hoping the silliness of my conclusion would give her ample reason to offer a more rational explanation. "You're a time traveler then." I squinted through the tumbler at her, set it down on the oak stump table and waited for a reply.

Her laugh was charming, though a bit affected. "You make it sound so...so easily accepted."

"Not that I'm aware of."

"You believe me?" Her smile was warm, genuine and for a fleeting moment, I sensed a kinship with her. But there was a gulf between us a lifetime together couldn't bridge. As if she came from a world so alien, nothing here mattered, not a lick.

It was my turn to laugh. "Not hardly. Only in books and on TV. Science fiction is my favorite means of escaping reality."

"I saw. Most of your sci-fi novels are about time travel. But it's true."

"Why haven't you escaped...in your 'porter', before now? Why did you have to run? Why is it necessary for you to hide from the suits? Why don't you use one of your future techie widgets to save yourself instead of coming to me? I must seem a Neanderthal to you."

"Couldn't."

"And?" I was becoming amused. It was quite a tale she was spinning, though I dare say she was either a damned good actress, delusional, or both.

A Matter of Time - A Short Story

“It’s broken. I need a few elements to replicate new parts.”

“Such as?”

“Magnesium, titanium, sulfates, other trace elements only found in high grade ceramics.”

“It doesn’t matter in what form?”

“No. I can extract what I need from just about anything to replicate the parts I need.”

“Then I assume you have a replicator in your porter? And how, pray tell, did your ‘porter’ get damaged in the first place?”

She answered so straight forward I could’ve sworn this was a set and she was mouthing well rehearsed lines off a script.

“I encountered an unexpected variance in the modulation of the quantum singularity that regulates the porter’s phase shift...to put it in terms you may grasp.”

I smiled at that. If I hadn’t heard it dozens of times before, I’d expect it would be as Greek to me as high school algebra. The sciences don’t hold my interest, though I find the various theories of time travel to be worthy of study. Still, I understood what she was saying, even if I didn’t understand the science behind it. “In other words, it’s so complicated my limited education will not allow me to grasp the principals you find so basic.”

“For short.”

“Try me.”

At once she relaxed, let go a girlish giggle so unexpected, but stood abruptly and turned to the door. She crossed her arms and seemed to study what lay outside with undue interest. A minute passed. I retrieved my tea and sucked in an ice cube. Perhaps she was formulating an answer she thought I might accept, or was merely stalling for time. It didn’t matter. I wasn’t going anywhere. Time was irrelevant and though the day began as pleasantly empty as the months preceding it, the distraction she presented was intriguing. Finally, she sat down and faced me squarely, leaned forward as if to take me into her confidence.

“Time is flexible, yet immutable. I can travel to any point in time in the past, from my reality in the year twenty-one-forty-eight, to as far back as when the universe began, the Big Bang, as it’s called.” Her words drifted on the air between us like a wisp of mist. “I can interact with anyone, make dramatic changes in history as if it were directing a play, then leave. If I return a minute later, everything will be like it was before my arrival. No one remembers me, like I’d never been there before because to them, I hadn’t. Once I repair my vehicle I will leave...and in that instant you will forget I was ever here.”

A Matter of Time - A Short Story

That was an explanation I'd not considered. It neatly explained away the paradox that plagued all time-travel theorists: what would happen if a time traveler killed his grandfather before he was born? Would he then cease to exist? I stared back at her and it was her turn to wait patiently as I mulled it over.

"You have proof?"

"Does it matter? Once I'm gone, you won't remember me."

"If you're an escaped psychopath, I'm harboring a dangerous fugitive."

She stared at me, so earnest, but before long a smile turned up the corners of her mouth. A mischievous glint turned her blue eyes a veiled shade of emerald. At last she sat back, acting as if she'd come to a conclusion as unexpected as her arrival had been to me.

"Lucas..."

"Luke."

"Luke. As one would expect, my level of technology is far beyond anything you've ever known. You might write it off as magic or illusion, but to me it's as normal as a sea breeze. I can change the color of your furniture simply by rearranging the molecules in the pigment and the microscopic machinery in my body can cause an invading microbe to mutate into something useful, but I can't stop a bullet in mid-flight and I can't bring the dead back to life. My technology is limited by the laws of physics and biology."

"Humor me." I sucked another cube from my tumbler and sat back, expectant. Slowly, as if not to frighten me, she removed a palm-sized black stone from her shirt pocket and aimed it at the arm of my chair, careful not to point it at me. Though there was no sound, no beam of visible energy, nor a sense that anything was happening, a spot on the divan arm faded to white. As the affected area grew, it turned lime green. I watched in utter amazement until the shading approached me, then I leapt to my feet, quite automatically, and watched, mesmerized, until the entire divan assumed the new color.

I reached out and tentatively touched the fabric and, since my finger didn't turn green as well, I seated myself and faced her with a new level of appreciation. "I'm impressed," was all I could think to say.

"Another magic trick?" She was amused, and utterly in control of the situation. I had no idea what else she was capable of, thus I assumed an air of expectant caution. Could the device she held also be used as a weapon?

"No, the transmuter is not designed to be used as a weapon. And it can't be used to destroy biological tissue."

"You can read minds too?" I cocked a brow, an affectation I'd found handy when faced with an individual whom I was unsure of. It often gave them the false impression they had me by the short hairs.

“No,” she chuckled, “I merely assumed what your next question would be.”

“You can use it to defend yourself?”

“Only in a limited way. The affect on biological tissue takes several minutes, so its defensive capabilities are questionable at best.”

“Okay, so you’ve convinced me that you are someone or something I should treat with great respect...or caution rather, but it still doesn’t explain why you’re here or how your ‘porter’ got damaged in the first place.”

“I’m a genealogist, nothing more startling than that.”

“You get paid to travel in time to look up family histories?” My skepticism must have shown.

“No. The concept of money, a means of exchange for services rendered, no longer exists in my time. We choose our field of endeavor and then we pursue it.”

“How do you get paid...reimbursed...um, rewarded...for your efforts.”

“The thrill is enough.”

I pondered that, but the concept of putting my life in danger just for the thrill of it was beyond me. I had friends who sky-dived, knew people who bungi jumped off bridges and watched shows where people did really stupid things just to show off, and yet I couldn’t get past the belief that there was something downright masochistic about such antics.

“What about your porter? Is that why they’re after you?”

“I was researching a depository...an archive...at the Smithsonian, when I was discovered. It was after hours...stupid of me...and I was arrested. My porter was impounded. I was questioned at some length, then locked up. After a while, my transmuter came to me and I made my escape. It has a self-retrieval function. Along the way, my transmuter located my porter, so naturally I tried to get it back. My porter may look ordinary, but ‘under the hood’ the singularity drive and its backup turbine are way beyond anything you have today. It took me a couple days to find the place, but by then the square heads had time to look it over. Without the proper codes, they couldn’t do much to it, but they did something. I didn’t find that out until I tried to return to my own time and couldn’t. I had to drive it out of there. You have no idea how involved that can be...and they’ve been after me for hours.”

“Of what benefit is it to me to help you out any more than I already have?”

For the first time since my early twenties, I was absolutely, without a doubt, no longer in control of the situation. It was unsettling, yet refreshing. My ego needed a jolt.

A Matter of Time - A Short Story

“I can’t offer you anything that you can ‘buy’ for yourself. Material things are of little consequence to me. And once I’m gone, you won’t remember me. Do you require a bribe?”

“No.” I felt stupid for even suggesting it. After all, what could she offer me that I couldn’t buy? Except... “You could take me with you.”

“I’m not sure...”

“Why not? After a few spins around the old space-time continuum, you could dump me off...like excess baggage. As you tell me, I wouldn’t remember a thing, so what would it hurt?”

She pondered that, then seemed to reach a decision. “Fair enough.”

“That settled, what can I do for you?”

“Luke, I need you to gather a few items for me. This device...” She handed it to me and I took it with some trepidation. “will locate the materials I need and extract them in the quantity I require. All you have to do is follow its lead.”

“How...how do I operate it?”

“You can really be obtuse, can’t you?”

She seemed to be toying with me, though I didn’t find it discomforting. Why, I didn’t know, but I considered the possibility that she could alter my perceptions, calm my fears by some level of trickery, or magic if you will. Handing me the device assuaged my fears, though I had as yet to become fearful.

“Why can’t you do it?”

“My movements about this island would draw attention, would they not?” She cocked an eye at me, mimicking my earlier action, and I realized she was far too amused by me, though I sensed she had no desire to destroy my dignity.

“When?”

“Now would be nice. I’ll hide under your bed until you return. Can you show me how to access it?”

I rolled the device about in my hand. It appeared to be shiny smooth without depressions or patterns of any sort. “Can I accidentally harm someone with this?”

“No, Luke. It has been programmed for this specific function. It’s linked to me via a microscopic implant in my brain. Only I can operate it...alter its parameters. All you can do is follow its lead and point when called upon to do so.”

“Fascinating.” What the hell else could I say?

“The bed?” She rose.

“Oh,” I mumbled, still inspecting the device. I rose and faced her, my expression purposely warm, disarming. “In here.”

She followed me into the bedroom through the open door to the left of the front entrance. I had furnished the room with an early American motif, except for the waterbed. Of dark, gnarled pine, it fit well with the mirrored dresser, nightstands and bureau chest, but the headboard successfully concealed a myriad set of digital controls.

I touched the panel access, invisible unless you knew what you were looking for, and a long, four-inch wide strip slipped to one side. The function display was online. I tapped in the release sequence on the touch screen. A compartment door beneath the bed hinged open.

“There. If the sensors pick up anyone approaching, the appropriate monitor will display their image on the TV in here and in the other room. They’re voice operated, so you just have to say ‘TV blank’, then duck under the bed. The hatch will close once you’re inside. To open, just say ‘open’.”

“Simple enough.”

There seemed to be little else to say. The adventure had begun. Though I had my doubts about all of it, her magic tricks were compelling. I held the device out before me as we left the bedroom and it directed me to the kitchen. Not physically, but it was like a suggestion, a thought. I was impressed.

Amanda settled into the lounge with a reassuring smile and sipped on her tea as I stepped into the kitchen. As gently instructed I removed a two-quart pan from a lower cabinet and set it on the counter beside the sink. Nothing seemed to happen, but a moment later it directed me to the back bedroom. Being a recluse, I used it for laundry and storage.

In the far corner was an unused set of golf clubs I’d been gifted by a prospective client. Not that I didn’t golf, but it’d been quite a while. Work had been my life, and left little time for recreation. The head of the putter and a driver shrank until there was nothing left but the shafts. In turn, the black orb swelled. I cried out and nearly dropped it, but regained my composure and headed for the front door.

“You okay,” she asked as I passed.

“Sure. Nothing to it.” I smiled back, my head filled with a subtle urgency.

Outside, I followed the path back the way we had come and in a couple minutes arrived at the village. The device directed me to Thelma Bergen’s home. Without thinking, I stepped up on the porch and was about to walk through the front door when I noted movement to my left.

A Matter of Time - A Short Story

“Oh, hi Thelma.” I felt embarrassed and stood there with my hand outstretched, the device now warm in my palm.

“Luke. Do you need something?” She rose from the porch swing and reached past me to open the screen door. “Inside?”

I had to do some fancy explaining, but I’ve never been a quick wit, so it was a bit of a struggle. “Uh, yeah, sort of...sure.”

“You actin’ kind of peculiar, Luke. Anythin’ wrong?” Her motherly smile seemed troubled, and curious.

“No, no, just playing with a new toy...a techno thingy.” I hesitated.

“Go on in.”

I caught the aroma of lightly perfumed soap as I brushed past. She let the door swing shut, slipped by me, then turned to face me. The room, no larger than my living room, smelled of ancient mold and candle perfume. Their white rattan chairs and love seat were worn on the arms and the walls lined with shelving jam packed with ceramic figurines and knick-knacks of all size, shapes and colors. The device directed me to an angel figurine on a shelf between the sidewall windows. As if my senses were working on overtime, I noted her curtains were a wispy yellow that were once white and the wallpaper a faded gray diamond pattern I’m sure had held far more color some years before.

“May I?” I didn’t touch the figurine, but instead faced her.

“The angel? You want my angel?” She crossed her arms and looked somewhat put out. “That is a family heirloom, given to me by my great grandmother just before she died. I’m hard pressed to give it away. Besides, what do you need it for? Surely not for decoration?”

“No, nothing like that. It has material in it I need for...for...an experiment.” What else could I say? The fact that the islanders hadn’t a clue what I’d done before I moved in was my only saving grace.

“Its priceless.” Her frown deepened.

“Name it.”

“Four hundred dollars.”

“Am I good for it? I’ll see you have the money by tomorrow.”

Confusion seemed to rule her thoughts, but she quickly recovered. “Sure. I guess I can part with it, if you need it that badly.”

“I do.”

With a deepening frown and not an insurmountable hesitation, she nodded. “Take it then.”

I reached for the angel, but the device cautioned me not to. An instant later, it collapsed into a pile of powder that cascaded off the shelf like a white waterfall until all that remained was a small mound.

Thelma gasped and stepped back, bumping into the loveseat. She teetered, but recovered, using the arm for support. “How, what...”

“Hard to explain the technology, Thelma, but I appreciate your help.” I smiled reassuringly. “Uh, thanks. I’ll stop by later and tell you how it worked out, okay?”

“Sure, professor...um, Luke. Sure.” She looked at me with wonder, and a touch of fear. The unknown can be quite frightful, especially when it comes upon you sudden like.

I backed out the door bowing as I turned and tried to walk away casual, but my heart was thumping. I never would have believed it myself if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes. Twice. A dozen steps and a warning surged through my head. I shoved the device into my pants pocket just as two of the suits appeared around the corner of Barton Manson’s place.

“Sir.” It came out of the mouth of the first suit like an order. Both were mid-thirties with close-cropped brown hair. Their suits looked expensive and tailor cut to conceal well-muscled frames and most likely, weapons. I’d seen men like these before, when a former client’s office was invaded by a small army of Federal agents on a politically inspired witch hunt.

“Odd to see you here,” I blurted, putting on an act as I’d done thousands of times in my short, but dynamic career.

The one who had spoken flashed a badge holder he pulled from an inner pocket and scrutinized me. “Have you seen anyone out of the ordinary around here? A girl, about my age, short blonde hair...”

“Lots of girls like that come over on the ferry every day,” I dodged.

“No, she wouldn’t be wearing beachwear. Jeans. White shirt.”

“I’ve been home all morning. Just came out for my morning walk.”

“You live on the island?”

“Sure. Back that way a few hundred yards. I just stopped in to say good morning to Thelma.” I glanced over my shoulder, but Thelma had apparently stayed inside, no doubt praying for forgiveness from God for letting me destroy her angel.

“Keep an eye out. She’s an escaped fugitive. Dangerous. Call the FBI if you see her, but don’t try to

apprehend her.”

“No problem.” Hard to believe how cool I was. Unlike in New York, my heart was in my throat. I was glad he didn’t try to shake my hand. My palms were sweating.

“Good day, sir.” He punctuated each word, with a hint of suspicion. Probably an occupational hazard.

“Be happy,” I smiled widely and brushed past that trim, hard-bodied statue, and sauntered nonchalantly down the gravel lane. At the northern edge of the village I turned and followed a path into the woods. A hundred yards farther, I came to a cross path and headed back to my shack. I saw more black suits coming around the bend behind me where the footpath angled toward the beach, but they turned off at the village.

With a heartfelt sigh, I wiped my hands on my pants and got that black stone back out. It was a lot heavier than when I started and I was no longer getting telepathic suggestions, so I picked up my pace. As fear of discovery faded, anticipation caught up with me. I was about to embark on the adventure of my life, if it wasn’t all just a crazy ruse. But I was sure I’d read her right. Never been wrong before. Well, maybe once, when a luscious redhead with emerald eyes and a body to die for named Heather had scammed me big time. She wooed me and conned me into investing in an IPO without first checking it out. Lost a hundred thousand. I didn’t see her again until the Feds caught up with her and she cut a deal to save her skin. She’d treated me like I was nobody. Didn’t even once look my way at the hearing.

Waiting at the front door, Amanda hurried out to meet me. “Got everything?”

“Yup.”

“Good. Let’s go.” There was no emotion in her voice as she accepted the device from me, her expression oddly neutral. That same way I’d acted when I learned Heather had conned me. I reached out and grasped her arm as she stepped past. Not hurtful, but enough to give her pause.

“No scam, right? You’re taking me with you?” I held her gaze, and her arm, until I was certain she wasn’t about to lie.

“Luke, I don’t lie, not to anybody. I don’t have to.”

I sized her up again and she gave it back to me in spades. The whole thing was over in an instant, but what passed between us was like a lightning bolt. I mean, I was jolted to my very toes. She’d flooded my brain with the likes of dopamine, and I was plunged into an euphoric abyss of monumental proportions. She was taking me with her all right: body, mind and soul. Holy crimini, I was a goner for sure. No woman had ever had that affect on me. It wasn’t lust, but rather an intimacy mixed up with trust and a meeting of the minds.

We hurried down the path I’d arrived on and veered off into the woods along a deer trail I was sure the

A Matter of Time - A Short Story

Feds hadn't a clue was there. Nearly at a run, we dodged a team of suits as we crossed another footpath and in minutes, we were back where she'd left her porter. My heart was racing and I was breathing hard. Sweat beaded on my face, but she looked smooth and clean, and unruffled.

The porter appeared just like that, right where it should have been. She held out that black stone and a humming began that grew louder and more insistent as the seconds spun away. I was mesmerized, as much by her as what I was seeing. There, floating a few inches from the device, a silvery cylinder, no bigger than a cigarette lighter, coalesced.

What I took to be the hood lifted off and the cylinder floated over and inserted itself in a box of indeterminate color beside what appeared to be a miniature turbine. I'd seen engines like that at air shows, but this was no bigger than a pitcher of beer. The porter took on a glow that seemed to radiate a rainbow in every direction and I felt oddly displaced. Through a fog, I heard her say something.

"Eh?"

She leaned into me and I could smell her warmth, her bodily perfume. "Spatial displacement. The feeling will pass. Get in." She tugged me towards the car. "The Feds are coming."

In a daze, I climbed in beside her and was suddenly amazed at how big it seemed inside. Could have fit my living room in there. Lost in the moment, I didn't recognize the threat posed by the black forms coming out of the trees, but then I realized they were the suits. They were shouting and then they were firing. You know how they do that stop action slo-mo in the movies where you can see the bullets spitting out of the barrels and coming right at you? I was like that, but the bullets didn't fall when they hit the force shield. They just stuttered to a stop inches from the porter and hung there.

The woods blinked out, became a shroud of translucent blue, but there was nothing beyond that. Just a white emptiness that seemed to go on forever. Nothing in my life had ever prepared me for anything like this. Jules Verne, eat your heart out!

I turned to Amanda and she kissed me. Not just with her lips, but with every inch her being. Like being touched by God, my life flashed before my eyes! In that instant, the fractal of time I knew how utterly pointless my existence had been until then.

Without a trace of malevolence, she shoved me aside. I felt abandoned, shallow and empty, and used. "What the he...."

"Shut up!" she barked. Her shoulders slumped, expression softened. "I mean something's wrong."

Outside darkened. A pool of light bathed the porter. We were inside a warehouse surrounded by workbenches and black metal racks of electronics. Two men in white smocks stood to our left, one with his hands thrown up, the other clutching a tool to his chest. To hazard a guess, I think they were as stunned as I.

"Where..."

"The research place I told you about." She glanced at me from beneath a swatch of golden hair. Fear, flash of anger, a frown. Jaw set, she looked past me, eyes calculating. Our surroundings coalesced.

"Why are we here?"

"Not sure. Must have left something." Her fingers caressed and prodded a dark blue panel of melding colors and shapes floating above her lap. Lists appeared, were replaced. Outside the porter things shifted, faded in and out. Colors flowed, the men's movements disjointed, like jumbled movie frames. With a soft flicker the scene settled. A brilliant red spot on a cart between the men blinked. Blinked again.

"That's what's missing!" She jabbed a finger at the small dark object propped on the cart. "Get it, Luke!"

Without thinking, I bolted from the porter though I can't recall opening a door. The object was nearly in my grasp when a fist slammed my shoulder, knocked me to the floor. My head spun and my belly knotted, but I was damned if they were going to take me out that easy.

Adrenaline set my heart pounding. I gathered myself, jerked my legs under me and surged upward, arms rigid, seeking flesh and bone. Fist met jaw. A guy lurched away. The other was on me, twisted my arm behind me, but I had that black ball and I hit him upside the head with it, hard. He staggered back. Blood swelled on his forehead.

"Amanda!" I tossed the pulsing, palm-sized ball to her. She did something and the porter's glow surged, but by then both guys were on me. I dropped and rolled, felt the cold, round nose of a gun on my neck and froze.

"Get up," a suit from out of nowhere demanded.

I pushed myself up slow like, getting a feel for what was beyond the trio of blue slacks, searching for an opening, anything that would gain me enough freedom to reach the porter. It wasn't going to happen. The muzzle of a short, ugly weapon followed my nose until I was upright, my hands clenched to my side.

"Luke!"

I looked to her voice while keeping a wary eye on that gun barrel.

"I'll come back for you." Anguish pained her face as she turned her attention from me.

The porter threw off rainbows and faded away until there was nothing but abject dejection swelling in my belly. How easily I'd been played by a sexy time traveler. I grinned stupidly at the uniformed man

with the gun, and raised my hands.

“Take me to your leader,” I smirked. He smacked me with the butt and I collapsed at his feet, hurt so bad I couldn’t think beyond that.

Over the next week, they shuttled me from one vanilla white concrete room to another. Interrogated by a dozen different personalities, some benign, others cruel, I acquired large and mottled bruises to prove it. My eyes were so dry they felt brush-hogged. I stank and tasted filth when I breathed. Though they fed me three squares a day, the food tasted pre-packaged – heavy with salt. It left me gagging for water, which they provided sparingly. Something in the meal kept sleep just beyond reach. I bitched and screamed, parried there insults but gave up nothing. What little I knew would’ve convinced them I knew far more.

The hours mashed together until I didn't know what was and what wasn't. Words, harsh and grating, sometimes soft and soothing came at me until it became an endless blur of senseless gibberish. I didn't care anymore. They could kill me and all I could think was what a relief that would be.

At last, alone in a cold, stark windowless box with a concrete bed and a hole in the corner for a latrine. Hours, days, I can't recall, the silence a warm blanket, a salve to my aching head. But soon enough I was shuttled, cuffed hands to ankles, to more spacious quarters. Inexplicably, food appeared at regular intervals, thankfully varied and tasteful, and plenty of water. In one corner a black spot, when pushed, brought forth a toilet and washbasin, fully accessorized.

No furnishings, but warm enough and the floor like a sponge mat. No trouble falling asleep on it. When awake, I busied my mind with fantasies or worked through an endless series of aerobics I learned from those video babes. No one came to visit. No sound intruded. I made my own music, desperate to keep from losing all reason. My brief adventure with Amanda seemed less and less real. Even memories of my life on the island became somehow distant.

My sanity crumbled. I refused to eat and no one forced me, but I was never alone. A miniature lens tracked my movements and the shielded light at the center of the ceiling never dimmed. I curled up in the corner opposite the lens and prayed for death. The all too brief glimpse of what Amanda offered convinced me that without her there was nothing.

Starved and delusional, I wept dry, pitiless tears, cushioned my fragile ego for the end, thus unwilling to believe when the back wall collapsed into jagged blocks. Gray dust swept in and there was the blue porter. I blinked, rubbed my eyes, but despite all that, the vision remained.

"Get in!" Amanda ordered.

I heard the words, their meaning beyond comprehension. They came again and again, more strident each time. Frightened and appalled by the harsh, urgent rasp, I prayed for the serenity of silence. A hand smacked my face and before me was a uniform of the Galactic Imperial Guard.

A Matter of Time - A Short Story

"Luke! Luke!"

She didn't hit me again, but shook me until the uniform melded to a yellow flower print and a grim, but determined contenance, blue eyes startling in their clarity.

Joy! I staggered to my feet. "I love you," I croaked.

"Yeah, I know. Here," she pulled my arm over her shoulders and lugged me to the porter. I found my legs and helped her the last few feet. I flopped into the porter. That twisty, disorienting feeling took hold. Amanda had come back. Nothing else mattered.

A semblance of reality, thoughts urging me to wakefulness. I felt groggy, as if I'd overslept. "Where are we?"

Beyond the confines of her porter, vast darkness. I made out bits and pieces - a string of stars in a nebula billions of miles across, swirling clouds of purples and reds and orange, a giant red ball, gone in less than a blink.

"We're approaching the center of your galaxy." So matter-of-fact, as if there was nothing she hadn't seen or experienced.

"I thought the center was too violent for anything to live there?"

She leaned into me, brushed my cheek, smiled gently. "You have much to learn."

"You make my generation sound stupid." I cocked my head, feeling mentally like an ant contemplating a dike. A Neanderthal.

She smiled with her gorgeous blue eyes for the first time since we left that facility...and my time. I swear she radiated genuine affection, but I wasn't ready to handle that so I said what came to mind.

"Tell me then, explain 'time' to me."

Her vibrant, yet contained laugh smothered all doubt. She laid an arm alongside mine on the seat back and affectionately toyed with the hair at the nape of my neck. The affect, electric. Despite the briefness of our budding relationship, I would've purred if I'd been a cat.

"To describe it in terms you might grasp, might, mind you...you could say time is like a silly putty rubber band. You can stretch it, mold it into whatever shape you want, but it will always return to its original form. You can build worlds or conquer them, change peoples lives, make the sun go nova, do anything your mind can conger up, but after all is said and done, God puts most of it right."

“God, huh?” Hadn’t thought much about ‘him’ of late, though I had my own vision of what the afterlife was all about, and it didn’t scare me.

“In your time, the world is deeply religious...and that’s okay...but somewhat misguided. God doesn’t dabble in the little things. He handles the big picture for sure, but what we do, how we make our way through hundreds of thousands of lives, is completely up to us. And it does matter. It all matters. Everything we do, everything we say, how we touch the lives of others – it’s all part of the big picture. And God did create us in his own image, as he did on billions of other worlds just like ours. He has emotions, he can be hurt, like when his children go to war or commit horrible atrocities. But, he gave us the ability to combine the power of our psyche, to channel our thoughts, that we may prevent terrible things from happening. Unfortunately, that won’t become generally accepted until late in the twenty second century.

“Think of the cosmic whole like silly putty when it lifts the ink from a page. Even though we can’t see the image when we mash it all together, the essence of it is still there. Great evil wounds God and great good heals him. What we end up with is the combination of all of that. Good or bad, it’s what we make it. That’s why what we do during our flicker of time in the real world matters so much.”

Being a logical thinker the concepts she laid on me had merit, took me to thinking about how little I, and Mankind really knew about anything. But that aside, I hadn’t lost touch with the here and now. “What are we going to do at the center of the galaxy?”

“We’re going to witness the birth of the universe...the 'Big Bang' as you call it.”

How do you respond to that? I fell silent and in an instant, we were there - in a black, formless void. The porter, along with Amanda, dissolved and I floated in nothingness, alone, frightened out of my wits. So profoundly overwhelmed was I, I would gladly have welcomed death just to feel something, anything.

An agony of light and a blast that tore me to smithereens.

As quickly as it had happened, Amanda was cradling my head on her chest. I took a deep, shuddering breath, my thoughts clear and concise, my soul purified and renewed. The mystery was gone and in its place a depth of understanding beyond anything I ever dreamed possible.

For years after that, we traveled from one end of the time spectrum to the other. We spied on alien cultures and touched living beings beyond belief. I saw worlds and sights no man can imagine. And I’m here to tell you, those sci-fi writers had some of it right, but whoa baby, what they missed could fill a galaxy!

I experienced a fulfillment beyond all, suffered pain and fear and loss and a plethora of emotions we think of as uniquely human. But it was all worth it. Even when Amanda took me home an instant after we’d left. The suits weren’t there, but the damp smell of the morning mist rising from the ground and

A Matter of Time - A Short Story

the twitters and squeaks of small critters living and dying in the brush, was.

We bid farewell as she returned to her own time. I would see her again, when this life was over, but we'd shared a lifetime of love that would carry me until then. I knew the exact moment and manner of my death, and with it came a serenity that few will ever know. Between then and now, I'll write about it. Share with you my adventures. You'll think them all just entertaining tales, dredged from the deepest recesses of my mind, but what you will never believe is that it's all true. Bet my life on it.