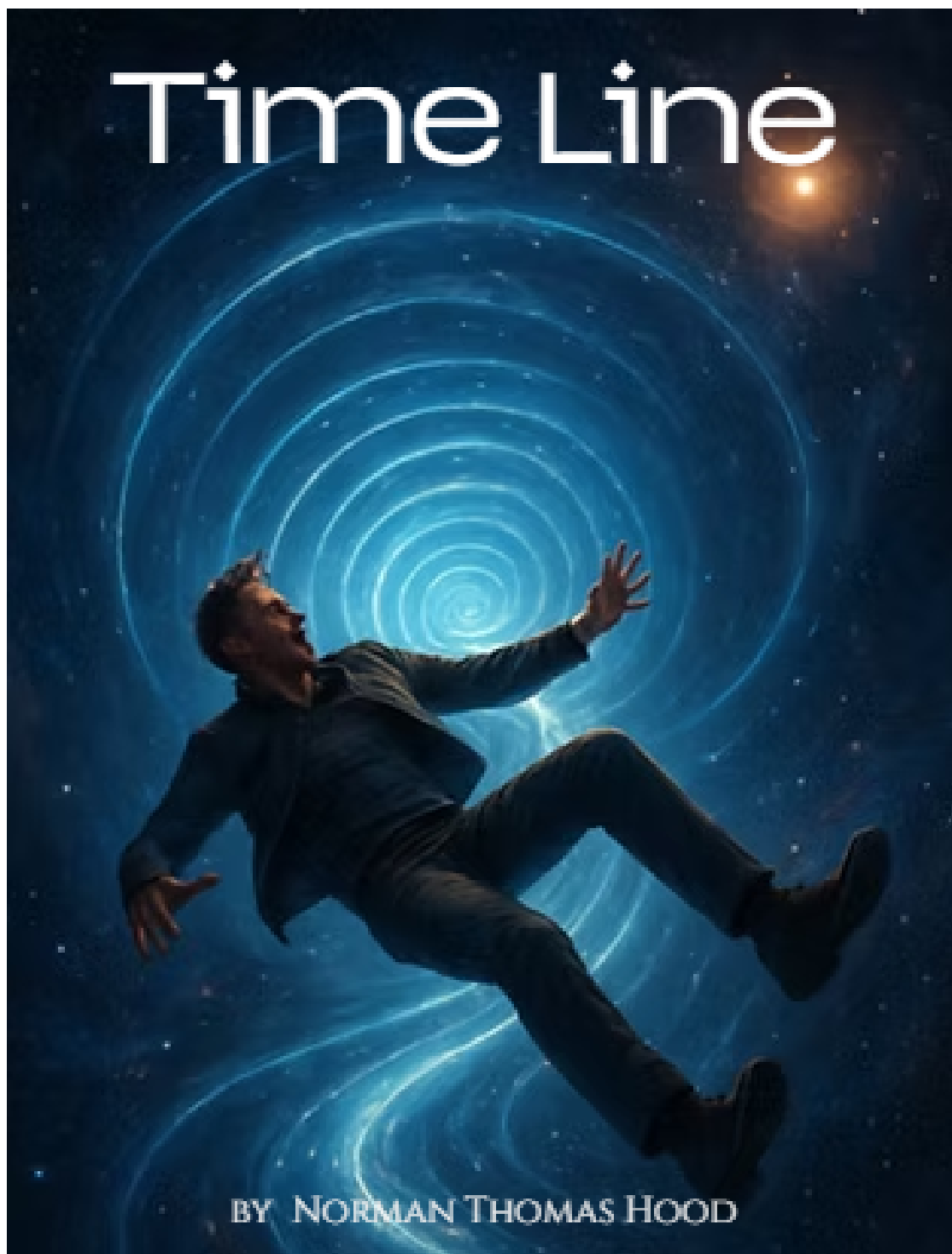




Time Line

By Norman Thomas Hood

Time.

I thought I knew what it was. More than that, I thought I knew what it wasn't. I was wrong on both counts. My name is Scott Pennington, and that will always be my name, though the man writing this may not be the one you'd find if we meet in another time line. Have I confused you yet? Let me know when I have, so I'll know we're on the same page. Until then, I'll try to tell you the story exactly as I experienced it.

It started two years ago, or two years from now. I'm not sure anymore. I was lying in bed, planning my divorce. I'd walked in on my wife and my brother the week before. Yes, I said it correctly... my brother. I can't even explain the shock of what I saw when I opened my front door. I'll spare you the fleshy details, other than to say it was the last day our couch spent in the house, and the last day I wore my wedding ring.

My 4:15 flight had been cancelled, and the next plane to Chicago wasn't for another few hours. I decided to drive home from the airport and surprise Julie with a dinner date while I waited for the next departure. I surprised her... and Mark.

"Scott! What are you — oh, God!" she screamed, scrambling for her clothes.

"Oh, shit! Dammit, Scott! I'm sorry!" Mark said, pulling up his pants.

I'll never forget the look of fear on his face. He had good reason to be afraid. He was 5' 8", 160 lbs at the time, and I was 6' 4" running about 225. His

expectation was that I'd kick his ass all around the house. I didn't. I'm not sure why I didn't, but if I had to guess, it was because the hurt in that moment outweighed my anger. I wish it had been some guy I didn't know. It would have been better for me. I'd be in prison now, but it would have been better.

Julie spent the next few days begging me to forgive her. "It was a "horrible mistake", she said repeatedly, followed up by saying she didn't want to lose me. She offered lots of reasons to work things out, but I knew the main one. I made money; *good* money.

I was a Wealth Manager. Not a Financial Planner or Advisor... a *Wealth Manager*. My clients didn't plan their financial strategies around a household budget. My clients already *had* their money. Lots of it. None of them were rich, they were wealthy. There's a difference between the two. And that difference required the right person behind the wheel of their car, so to speak. That person was me.

Mark, on the other hand, was a *live in the moment* type of guy. It was all about the next thrill for him, his next adventure. It always has been. The farthest he'd ever planned ahead was his next meal, and that Tuesday afternoon, his dessert was Julie.

I'm not the kind of man to accept the battle scar of infidelity with any intention to mend fences. There's no *fighting to win my marriage back* mentality behind these eyes. In fact, I shut down in response to the notion. Completely down, as in 'off'.

The problem for me wasn't ending the marriage, it was the hurt they left me holding. It ran deep, and that's what I needed to manage now.

Julie was the one part of my life I never *had* to manage, and I loved her for that reason. She was the fun in our equation, the fire I needed to help me know I was *experiencing* life, not just living to make money. And now, because of her "mistake", that part of my life was gone. I pulled away from her, my brother *and* my parents who offered little understanding, but lobbied hard for reconciliation.

All that remained was the emotional damage the affair had caused, and my emotional losses hit hard. The depression that set in was subtle but suffocating, and getting worse each day.

A practical man does practical things, until he's left with no practical way to fix himself. If the mind isn't healthy, nothing else is. And that's what I had to do...

get my mind healthy again. I reasoned I could do it alone. I bought two self-help books and read them both, cover to cover. They didn't help. Neither did an online support group I joined, which ended up being more of an online dating club. It was then I knew I needed real, professional help if I ever wanted to heal. So, I caved, and sought out a doctor in the appropriate field.

My first session went well. The psychiatrist spent most of the hour fleshing out the marital infidelity and my feelings about it. Much of the second session dealt with the same, though he did inquire about love and loss in my youth as well.

He prescribed two medications to help with sleeplessness and my depression, but after five weeks I sat the half-used bottles onto his desk. I didn't like the way they made me feel; too unnatural. I don't like perpetual band-aids. I wanted to be fixed. I didn't want to spend the two or three years he said it traditionally required to recover from a broken marriage. I wanted it finished and in the box.

Six months of therapy later, I felt as if I hadn't moved an inch toward my goal. I wasn't the only one.

"Scott, I'm really at a loss here. If I thought we were making progress, I'd continue without objection, but I'm beginning to realize another six months of this would just be wasting *our* time and *your* money."

"I guess I'm just a hard nut to crack, Dr. Melton," I said. I was trying to keep the conversation light. "It's not that I'm *wanting* to fail. The negative thoughts and depression... they just won't let go of me. I want them gone. Hell, the divorce has been final for a while now. Shouldn't I feel free, happy and excited for the next chapter of my life? But instead, every day that passes seems to suck a little more than the last. I've literally only had *one* decent day since I caught them in my living room. It was the happiest I've felt since then, and it began in my sleep.

"I had a very vivid dream of my youth Monday evening. I feel like I dreamed all night long. I even woke up to use the bathroom around 3am, went back to sleep and continued dreaming the same thing. I woke up the next morning with it still fresh in my mind. I was happy even *after* the dream ended. For the whole day, actually... really happy!

"The dream felt so real and powerful, it made me forget my stress and pain. I didn't feel like the same, pitiful victim that had been cheated on and hurt so badly. Instead, I felt excited and new... enthusiastic about life. I couldn't wait to start the day! Can you understand that?"

“Yes, I can, Scott. There’s been several books written on causal dream therapy. It’s an effective type of mental and emotional reprieve from whatever’s plaguing one in their waking life. Very powerful... but still, temporary.

“You know, John, considering how effective that was for you, that may be the answer. I have an old colleague of mine that may be able to help you where I can’t. His name is Dr. Henry Edelstein. He used to practice in Minnesota some years ago. He wrote a book that caused quite the controversy in those days.”

“Used to practice?” I prodded.

“Yes, well... because of the book I mentioned, I’m afraid. It was... unconventional, to say the least. Many people in our field didn’t take it or the doctor seriously after reading it. Very strange methods involving induced dreaming through hypnosis. He helped a lot of clients overcome some deeply embedded traumas.

“The problem was that one of his patients experienced some difficulty returning to the same life situation and expectation after the treatments. He disappeared from public life and returned one day, months later. He claimed he’d accidentally traveled time because of the doctor’s treatment. It was ludicrous! The man went to the authorities and told them he’d spent seventeen years trapped in the past, inside his younger body, no less! Turns out the man had spent some time in a mental facility before seeking the doctor’s care. But the story of his accusations had already hit the news and lent fuel to the ridicule and objection for Henry’s work altogether.”

“You called him Henry. Did you know him personally?”

“Yes, we studied together. We were roommates in college, actually. I always knew him to be a very stable and brilliant man. I wouldn’t have suggested him if I didn’t.”

“Granted. So is he still practicing?”

“That, I’m not sure about. But I *do* know he still lives in Minnesota. He sent me a Christmas card from there a few months ago. Let me give him a call and find out what he’s up to. If he agrees to see you, it would involve travel and lodging, of course.”

“Not a problem,” I said. “Maybe unconventional help is just what I need right now.”

Two weeks went by before I heard back from Dr. Melton. Edelstein had agreed to meet and evaluate me for treatment. It would take a trip to find out, he told me, and there would be conditions I'd need to agree to before he consented. Chiefly, I'd have to sign a nondisclosure agreement covering anything to do with the treatment. Secondly, I'd sign an agreement not to hold the doctor responsible for any negative outcomes related to his personal advice, medical advice or treatment. In other words, I couldn't sue his ass. Right away, the business side of me wanted to run away in a full sprint from the red flags. But it wasn't the business side of me that needed fixing, it was the emotional.

Soon, I was on a plane for Minnesota. One car rental and hotel check-in later, and I was ready to meet the doctor.

"Doctor Edelstein. Pleased to meet you. I'm Scott Pennington, your three o'clock."

"No need for the appointment details, Mr. Pennington. I *have* no other patients," he said. "And please, call me Henry. I assume you'll afford me the same courtesy?"

"Yes, of course. Thank you for considering me for treatment, Henry. Dr. Melton spoke highly of you. I'm looking forward to getting started."

He handed me two pieces of paper.

"Oh, yes... no problem," I said, signing the agreements. I'll be candid with you, sir. Doctor Melton gave me a brief history concerning one of your clients in the past."

"I would expect him to. You should know a little about the man who might be treating you," he said. "Why don't you have a seat in my office? We can continue there. Coffee?"

"Thanks, black is fine."

"Good, that's all I have," he smiled. The doctor disappeared into his kitchen.

Looking around the office, it was clear he didn't use it for treating patients any longer. There were boxes of papers everywhere. It was disheveled to the point it looked more like a record retention storage room. The man literally had one,

small path leading to his desk. Seeing the stacks of literature stacked so high around the recliner told me they'd just been moved so I'd have a place to sit.

"Here you go. Careful now. It's hot and very strong I'm afraid," he said.

He took a seat behind his desk and shuffled the mess around while I sipped the coffee. When he'd cleared off a good space, he sat a voice recorder on his desk, along with a notepad.

"Everything we talk about will be recorded, Scott. I'll also take notes when necessary. Is that agreeable?"

I nodded my answer, but it was obvious he was waiting for verbal confirmation. "Yes," I said clearly, "that's fine."

The session went much like my opener with Dr. Melton. Same type of questions, same answers. The only difference came when I mentioned my dream. Edelstein became notably engaged when I began to talk about it. He probed all aspects of it, taking notes after every question I answered. Two hours later, he confirmed what I'd already surmised from his body language.

"You're definitely a candidate for treatment, Scott. I apologize for the lengthy session, but I had to be certain. I forgot to ask you earlier, but had you taken any recreational drugs before the dream occurred? Even earlier in the week?"

"No, sir. I don't use recreational drugs. And the most I have to drink is an occasional glass of red wine with dinner. But not too much... it puts me right to sleep."

"Good, then we can proceed. I understand you're renting a hotel room off 494? There's a bed and breakfast a few miles from here. You'd be more comfortable there, and closer.

"We're looking at 2-4 weeks of treatment, depending on your rate of progress. I'd hate to see you in a hotel room for that long. Take a look at the place. You'll like the owner, I'm sure of it. It's called The Benson B&B."

"That's great! Yes, I'm sure that'd be more comfortable than a hotel. I appreciate the tip."

"Good. Well then, I'd like to fast-track your sessions... three times each week, with a day in between. We can start on Monday."

"Great, I'll get settled in this weekend and see you Monday, at the same time."

We shook hands and I left for my car. Along the way, I wondered how, with over a hundred hotels and motels in and around Minneapolis, he knew I'd picked one off Highway 494.

After an early Continental breakfast, I got the location for the inn and drove ten miles to the Benson. Pulling in, I noticed the obvious in its appearance. It showcased a very northern, traditional cottage architecture. I knocked on the door, suddenly realizing how early in the morning it was. Before I could retreat to my car, the door opened a few inches before a small chain prevented it from going any further.

"Can I help you?" A woman with the bluest eyes I'd seen asked me. She was still in her robe, probably wondering why she hell she answered her door so early in the morning.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "I didn't realise what time of the day it was before I knocked." I moved over so she could see me better.

The moment her eyes met mine, she acted as if she'd seen a ghost! After a few seconds passed without her speaking, I extended my hand to shake hers.

"I'm Scott, Scott Pennington. I'm new in town for a few weeks. A friend of mine, Dr. Edelstein, suggested your bed and breakfast. I was hoping you could show me around, but I feel a little intrusive right now, considering how early it is."

"You're not too early, I promise you. Henry? Yes, I know him. He's a good man." She moved the hair out of her eyes. "I can't believe you're seeing me like this! Please, come in. I'm Elizabeth. Elizabeth... Benson. Nice to meet you. I have coffee on the counter. If you'll have a seat in the kitchen and give me just a few minutes, I'll come back looking a little more presentable."

She didn't need a few minutes. She looked as beautiful as a woman could, whether in a morning robe or a dinner dress.

"Sure, I'll be right here. Take your time, please. And again, I'm sorry I bothered you so early. I wasn't thinking."

She nodded, and backed nervously into the hallway behind her without taking her eyes off me. The look of surprise she had at the door had not left yet.

When she'd disappeared, I quickly combed my fingers through my beard, worried I may have had breakfast crumbs caught in it.

Her kitchen reminded me of my grandmother's. The walls were light yellow, which contrasted well with her vintage green appliances. All that was missing was the smell of peanut butter cookies in the oven to convince me I was eight years old again.

"I'm back! Did you pour yourself some coffee yet?" she asked, entering the kitchen.

For a moment, I was speechless... and admittedly, wrong. She emerged looking more beautiful than I could have imagined. Her long, auburn hair cascaded perfectly along her lovely face. I felt guilty for noticing, but quickly reminded myself I wasn't married any longer.

"Pour myself—? Oh, no. I'd feel like a burglar rummaging through your cabinets," I said.

"Why would you have to rummage— oh! I thought I had some cups out. Sorry! Let me get you one."

She crossed the room like a gazelle, each step more graceful than the last. In that moment, I believed I would have rented a room from her even if it were a barn stall.

She poured a cup of coffee, then sat it on the table, in front of me. I picked it up and noticed the printing on the outside of the cup.

"'You're the reason I landed safely'," I read aloud. "And there's a little airplane on it."

"Kinda cute, huh? she asked.

"Yeah, it is. A little vague for anyone but a pilot, but cute enough. Thanks again for seeing me this morning. I was wondering if you have a room available for a few weeks. I'm here for— well... I'm here on business."

"Oh... on business? With Henry?" she asked, grinning.

I'd become careful with my answer, not wanting her to know I was in town for psychiatric care.

"Yes, I have... business... with Dr. Edelstein," I managed to get out, without feeling like a complete liar.

She pulled out the chair across from me and sat down.

“Well, now... Mr. Pennington, is it? I don’t know *anything* about you. I’m a single mother of an impressionable toddler. I can’t allow just *anyone* to rent living space in my home. And for several weeks? That’s a *very* long rental for a B&B, sir.”

“Oh, yes, I’m sorry. I’m from Connecticut. I’m thirty-two, single... well, actually divorced—”

She quickly reached across the table, covering my hand with hers.

“I’m just kidding you, Mr. Pennington! You don’t have to go into any detail unless you want to. If Henry sent you to me, then I’m satisfied you’re a decent man, and you’re certainly welcome to rent a room here. I have one available... two, in fact. You can take your pick.”

Her warm smile instantly disarmed me. Her hand lingered on mine for a moment, until she realised so and quickly pulled it away. I think I would have allowed her to leave it there for the rest of the day. I’d never been so enamored by a woman I’d just met before.

“So, you live here alone... with your son?” I asked, trying not to act how I felt inside.

“Yes, but I didn’t say whether it was a girl or a boy. Did Henry tell you about him?”

“No, he didn’t say a word about anything other than he thought I’d like you as a landlord. I really don’t know why I assumed it was a boy. Fifty-fifty chance, I guess?”

“Hmmm... maybe so. His name is Oliver. He’s asleep upstairs. I can show you the rooms, but we’ll need to keep our voices down.”

“I’ll be as quiet—” I began.

“As a church mouse? Yes, you’d better be,” she said, smiling.

I followed her down the hall, then up a winding staircase. There were four bedrooms on the second floor. She opened the door to two of them and showed them to me. I chose the one with the twin bed in case she found a couple who needed a room while I was there, as the other one had a queen bed. When we returned downstairs, she showed me my restroom and the parlor.

“I usually don’t rent rooms for more than a few days at a time, Mr. Pennington. Most renters want a B&B without the owner hanging around, but

Oliver and I have no choice right now. I'd have to ask \$985 for each week you're here. Is that acceptable?"

"More than fair," I said, "and please, call me Scott."

"And you can call me Beth," she said.

"I like that name. It's in my family."

"Your grandmother?" she asked.

"Exactly! Good guess. She was an Elizabeth, also," I said.

"Aren't we all?" she smiled.

I laughed at her words. At that moment, I knew Dr. Edelstein had been right with how I'd feel about the owner of the Benson. I liked her *very* much.

The next morning, I unpacked the luggage I'd moved from the hotel and took a shower. When I entered the kitchen, I saw a pair of very blue eyes staring at me. They weren't Beth's. They belonged to a little boy sitting in a high chair. He was trying his best to force a piece of banana into his mouth. I sat down across from him.

"Hey, little guy, how does that nanner taste?" I asked.

He smiled at me, allowing the most recent piece to fall from his mouth. I sensed someone was watching me. I turned around to see Beth standing in the doorway. She was wiping her eyes.

"Allergies?" I asked.

"What? Oh... yes, you wouldn't think they'd be so bad in Minnesota," she said, walking in the room.

"I see you've met Mr. Oliver. He's the only male that's been here longer than you're planning to stay," she said.

"Something tells me this little guy is getting a free ride, though," I laughed.

"Or at least a better deal than you gave me!"

She sat down next to the child. "Well, I can't expect Mr. Oliver to pay rent if he can't work, Scott. And I can't expect him to work if he's only just now learning to walk, can I? That wouldn't be fair to him, and I certainly don't want to be sued for discrimination."

Once again, she made me laugh.

"True, true. I guess I can't be *too* upset that he's getting a pass on rent," I admitted.

"He's only freeloading until he's big enough to help me around the house, Scott. Then he's going to become mommy's little helper."

"I'm sure he'll be a good one. Listen, I don't mean to pry, but where's Oliver's father?"

She took a sip of coffee before answering. "Until recently, I didn't know *where* he was. He left us. A few months ago, actually. It's just Oliver and me, now, and we're doing just fine... right Ollie?"

Her eyes showed her pain. I instantly regretted asking the question.

"I'm sorry, Beth. I can't imagine *any* man leaving you... or Oliver. He must be an idiot," I said.

"No, he's no idiot. Let's just say the timing wasn't right for us. Oliver and I are okay, though. We're adjusting."

"Well, unless you have a *wicked witch of the west* side to you that I don't see, I still say he's an idiot."

"Well, thanks for saying so, but I can be a handful sometimes. It's the Irish in me, I've been told."

"Me, as well... but I'm Irish-English. So, I can be a real smartass, but afterwards, I apologize like a gentleman."

My comment must have hit her just right, because she laughed so loudly that Oliver dropped his piece of banana and started laughing, too. She cleaned up his face, then turned her attention back to me.

"Well, Scott, you look like you're ready to go somewhere this morning. Are you seeing Henry today?"

"Not until Monday. I just thought I'd take a drive around to get used to my surroundings. Maybe pick up a good book to read. I get bored easily, that's all."

"Oh, are we not exciting enough for you, then? Or maybe Connecticut is just *that* more exciting than Minnesota?" she asked. Her smile had disappeared.

"No, not at all! Listen, I didn't mean to say—"

She laughed again. Oliver quickly joined in.

"Oh, okay... I see what's going on here. You and Mr. Oliver, here, are part-time comedians!" I said.

"Only on Saturdays!" she laughed. "Get your tickets while they're available!"

Suddenly, I didn't want to go for a drive. I wanted to stay at the house and spend the rest of the morning with Beth.

"Well, be careful out there. Minnesota's not quite the same as it used to be. Especially Minneapolis."

"I'll be careful... thanks. Any suggestions on where to go?" I asked.

She exhaled fully while thinking. "Yes, but none that are very close to one another. Let me write a few places down for you, and you can decide."

As she jotted down her suggestions, I realized how relaxed and at peace I felt. It was as if Beth was an antidote for my depression. Still, I knew my condition needed more than a temporary fix. I needed a cure, and needed to keep my mind on the upcoming treatments.

I reluctantly took the drive. First, to the city. Then to the places Beth suggested. All the while, I realized I was anticipating getting back to the cottage. And once again, I had to keep reminding myself I was single, and that it was okay to be excited about another woman. There was something about her presence that drew me in.

Treatments or not, she was firmly in my head now. I didn't know if that would turn out to be good or bad, but I knew I wanted to find out. After a day of sightseeing, my favorite destination turned out to be her driveway.

The smell of baked bread permeated the entrance to her home.

"Just in time, Scott! Want to join Oliver and I for some homemade chicken pot pie?" she asked, putting the dish on the table.

"Well, you're running a bed and *breakfast*, Beth, and it's dinner time now. I don't want to overstep my bounds," I said. "I can go out and get something for me, really. It's no problem."

She looked at Oliver, who was busy eating cheerios off his tray.

"Well, Ollie, looks like 'ole Mr. Pennington here isn't a lover of chicken pot pie. Can you believe that? He'd rather go out and eat some old, dried out burger instead of joining us!"

"Beth, are you 100% Irish? Because I didn't know the culture could be *this* snarky without whiskey," I said, laughing.

She sauntered around the table to where I stood and locked eyes with me. "Maybe you've just never met a *real* Irish girl before now, Mr. Pennington." "I thought we were on a first name basis," I said.

"Not if you don't try my pot pie, sir. If you'd rather allow a drive-thru burger to cross your lips over *my* dinner, we'll have to return to proper formalities."

"Well, I don't want *that* to happen," I said, sitting down obediently.

"You've made the right choice. Now, can I get you some tea?"

Her dinner was amazing. I hadn't had that dish since my mom cooked it for my 17th birthday. It was always my favorite, but somehow, Beth's was even better. I spent the evening thinking how different I'd felt since meeting her. Maybe it was just the endorphin surge after meeting such a beautiful girl. I wasn't sure. But I knew the moment I eventually set foot in Connecticut again, my depression would boldly reintroduce itself. So, once more, I had to remind myself to stay focused on treatment.

I have to admit, I was nervous prior to my first session with Dr. Edelstein. I'd searched and read some news reports of his patient's lawsuit and specific accusations. The news coverage went for the doctor's throat, painting him as a lunatic, a fringe-science witch doctor. Still, I trusted Dr. Melton, and the added fact that he knew Edelstein tipped the scales in his favor.

"Come in Scott. You know your way to the office," he said.

His home was a bit tidier this time. Not so much his office, but the rest of the ground floor.

"I'm excited to get started, doctor. How do we begin?"

"I'll explain the process. We're going to get you into a relaxed state with a few minutes of binaural, wave-based music. Here, take these headphones. After that, you'll begin to hear some Shamanic drumming. Its purpose is to gradually align your heartbeat with the drum beats. After a few minutes of the repeated beat rate, the tempo will begin to slow, decreasing your heart rate along with it. It is then you'll hear my voice in your right ear. I'll conduct a guided meditation using hypnosis, taking you back to a time in your life, of your choosing, that you remember yourself being happy, safe and secure. A time when worries and

stressors weren't a part of your life. When we reach that place, I'll continue, through hypnosis, to bring that healthy mindset to the forefront of your personality and work it into your current psyche."

I was speechless, and a little nervous. The doctor noticed and laughed quietly.

"It's a lot to take in, isn't it?" he asked. "But if we're successful, we're going to achieve with this process what conventional medicine relies on mind-affecting drugs to accomplish. And we'll do it much more effectively. Do you still want to go forward?"

I nodded yes. He waited a moment before holding up his recorder.

"Oh... right. I wish to proceed," I said clearly into the recorder.

"Okay, Scott... recline your chair back and put the headphones on," he directed.

I did as I was told and began to hear some low drone notes rising to a comfortable volume. They were in harmony with each other and sounded as if they were being played on a keyboard. After a minute of listening to it, I felt myself begin to relax.

I remember thinking how hard it would be to stay awake if this was attempted at night.

About fifteen minutes into the recording, I heard some faint drum rhythms begin to play in both ears. The drone notes slowly faded out while the drums increased in volume, eventually replacing them. I began to relax even more, but in a more encompassing way. My mind and body were going deeper and deeper into a relaxed state. I'd never felt that way before. I felt my pulse synchronize with the drums' rhythms.

After a while, it felt as if my *body* was producing the drums somehow! It was then I heard the doctor's voice speaking in my right ear. It was faint, but clear. At first, his words seemed out of place with the drums and my heartbeat. Then gradually, they began to merge with both. It was an unusual sensation, like his words were bypassing my normal paths for perception and flowed directing into my consciousness. With a calming tone, he guided my mind through earlier times in my life, allowing me to choose our destination.

I found myself sitting at my grandmother's kitchen table, eating cereal. I was conscious I was there, and conscious I was seated in the doctor's recliner as well. I could feel the milk in my mouth, thinking how cold it was. The taste of the

cereal... the texture and crunch... It was all there. *I* was there. My grandmother sat across from me and talked to me about God and her memories of church life as a child. The stories she told were warm and sometimes funny. I remember spitting out some cereal while laughing at one. She walked over and hugged me for what seemed like an hour.

The way she looked into my eyes... the love, the pride, the caring. She made me feel like the most loved person on earth! I heard the doctor's voice again, asking me to describe what I was feeling. I answered him as well as I could.

Moments after, I began to feel even more relaxed and heard an odd tone forming in my head. It grew in volume, making it difficult to hear the doctor. I felt a strange, tingling sensation in my chest. It tickled, but then became more intense. I thought I heard him speaking again. I told him I couldn't hear him very well... that there was a weird noise in my head that was getting more intense, and my chest felt like one's foot does when it falls asleep.

Immediately, I felt his hands grabbing the headphones. He pulled them off my head, leaving me stunned and confused. The room suddenly looked very strange. The walls were moving and the floor looked... absent! I realized then that I was still under hypnosis. The doctor spoke my name loudly, gaining my full attention, then started counting backwards. I heard a finger snap in my right ear, then my left. The next thing I know, I was on his floor, not remembering how I got there.

"Scott! Are you alright?" he asked, reaching down to help me to my feet.

My head was ringing and my chest still tingled.

"Yeah, I think so. What happened?"

He put his hands on my shoulders. "How long were you there?" he asked.

"How long... what? Where?" I asked, still shaking the cobwebs from my head.

"At your grandmother's house... in that time line," he said.

"I don't know... maybe thirty minutes?" I said. "What do you mean, time line?"

He walked behind his desk and sat down, visibly upset.

"I knew we had to be careful, but for you to respond so quickly to the phenomenon... I didn't expect it," he said. "I'm very sorry, Scott."

I climbed back into the recliner.

"I don't get it, doctor. Time line? That's the phrase your deranged patient used when explaining his story to the police. Are you saying what he claimed really happened?"

The doctor turned off his recorder, leaned back and rubbed his eyes.

“Some of what he claimed was true, and some of it was misunderstood and relayed incorrectly to the authorities. It’s a phenomenon, a byproduct, really, of the process I developed to enable hypnosis to anchor more effectively. His experience was my introduction to it as well.”

“Are you trying to tell me I almost time travelled? Come on, doctor! That’s science fiction!” I said, laughing.

“Another few seconds, and it would have become science *fact* for you, young man! I’m afraid we’re going to have to abandon the treatment, Mr. Pennington. At least until I can discover a way to make it safe for you.”

“Safe? You’re not making sense, doctor. So *what* if I ended up on the floor. Listen, I’ve spent a lot of time and money to make this happen. Dr. Melton showed the highest respect for you and your work. Are you telling me you can’t help me? Less than two weeks ago, I spent an entire weekend battling suicidal thoughts! I told you that in our opening session. Thoughts like those aren’t normal for me. I want to escape this depression that’s been kicking my ass for over eight months now. There has to be something we can do to safeguard against whatever you’re worried about happening to my brain.”

“It’s not just your brain!” he said. “Listen to me carefully, Scott. What was beginning to occur, preempted by the tingling and strange tone you heard, *has* to be the stopping point. Anything beyond that is dangerous! I didn’t even have time to plant any of the hypnotic suggestions you needed. Any longer, and you would have fully inhabited your past identity.”

“So, we barely avoided my mind being stuck in the memory of my past?” I asked.

“Not just your mind, Scott... you! Your current mental essence, your personality as a thirty-two year-old man... the whole of it, trapped inside your youthful self! Believe me or not, but that’s *exactly* what happened to Mr. Stevens, the man who sued me and destroyed my career. He was pulled into an earlier time line!”

“If that’s true, and I’m not saying I believe *any* of that, then why did you even agree to treat me? Wouldn’t it be too risky... for us both?”

“That’s not important for you to know right now,” he said, “but I did not expect this so soon.”

“So that’s it? There’s nothing you can do to ensure I won’t slip into another... hell, I don’t even want to say it! I’ll just use the word *condition*.”

The doctor leaned back in his chair with his hands folded behind his head. He stared out his office window. I tried my best to calm down and give him some time to think about it.

“I have a theory that might work, Scott, but it’s only a theory at this point, since I haven’t had any way to test it. A self-inflicted jolt of some kind, or an agreed upon hypnotic trigger word or phrase... something that would hinder the progression of the time line shift phenomenon without bringing you out of hypnosis. Just long enough for me to complete the suggestions needed to make the treatment a success. If we could implement it correctly, I have no doubt we could be successful.”

“Well, then, let’s try it. You have a willing participant sitting right here,” I said. “I’d rather try out your theory than fly back to Connecticut empty-handed, only to greet my depression at the front door.”

“You have to take the risks seriously, Scott. We’d be under the same agreement as far as your treatment and confidentiality. Is that still agreeable after what I’ve just told you?” he asked.

“Yes, it is. Look, we can make it work. I’ll be able to tell you when and *if* this “phenomenon” you’re worried about begins to happen, and you can hit me with the phrase or sound needed to interrupt it. If it gets too weird and I can’t take the headphones off, *you* can. I trust you. We’ll know one way or another if your theory works. So yes, I’m in. Want to try again on Wednesday?” I asked.

“Let’s wait until Friday. I want to do some research on low frequency cancellation first. I think that’s the place to start. Again, we don’t want to knock you out of your induced state... just hold you there long enough so I can insert the suggestions. We need to keep you from slipping further down the rabbit hole, so to speak. But you’ll have to have a way of doing that yourself. That’s the only way I’ll proceed.”

“Makes sense enough. So, it looks like you have some homework to do. I’ll see you Friday unless I hear from you before. I can let myself out, doctor.”

I shook his hand before leaving the office.

“We’ll make this work, doc.”

That night I slept like a baby. Well, up until sometime just before dawn, anyway. I got up for a drink of water and started dreaming just after getting back to sleep.

I found myself in my grandmother's kitchen again, going through the same motions I had hours before, under hypnosis. Same cereal, same stories from Nana, same hug, same everything. But at the end of it, the dream continued past the point where the doctor pulled me out of hypnosis.

After Nana's hug, I washed out my cereal bowl in the sink and went to the backyard to play with Benny, her golden retriever. A rush of excitement ran through me seeing him again! I truly loved that dog. We played together for several minutes. But in the dream, I realized my mind was that of my current age. It was like my seven year-old body was being operated by my thirty-two year-old brain!

I had random thoughts of the doctor, Beth, and even the session I had earlier that day. But as we kept playing, something unusual began to happen to my grandmother's yard. Each time Benny chased down a ball and ran it back to me, the distance between us grew. My grandmother's yard was literally growing in length! Benny all but disappeared into the distance while retrieving my throws. Then, all at once, I felt the tingling in my chest happening again. I instantly knew what was happening! I tried to wake myself up, but couldn't! The tingling increased, becoming painful now! I twisted and turned, trying to wake myself up. It didn't help! Then I felt something suddenly scratch my face, and immediately, I woke up! I was in bed, covered in sweat.

The bedroom lamp was lying across my chest. I must have knocked it over in my sleep. It scratched my nose and cheek, enough to wake me up! The whole experience shook me to the core! I got out of bed and quietly walked down the hall to take a shower, hoping not to wake Beth or her son.

After I calmed down, I tried without success to go back to sleep. At 6am, I gave up trying and got dressed for the day. I walked downstairs and took it upon myself to make some coffee, still thinking about the horrific dream. A few minutes later, I heard footsteps behind me.

"Hey there, you're up early this morning. Making coffee for me now?" Beth asked. I smiled and lifted my cup to say hello.

“Was my chicken pie so damn good that you’re trying to butter me up for more?” she asked, pulling a clean cup down from the cabinet.

She sat across from me, patiently awaiting my answer.

“I got up earlier than usual, so I took the liberty to make some. Hope that was okay. But taste it before you get too excited, Beth. I tend to make it too strong for most people. But hey, if it tastes good to you, I’ll make it every morning.”

She took a sip and nodded. “Wow... yep, it’s strong, alright! But it’s not really *that* much stronger than I make it. Maybe we can meet in the middle. How ‘bout we compromise on how many scoops?”

“Deal. Do I need to sign anything?” I asked.

“Sign anything? No. I trust you, Scott... as far as coffee goes, anyway,” she laughed.

“I was kidding,” I said. “Lately, I’ve had to sign a lot of agreements, that’s all.”

She leaned forward and looked closely at my face, “Oh Scott, you have a scratch on your face! What happened?”

“I had a nightmare last night and accidentally knocked over your lamp. It caught me just right. The lamp’s fine, though. The good thing is it knocked me out of my nightmare.”

She took another drink, then put her cup down.

“I’m sorry that happened, Scott. Glad you’re okay, though. So... not to pry, but to pry... how’s your business with Henry going? Is he doing well?” she asked.

I felt a little apprehension to answer, but something told me it’d be okay to be candid.

“Henry’s good. Beth, I’m seeing him for therapy. My recent divorce left me with a lot of... difficulty. It was really tough on me. Still is.”

She held her hand up to stop me. “Oh, I’m sorry, Scott. I really *am* prying, aren’t I? You don’t have to say anything else.”

“It’s okay. Probably helps to talk about it. That’s what people say, anyway. My wife had an affair. To make it worse, it was with my younger brother. So, the hurt went twice as deep and sent me into a depression. I went to therapy for six months, but it didn’t seem to help. My doctor suggested Dr. Edelstein... that’s why I’m here. But I’m sure you figured it concerned therapy the moment you heard his name mentioned.”

“Well, yes, I assumed it did, but I’m sorry to hear someone hurt you like that. It has to be hard to heal from,” she said.

“Yes. Well, it seems we’re both mourning a loss. I’m sorry your husband left, Beth. And with a child in the picture. It must be really difficult for you, too.”

She seemed uncomfortable, turning her eyes from me as she formed her words.

“It’s... okay. I’m a firm believer that God puts the right people in our lives at the right time.”

“My grandmother used to say that. I hope it’s true. So, about Henry... I had a session with him yesterday. It was interesting, to say the least. So much so, he’s put off my next session until Friday.”

“Well, Mr. Pennington, it seems you have some free time on your hands. I’m planning to take Oliver to the zoo tomorrow. It’ll be his first time. I’m so excited! If you’re not opposed to being seen with a single mom and her toddler, we would love a chaperone.”

“You know, Beth, you had me at “zoo”... one of my favorite places to be. I used to go all the time. Years ago, I mean. And Oliver’s great. I’d like to spend the day with both of you. I’ve never changed a diaper, though. I wouldn’t know at which end to start.”

“Oh Lord, Scott! No one’s expecting that! Just help me push his stroller once in a while if I get tired. The worse you’d have to do other than that is fight off any escaped Spider Monkeys. Be careful, though. They’re very scrappy.”

I laughed out loud. A little *too* loud, waking Oliver up.

“Oh, damn. I’m sorry, Beth. I woke the little guy up.”

“It’s fine,” she said, scooting her chair out. “It’s close enough to the time he gets up anyway. Let me change him and we’ll be downstairs.”

She hurried up the stairs to comfort him. I felt an urge to go with her, just to check on him. I realized how weird that would seem, though, and stayed put in the kitchen.

What the hell am I thinking? I’m rushing things too much!

She returned a few minutes later with a hungry baby. After buckling him into his high chair, she sat a sippy cup down in front of him. He picked it up and dropped it a couple times, but got a grip on it soon enough.

“You missed the bottle phase. He put up a heck of a fight going from warm milk to cold, but I won the battle... didn’t I, little man?” she smiled at him, nuzzling her nose against his.

Next, a handful of Cheerios was set in front of him.

“That’ll keep him busy while I make some eggs. I’m trying to introduce him to real food, little by little,” she said. “You want some eggs?”

“No, you’re doing too much already,” I said, waving her off.

“They’re scrambled eggs, Scott, and this is a bed and breakfast... remember? All I have to do is add a couple more to the pan. Cheese, right?” she asked.

“Okay, sure. Yeah, cheese is great. You read my mind.”

“Oh... well, it’s just a thing we do in Minnesota... cheese in eggs,” she said.

“Really, I hadn’t heard that. Cool. I fit right in, then.”

“More than you know,” she said under her breath. But I wasn’t exactly sure that’s what I heard.

“What was that?” I asked.

She turned to open the fridge. “I didn’t ask you... are two eggs enough, or do you want three?”

“Two’s perfect. Hey, it looks like the little guy finished his cereal,” I said.

Oliver noticed his tray was empty as well. He began to get upset, wanting more.

“Hold on, Ollie... Mommy’s cooking the eggs. Just a few more seconds,” she said, working fast to get them done.

Oliver whined another second or two, his eyes locked onto mine. Suddenly, he extended his arms, wanting me to pick him up. Without thinking, I pulled his tray open, unbuckled him and picked him up. As I held him in my arms, he continued to stare into my eyes. It was a surreal moment. He felt so natural in my arms. I didn’t want to put him back down. I heard a quiet gasp behind me, then turned to see Beth watching us with her mouth open.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Beth. He wanted me to pick him up... stuck his arms out. I wasn’t thinking... I just reacted.”

I quickly put him into her arms. She looked upset. I started to say I was sorry again, but she shook her head ‘no’ when I began to.

“No, it’s okay, Scott. It was just a shock, that’s all.” She wiped a tear from her eye. “He really held his arms out to you? He hasn’t done that for anyone but me until now.”

“Yes, but I should have asked you first,” I said. “I’m sure he’d rather have had you.”

“No, it was very nice... thank you.”

The three of us ate our eggs. Oliver sat across the table, smiling and laughing. He’d smile at Beth, then turn to me, smile and laugh some more, then turn back to Beth to repeat the process. Another surreal moment.

Wednesday was a busy day for the zoo. I think people knew Fall was on the way, and soon there wouldn’t be many more warm days. No Spider Monkeys terrorized Beth, but I still asked to push Oliver’s stroller as we walked around. When we’d put all the miles we wanted on our shoes, we called it an afternoon and drove back towards the cottage.

“Mind if I stop at the grocery for a second? I want to pick up some snacks. I’m out, and have been craving Cheetos,” she said.

“Cheetos? Haha, sure. You really *are* addicted to cheese, huh?” I laughed.

“Some have said so. It’s my go-to snack, Scott. Don’t you have any snacks you can’t live without?”

“Funyuns. I can eat a whole bag of those. It used to be Bugles for me, but they just don’t hit the same as they did when I was a kid. They say your taste buds change as you age. Maybe that’s what’s going on,” I said.

“No, you’re right. I think they may have changed their recipe, like twenty years ago. I could be wrong, but yeah, they don’t taste the same to me, either.”

“Hey... the zoo, cheese in our eggs, scorching criticism for Bugles... some might think we’re an old, married couple,” I said.

Beth laughed hard. No, it was *more* than just a laugh. She whooped loudly.

“I’m not answering that one!” she said, placing her hand on my shoulder.

Another surreal moment. I had fully fallen for her, and I think she knew it. Maybe after Friday’s session, I’d let Edelstein know I hadn’t been happier than I’d been in the last week and don’t need help any more. Or, maybe I wouldn’t. Stopping treatment would mean no excuse to remain in Minnesota, and no reason to keep renting the B&B.

We made our stop, then pulled into her driveway. As we did, a dark blue sedan pulled out onto the street, leaving quickly. As it made a right turn, the car almost took out Beth's mailbox!

"Oh, wow," I said, "looks like you may have missed a prospective tenant."

"Not driving like that, I didn't! They can keep on looking," she said. "I don't want them."

"Their loss," I said. "I think I'd rather have you all to myself, anyway."

She put the car in park and turned to me. "Oh, you would, would you? That's pretty forward, Scott. Was it my chicken pot pie or scrambled eggs?" she asked, obviously trying to keep the conversation light.

"It's everything," I said, digging my heels in. We locked eyes for several seconds. Her demeanor turned serious.

"You're not kissing me in a car, like we're a couple of horny teenagers," she said, opening her door.

At once, I knew I had pushed too hard, too quick.

"I'm sorry, Beth. I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable."

She didn't answer immediately, and she *did* look uncomfortable. I felt like the biggest dumbass in the world.

"I need to get Oliver inside now," she said, opening his door.

"Yeah, of course," I said. "Need any help?"

"No, I got it," she said, undoing the seatbelt.

She had him and the seat out of the car in three seconds, then hurried to the house. I closed the car door behind me and followed her in, trying to decide how to apologize. She sat Oliver down in the middle of the hallway and spun around to face me.

"*This* is where you kiss a woman," she said, startling me.

She grabbed my shirt and pulled me in for a passionate kiss. The moment was a mixture of panic, surprise and passion. I kissed her back when she finished, this time longer and even more satisfying than the first. When we eventually separated, I knew the doctor's treatments would no longer dictate how long I stayed in Minnesota.

Friday morning arrived quickly. My recent time with Beth had changed everything. I almost called to cancel the appointment, but knowing Henry had worked almost four days preparing for the session held me to my word. At the least, I could help him forward his research.

I pulled up to his house and noticed the same blue sedan we'd seen at Beth's home. It was parked down the street, just a few houses away. I knocked on Henry's door.

"Hi, Henry. Hey, I appreciate you sending me out to Beth's for a room to rent, but you didn't tell me there was a B&B only three houses down from you," I laughed. He seemed puzzled.

"There's not. None that I'm aware of, anyway," he said.

"Oh, I just noticed a car outside I'd seen at the Benson a couple days ago."

The doctor stepped out his front door, almost knocking me over as he did.

"What did it look like?" he asked, walking up his driveway. "What color?"

"Um, dark blue... a new looking sedan. Midsize, I think." I could read the doctor's concern.

"It's not there now. Did you see the license plates?" he asked.

"No, I didn't. Is everything okay?" I followed him back to the house.

"I got a visit from an agent Wednesday evening... after a friend of mine had left the house. They hassled me, asking questions about my practice and research, among other things."

"An agent? Like a *federal* agent?" I asked.

"Yes, the FBI. Federal Bureau of Irritation. They occasionally intrude on me. They've made it their priority to harass me ever so often. After my trial, they confiscated every piece of paper in my office, trying to steal my research. The joke was on them, though. Most of what they got were old magazines and trash. It really pissed them off! They arrested me for a short time, claiming I was a possible national security risk. It didn't stick. They offered to give back what they stole from me if I'd work for them. I refused, and thanked them for taking out my trash. Since then, they've made it a point to bother me at least once a year, sometimes more. If you see that car again, let me know."

"Sure, no problem, but we saw them at Beth's. Why would they be interested in her?"

"They're not."

“Me? That seems unlikely, doctor. We’ve only just started our sessions together,” I said.

“Have we?” he asked, under his breath as he moved to his office. “No matter. Scott, I think I’ve had a breakthrough concerning the phenomenon. The answer’s not with frequency cancellation, it’s with a self-introduced hypnotic break trigger.”

“I don’t get it, doctor. You’d said a verbal command wasn’t enough to break me out of the phase shift I was experiencing. You had to physically remove my headphones and shout at me, remember? How am I going to trigger myself?”

“Yes, I remember. I have an idea how to do it. We can’t rely on someone being there to break you free from the effects, Scott. You need a way to stop it yourself. There’s something I haven’t mentioned to you that you should be aware of following today’s session. You may soon start to experience dreams or flashbacks related to the treatments. If you do, I need to know about it. We’ll need to prepare you.”

“Too late, doctor. Whatever you’re talking about happened to me the night of our last session.”

The doctor looked at me, his stare ripe with concern. He looked out his window for a moment before speaking again.

“There’s no more time for secrets, Scott. Please have a seat and listen carefully to me. I’m going to ask you to hold back any comments or questions until I’ve finished.”

I sat down as instructed and waited to hear what he had to say.

“Keep an open mind as to what you’re about to hear. It was December, last year. I wasn’t practicing anymore and was basically retired. The lawsuit, which I saw as frivolous at the time, had all but ruined my reputation and career, anyway. I was visited by a young woman who was familiar with my work. She told me a fantastic story I never would have believed apart from the facts and knowledge she had of my research... of my very internal thoughts and theories.

“She showed up at my door, knocking frantically. It was after 11pm and I was asleep at the time. I rushed downstairs, worried something had happened to one of my neighbors. Maybe a fire... break-in, that sort of thing. When I opened the door, she started telling me an unbelievable story that involved me... and *you*, Scott.”

I couldn't stop myself from interrupting.

"Me? You said this happened in December. I'd never been to Minnesota before now, Henry."

The doctor nodded, but continued. "Yes, I know, Scott. But you *had* been here. The young lady told me an incredible story. She had met you innocently enough. You asked to rent a room from her. It was Beth, Scott."

"Listen, I know what you're getting at, but that's impossible! I've never met Beth before last week. You're talking about time travel, like the nutcase who sued you lied about. But If I'd done that somehow, I would have known about it before I'd met you... and her!"

"No, Scott... you're caught in a time line loop. It's like the chicken and the egg riddle. Who came first? In your case, neither. I've spent the last two years researching scenarios, outcomes and alternate possibilities since meeting Beth and hearing her story. I can't make it make sense except to say you're here right now, standing in front of me, and you were standing at Beth's door two years ago. You were waiting to meet her for the first time in her time line, and the second time in yours."

"That's impossible! She would have told me that when she opened her door to me last week."

I didn't realize it at first, but I had gotten out of the recliner and was pacing the room.

"How did I get stuck in some loop when it hasn't even begun yet?"

"Because it's going to begin today, Scott. It *has* to happen today! If it doesn't, there's several dangerous possibilities that can manifest. Why do you think I took you on as a patient? I was retired, for God's sake! I didn't know exactly when you were going to meet me, but I knew it would happen eventually and I'd need to be ready to help you when it did."

"Help me what? Stop a time loop I hadn't started? Won't you be starting it all off by treating me today, anyway? The best thing I could do is leave right now, it seems to me!"

"Yes, I can see your logic in considering that. But what of Beth, then? You've told me nothing about your stay with her and Oliver in the last week, but I can tell you from what she told me two years ago, you two were in love with each other. If

you walk out that door without finishing this, then it will have never begun! Do you understand?”

I sat back down in the chair, my head spinning. Somehow, I had to get on top of this and process what he was trying to tell me. At that point, the doctor was the one pacing.

“Okay, if what you said is true, then what would happen to *me* personally if I left right now? Would I go back to before you and I ever met? Or before my ex cheated on me?”

“I don’t really know, Scott. I wish I did. But I do know this. Everything Beth told me that happened came from her experiences with you and this letter.”

He dug in his desk drawer and handed me an envelope. This letter is from *you*, Scott... written to me last year. Beth brought it to me the day after you disappeared from her life.

I glanced at the letter and recognized what appeared to be my handwriting and signature.

“Is this some kind of joke? I never *wrote* this, doctor... not yet, anyway, according to you! You’re saying I wrote this in the past, am reading it in the present, concerning an event that hasn’t happened yet, that would cause me to write it in the first place... last year?”

Yes, exactly! Now you understand. You are caught in a time line loop, Scott. Please, just read the entire letter before you say anything else.”

I didn’t understand, but I continued to read the letter. The more I read of it, the more I knew I really *was* the author! The words, the phrasing... it all came from me. But the contents... they were jumbled. It could tell I wrote it in a hurry... under duress.

To Dr. Edelstein, and myself:

I’m leaving it to Beth to get this letter to you. She will know when. We haven’t met, but we will, and we have. My name is Scott Pennington. I’m a patient of yours. I came to you in the future for treatment... for my

depression. No, that wasn't a typo, and I'm not crazy. You used a similar treatment on me that you used on a former patient... the man that sued you and claimed he time travelled because of it. He wasn't crazy, either, though it eventually drove him crazy. Through some temporal, wave frequency shift, he went back in time over two decades and was forced to live out that time line again as a child with an adult mind. The issues he faced dealing with his situation landed him in a mental facility. I don't want that to happen to me... or worse. I shifted into this time line about two years ago. I'm beginning to phase in and out, though, through different time lines. I can't control when it happens. I've lived through events and periods in my life long enough to amount to almost an additional seventeen years by now. Every time I do, I end up changing something from my past and future, causing changes for myself as well as others that my choices have affected. I've had to learn to relive events in my life from memory to keep my future intact as well as possible each time I shift into another time line. Only recently have I arrived at Beth's door. This is the time line... the future I want. We're desperately in love, married and have a child now. I was beginning to think maybe my ordeal was over. That maybe I would remain in this time line with the woman I love and our beautiful little boy. But I've been having dreams that are leading to the episodes again. They occur when I'm in deep sleep, so I don't have any control over them. Beth knows everything concerning this. She woke up the last time it happened and stopped it with a glass of cold water to my face, as

it was the only thing she could think of in the moment. It worked! But what if she hadn't woken up? I need a way to stop it myself. Reading this, you have to know there will come a day you'll get a call about me. You have to accept me as a patient and treat me, and you have to find a way I can stop phasing through time. I need something strong enough to interrupt the process after it's begun. Please help me, doctor, and listen to Beth. She'll tell you anything I've left out. And to myself, I'll write this: Don't walk out that door, Scott, as crazy as all this sounds! If you've spent any time with Beth before reading this, then you know this is the choice you should make. If you haven't yet, you have to trust me... you have to trust yourself. You love her. We love her. Another thing... there are men from our government bent on using you, the doctor and his research to gain an advantage over the world... over time and history itself. Stay and allow the doctor to treat you again. We need to end this nightmare and choose Beth!

'Scott Pennington

My hand was shaking by the time I'd finished reading the letter. It seemed unbelievable, but somehow felt true to me, and familiar. I'll never forget the impact of realizing Oliver was mine, and learning I'm the husband who left! I must have written the letter just before I disappeared from their lives. And all this time, Beth knew everything! She's been waiting for me, hoping I'd return again! The sudden truths worked to make my mind numb.

I looked to the doctor. He was staring out his window. Before I could speak, he suddenly let go of the shades and turned around.

“Scott, we don’t have much time! The car you told me about is on the street again, fifty yards from the house! A man’s standing next to it with the driver’s door open, talking on a cell phone. He’s watching the house, Scott. You have to decide now!”

My mind reeled, not wanting to accept the incredible story I’d just heard and read about. But as I thought about Beth and my feelings for her, I knew what I had to do! I sat in the recliner and asked for the headphones. Before handing them to me, he spoke again.

“I don’t have time to explain everything we’re going to do except to give you a shortened version of it. I’m going to put you under hypnosis and take you back to a time in your life that was sudden and climactic for you, like a car accident, near death experience, terrible fright... whatever you lead me to. We’re going to hypnotically tie that shocking memory to the tingling you feel in your chest when the phenomenon begins. In theory, it will interrupt the time line shifts and stop you from travelling again. Got it?”

He spoke so fast, my brain hardly kept up. My heart was racing. All I could do was nod while putting the headphones on. As soon as I did, the doctor pulled them off.

“Scott, I have to give you something to calm you down. Otherwise, I worry you’ll not be susceptible to hypnosis quick enough. You’re in a heightened state of excitement right now, and there are men outside. Agreed?”

I nodded again. The doctor rolled up my sleeve. I felt a needle prick.

“I’ll watch you closely. As soon as I see the effects of the medicine, I’ll play the drum sounds in your headphones. We’re skipping the music this time. And Scott, no matter what happens while you’re under, don’t *ever* allow yourself to shift again,” he said. “I know my future and I’m content with it. Don’t risk losing yours, or your family’s.” He shook my hand and patted my shoulder.

Once again, I nodded, though worried now about the doctor’s last words.

Almost a minute later, I heard the drums in my ears. At once, I began to go under. My mind was foggy, but I heard the doctor speaking, and I remember answering him. I felt my chest tingling. I started to panic, as the doctor hadn’t introduced any trigger to stop it yet. I felt myself beginning to shift! Over the drums, I heard commotion in the room! There was yelling, a struggle, then gunshots! I tried to open my eyes to see what was happening. I couldn’t. My

whole body was vibrating now! I sensed someone standing over me, but I couldn't open my eyes to see who. Then I saw a flash of light behind my eyelids and felt a sudden jolt in my chest!

When my eyes opened again, I was exhausted. The doctor was lying on the floor in front of me. There was a pool of blood underneath his head. I tried to get out of the chair but had no strength to move. All I could do was turn my head a little and look around the room. It had been ransacked! All of the doctor's boxes of research were gone. They'd killed him and taken his research! I wondered why they didn't kill me, then it hit me. I must have shifted just long enough to have been gone from the room when they tried, and shifted back now, somehow!

I finally managed to get out of the chair and check on the doctor. He was dead, like I thought. I noticed his pants pockets were inside out and some furniture had been overturned. I realized they were trying to make his death look like a robbery gone bad!

I knew I had to get out of there. I cracked open the front door and looked outside. No one was around, but my rental car was missing! I pulled the hoodie over my head and staggered down the driveway, slowly recovering my strength. I cut through the neighborhood and walked until I came to a street with businesses. I heard the sound of sirens behind me and ducked into a restaurant, where I asked a manager to call a cab for me. Minutes later, I arrived at Beth's house. She was watching from the kitchen window. As I ran to the door, she stepped out onto the porch to meet me. The look on my face must have signaled something was wrong.

"Beth!" I said as we embraced.

"Scott, what happened?" she asked. I continued to hold her tight, catching my breath.

"Beth, I know! I know everything now. Our love, our marriage... Oliver! Where is he?"

"He's napping, in the living room, babe! Hurry, come inside! Scott, do you really remember everything? Everything between us since two years ago?"

"No, I don't actually remember it, but I *know* about it. I know, Beth! About our time together, our marriage... having Oliver together. My letter to the doctor... the one you gave him after I disappeared! I read it just an hour ago. He helped me— oh, my God, Beth. They killed him! I think it was the feds... I don't

know, really... but someone did! I came out from under hypnosis and found him on the floor! He'd been shot! I think I shifted right before they tried to kill me! The doctor seemed to know he was going to be killed, Beth. He told me never to allow myself to shift again, no matter what happened to him while I was under. He *had* to know! The government, Beth... they ransacked his home! Took everything to do with his research. My only guess is I disappeared as they came in, and they think I'm in the past somewhere. Babe! We fell in love and got married! When I read it in the letter, my heart raced! I wanted it to be true. And now... to know we were together and Oliver's mine! I mean, I wouldn't love him any less if he weren't, but—"

She kissed me. Maybe just to stop me from rambling... I'm not sure. When we parted lips, she began to cry, holding me even tighter.

"I knew it! I just knew it!" she said. "When I saw you at my door a week ago... at first, my heart sank when I realized you didn't recognize me. I almost broke down right there! But I hoped... I *prayed* you'd fall in love with me again. It was so hard to play the part of someone just getting to know you when all I wanted to do was grab you, kiss you, and tell you everything!"

"I think it would have scared me away, Beth. I would have thought you were crazy. Hell, it took Dr. Edelstein some time to convince me himself. And really, it was the letter that solidified it in my heart. Thank God we thought of doing that! But those men... the feds! They're still after us, I'm sure. What are we going to do? They'll keep watching you and eventually find out where I am!"

"We have a plan, babe. We worked it out before you disappeared from me. *You* worked it out, actually. I have everything you wrote down. I've been saving it... hoping one day you'd find me again and we could read it together."

I ran to the windows and looked outside. "Beth, your house could be bugged! That may be what they were doing when we caught them peeling out of your drive. We have to get out of here! They may be listening and on their way now!"

"They're not listening," she said. "Not yet, anyway. Follow me to the kitchen."

She reached into a cabinet drawer and pulled out two small devices.

"This one's an RF detector. It tells you if your house is bugged... and this one tells you if any cameras are around. It detects the lenses. I've been checking the house every day since you showed up at my door last week."

"Wow! I thought of that, too?"

“No, that was my idea,” she laughed. “My dad used to own a Radioshack. You knew that before... I’m a gadget geek. Oh, babe, I have so much to tell you from the last two years! You were there... we were there. But now you’re going to hear it for the first time!”

Just then, a white mail truck stopped at Beth’s driveway and slipped a package into her mailbox. We watched him pull away.

“Are you expecting anything?” I asked.

“Nothing. You stay out of sight, babe. I’ll be right back,” she said.

I watched her from the window, worried at any moment I’d see the blue sedan appear. She returned and locked the door behind her. I took a seat in the kitchen while she opened the padded envelope.

“There’s no return address, but inside is a note. Scott, it’s from Henry. And there’s a flash drive, too!”

She laid the note onto the table for us to read.

Scott and Beth,

I hope this package finds you safe and sound... and together. Scott, I recorded an alternate induction for you. It’s what you’ll need to use from here forward. Since we haven’t had a chance to decide on an interruption trigger yet, I used a suggestion that should work beautifully. It will be the moment when you read your letter and realize you have a son. That should be shocking enough! I reasoned that would be a wonderful and appropriate trigger to stop you from involuntarily shifting again, so you can enjoy a full life with your wonderful wife and child. Now, Scott, you remember those nondisclosure contracts you signed? You’re not to disclose anything about what’s happened between us or my work as long as I’m alive. Now, in the event I’ve passed, you

may tell our story... even write about it. Just be careful to use a pseudonym. We want to protect you, remember? Good luck!

Henry Edelstein

After reading the letter, I looked at Beth with a measure of sadness, knowing the doctor would never know whether or not his theory actually worked, or if we ended up safe and together, like he hoped.

“Babe, he saved my life, making sure I wasn’t there when those men broke in. But I didn’t shift back to two years ago. I only shifted temporarily... just long enough to be out of the room during all the danger. I don’t know how that happened, Beth!”

“He’s been working hard the last six months, Scott. He told me it wasn’t just the trigger you’d need going forward. He said he knew you’d be in danger, and had prepared for it. He found a way to keep you safe from harm.”

“Babe, the only way he could have known was if he’d time traveled himself,” I said.

“He told me Wednesday the research would die with him,” she said. “He said it was the only way to keep it out of the hands of the government. Those boxes they stole had nothing to do with his work. Most were full of old magazines and junk mail.”

“He fooled them twice, then,” I said. “Henry was more on top of things than I thought!”

“So what are you going to do now?” she asked. “Now that you’ve discovered you have a wife and son in the picture?”

“Well, obviously, I don’t have to propose. I must have done that already. Babe, my head’s still trying to wrap itself around everything I’ve learned today. It’s all just so incredible... and crazy! But I know inside that it’s true... and right. I love you! Within a day of getting to know you again, I knew I wanted to be with you. So, I don’t think there’s any reason to question it anymore. Why don’t we just pick up where we left off? I think we deserve that after all we’ve been through.”

She looked down at Oliver, who was still asleep in his car seat.

“Well, your plan has us leaving just before dawn, well before the men would arrive. I’ve had a set of bags packed for almost ten months now.”

“Are you serious? Ten months?”

“Since the day after you disappeared,” she said. “So... we have tonight. Let me get Oliver to his bed, then we could go to *our* room if you’d like... and pick up *exactly* where we left off.”

“What do you— you mean... *that’s* where we left off?” I asked. “That’s the last place you saw me as your husband?”

“Yes, it is. You picked the absolute *worst* time to disappear. When I told Henry about it, he had a hard time believing it, but explained how it could have happened. That means no red wine for you this time, Mr. Pennington. We don’t want you getting *too* relaxed!” She took my hand and whispered in my ear.

“Now you can get to know me all over again, if you can manage to stick around for the ending this time.”

“Oh, I will... so *this* is picking up where we left off, huh?”

“Yes, it is. But Oliver’s sleeping, remember? So we’ll need to be quiet. As quiet—”

“As a church mouse?” I interrupted , pulling her to me.

“As a church mouse,” she answered.

And that’s it.

That's the story of how all of this started. There’s a lot more that’s happened in the three years since then, but that’s another story for another time. So, have I confused you enough yet? Are we on the same page now?

I followed the doctor’s advice... changed the names of the characters, even picked a pseudonym to write this. I’ve always liked the name Norman. Kinda fits me. It literally means ‘man from the north.’

In my case, Connecticut.

The End