

The Wrong Time

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Prologue

This is a book about myself.

If that opener sound egotistic, it's anything but. If anything, this is an exercise in humility. I'm not even sure I'll have the nerve to send this off when I'm done.

I'd have no trouble getting it accepted, I have no doubt of that. My name is already a household word. My work has been on the New York top ten list at least twice. The name, Sean O'Riley, has been displayed in lights -- before it was dragged through the mud.

My name's been splattered in the worst way, and for a good reason. This isn't a denial, nor will I offer excuses. Reasons, maybe; that are not to be confused with excuses; but will never-the-less make the most self-righteous squirm (I know, because I've also been self-righteous in my time. Some may find that hard to believe).

I understand the reasons now, because I've literally come face to face with myself. And, I mean literally. You'll know, after you've read half of the way through, how so.

For now let's just say, the childish cliché, 'Me, Myself and I,' has taken on a new meaning.

Part One of this narrative is written by the 'myself' whom I met face to face.

Part One

Chapter 1

It was a typical day otherwise -- so much so I don't even remember any specific events leading up to the one that changed it all.

For all I know, I could have presented the latest set of sales figures to the board meeting, or talked to the boss and his consultant about the details of some project or other.

Otherwise, my recollection of it consists only of my general collective memory of all the days I spent at the office -- same greetings on arriving, same thing for lunch, same talk around the water cooler. Perhaps the details of whoever we were gossiping about could have varied, but nothing important enough to stand out. Nothing about that day does.

We creatures of routine are like that.

I was taking the exact rout home that I had walked for the past five years, clearing my mind of the problems of the work place so as not to burden Erin with them. She and my boss were mutually insistent that I not bring the problems of each other's jurisdiction into their's.

The rout I took from the one jurisdiction to the other passed through a dark alley. I prided myself in that. It was my link with London street life.

Erin would never walk it, nor Mimi (whom I went out with before falling in love with Erin). Nor would some of the boys at the office. Some said I was crazy.

I saw nothing dangerous about it. Sometimes there was a tramp sleeping amongst the cardboard boxes, sometimes a kid or two. I just walked briskly through, as though I had every business being there.

Once every blue moon, there was someone who looked as though they'd try to get a quid or two off me, but I'd look at

them as I passed with the look on my face, neither slowing nor quickening my pace, and they'd back off. After each incident, I was the more determined to keep to the same route.

But this day was when the ultimate break in my routine began.

I entered the usual way and walked on, maintaining my pace, looking straight ahead, not at the man I saw staggering to his feet.

But something made me look. He was remarkably like me, but somewhat dishevelled.

My fleeting impression was, that's me, having met something unpleasant in the dark alley.

He looked at me as though he were seeing a ghost -- as though I were the worst thing the alley could vomit up.

Next, there was the impression of walking into a vertical whirlpool.

That's exactly the impression I had, and still have. I whirled around a few times, and ended up on my knees. I picked myself up, looked about and actually saw the whirlpool.

Someone was coming behind me. I looked, and there I was -- or the man who looked like me, dressed in the same suit, looking groomed as I had a while ago, looking at me bemused in the same way as I had done before walking into the whirlpool.

I watched him go -- straight into the whirlpool -- he and it disappeared.

That was not a part of my routine.

It was a bit bothersome. Here was something I would have to fit into my sense of what was so and what couldn't be so.

I'm a realist. In my reading, I don't go for fantasy and science fiction. I write, sometimes, but I do literary fiction, sometimes historical -- about real things, stuff that happens to real people.

This didn't seem like one of those things, but the fact that it

happened meant it would have to be explained.

I'd do that later. I certainly wouldn't mention this to Erin nor even Roary.

Roary McGreggor and I had been friends since primary school. He used to date Erin, and I, Mimi. Erin and Mimi had also been friends a long time. Then, Erin and I almost ruined it for us all by falling in love with each other. I almost lost Roary as a friend, and Erin almost lost Mimi. Then Roary and Mimi fell in love, and we were all friends again.

I'm certainly glad I married Erin and not Mimi.

So, I finally arrived at home, walked up the steps, unlocked the door, and yelled, 'I'm home, Luv!'

I noticed she'd rearranged a few things in the lounge. There was one of the paintings from Roary and Mimi's house.

And there was Mimi in our kitchen.

'Oh, hi Mimi, where's Erin?' I asked.

She looked at me as though I were out of my mind.

'Why! Erin and Roary aren't coming till this evening! Did you get the mince beef like I asked you to?'

'The -- er -- what?'

'You forgot again? How long do you think I can put up with this, Sean? What do you expect to serve for supper? You know we're having Erin and Roary over!' She went on and on as though she and not Erin were my wife, strutting about as though the kitchen belonged to her.

She'd gone completely mad!

I turned around and walked into the dining room while she acted as though she were about to throw something at me.

Then, I saw the painting on the dining room wall. I remembered when we had that done. It was of both of our families, the four of us.

But I had to take a second look.

Roary had his arm around Erin, and I, around Mimi! And Roary was wearing my medallion!

Erin gave me that medallion. I clutched my chest -- it was still hanging about my neck. It looked exactly like the one Roary, in the picture, was wearing around his neck.

But it was one of a kind. Erin had it made for me!

I went into the lounge and looked at the pictures again. Several of them were definitely Mimi's. All the one's I remembered Erin getting, were missing.

I went upstairs into the bedroom. Signs of Mimi everywhere, and none that Erin had ever had anything to do with this house except visit occasionally.

Mimi was calling me from downstairs, but I just had to get myself together. I went discreetly into the bathroom, and after her third time calling, I flushed the toilet. She got the message.

I sat there, thinking.

I thought over the incident in the alley, seeing myself and the whirlpool. Wasn't there some episode from *Star Trek* or some other silly sci fi program where something like that happened?

I realise now that many science fiction works are based on Quantum Mechanics and other aspects of physics, but then I thought of them all as high-tech fairy stories for overgrown teenagers who couldn't get a life.

As much as I tried, I couldn't think of any other explanation. I had been pulled through that whirlpool into an alternative universe where I had married, not Erin, but Mimi.

The part of me that's solidly anchored in the real world still couldn't accept it. I shut my eyes, told myself what's what, opened them, only to see Mimi's facial cream sitting over the sink -- at least it wasn't Erin's. Nor was the bathrobe hanging on the doorknob.

I finally convinced myself.

Having done that, I had to make a move. I wasn't going to crawl into bed with Mimi, come night time, no matter what world this was. I still loved Erin.

I went into the bedroom and took some essential belongings and packed them into a carry bag. Looking at my belongings I was at least relieved to find that the me of this universe was me. They were mostly all my own things -- well, there was one gadget, a PDA thing, that I remember almost talking myself into getting. The only thing that stopped me was that Erin would think I spent too much -- I suppose Mimi wasn't so particular. I grabbed that as well.

I made sure I had everything, my wallet, my credit cards, my passport. I was determined not to return until Erin was back as my wife and not Mimi.

Mimi was still in the kitchen when I went down. I took one more look about the lounge to assure myself I was doing the right thing, and went out the door.

My first stop was the city library. There, they have a row of computers for surfing the Internet.

I could have done that at home, but I had to get away.

Habitually, I logged into my email account. My current password didn't work, so I tried the one I had previously, then the one I planned on using next. That one worked.

Some emails from the other me were identical to one's I had actually written, but others were not. Some came from people answering questions I had thought of asking, but I knew I hadn't. One was an angry response to something I almost sent, but deleted.

Some were addressed to Mimi and Sean.

This was too spooky. I decided to leave this mail account alone. I logged onto the free email site as a new user, and opened a new account. I named myself 'SeanAndErin'. That would reassure me of who I really was.

Then, I did a Google search for 'time warp'. That was the nearest word I knew for what I had experienced.

That came back with an overly long list that covered too wide a subject. I narrowed it down by adding the phrase,

'parallel universe'.

By far, most of what I found were sites belonging to sci fi fans and the like. A few were science sites explaining the principals of quantum mechanics. That was my first clue that there was a scientific basis for some of the weirder films and books I'd seen.

About fifteen pages on, one entry caught my attention. Someone by the name of Mick O'Connor was making a serious study of time warps. Looking at a few of his articles, he believed they were more common than the general public, and even the scientific world liked to believe. He even believed they could be created.

The previous day, I would have passed him off as a lunatic. Today, I was in no position to argue.

He lived in the North country. His email address was there, so I wrote an email explaining myself, hit the send button, and went off to Paddy's Station to catch the next train to that city.

It was an overnight trip.

Chapter 2

He was fixing his lawn mower when I arrived. Half the lawn looked as though the job waiting to be finish was long overdue, while he sat before his open contraption with greasy parts sitting all over the foot path.

'Mick O'Connor?' I enquired.

He looked up.

'I sent you an email last night. Sean O'Riley is my name. I took the train over this morning.'

'Yes -- I did see an email.' He stood up, wiped his hand on a cloth before extending it. 'You see, I get so many emails from kooks, I hardly pay attention to them any more.'

He invited me through to the kitchen door and set me down at the breakfast table.

He lived alone, by what I could tell. Things were arranged as a male bachelor would have it.

He put a saucepan of water on the stove and sat across from me.

'So, what's your story, again?'

I told him. It took about an hour, five cups of tea and three crumpets with jam.

We sat in the kitchen, and what few glances I got of the rooms beyond told me why. Papers and books were everywhere. There were wires strung about, which I assumed were attached to a computer just out of sight, and some other gadgets.

When I finished the story, he queried me again about the nature of the whirlpool. I told him all I remembered. He paused, as though thinking.

Then, he verified the exact order of events, at what point I met the copy of myself coming the the other way. The fact that the copy of me came out before I went in seemed to be significant. The number of seconds seemed to matter. He took

note of it in his book.

Then, he asked me again about the apparent differences between me and the Sean who belonged to this universe. It then occurred to me that similar scenes were taking place in my own universe. I hoped my copy wasn't making too much of a fool out of me in front of Erin.

All this seemed to confirm to Mick that I was far from being one of those 'kooks' that chanced on his website from time to time and tried to pass off their own tall tales.

When we were finally quiet, I popped my big question:

'Is there any chance of getting me back to my own time?'

He thought a while.

'I'm afraid that what you've encountered is a random one-off phenomena. You and your double might meet up again if you waited a million or so years, provided you two continued the exact same routine the whole time. There's probably a better chance of creating our own time-hole, and I must tell you now, it's never been done before.'

I sighed. He paused.

'The only hope I could give you is to invite you to join me on an experiment.'

I perked up.

'I'll be leaving for Bermuda in a few days. That's where these things seem most likely to occur. You can join me, if you pay your own way.'

I had my credit cards and travel documents with me, so I assured him I would.

'You must be tired, if you made an overnight trip from London. I'll clear a space on the settee so you can lie down. I have to finish cutting the grass.'

I was. I never sleep well on overnight conveyances.

The settee took a lot of clearing off, but he managed it. I settled down in the cluttered living room. About half an hour later, the sound of the lawn mower woke me up momentarily. I

was so tired, I had no trouble getting back to sleep.

We went to the pub for lunch. There, he attempted to explain to me the dynamics of parallel universes.

If I quoted him directly, I'm afraid my readers would be absolutely lost. I'm sure I would have been, had I not read some bits on Quantum Mechanics.

Apparently, there were some experiments done, first, by shooting a photon (a light particle) through a couple of slots in a lead box, and again, by trying to send one through a beam splitter, and measuring the effect at both destinations. The first experiment had them all wondering if the smallest unit of light was really a particle or a wave. The result seemed to indicate both.

My response was always, so what? Why can't the smallest light particle be both a particle and a wave? When they're that small, what difference does it make? It's like counting how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

Mick told me that to nuclear scientists, it makes a lot of difference. It throws a wrench into the whole logic behind physics. In physics, something can't be in two places at once. Things that are at a distance from one another can only communicate at the speed of light -- at the very fastest. In other words, if you send a message to someone far away, the message will never get there before a beam of light turned on at exactly the same time.

On earth, we'd never know that, because light travels pretty darn fast.

That's where I usually lost interest and went to something else, so I never caught the connection between QM and various science fiction settings. Mick now let me in on the rest.

In the second experiment, the one where they split the unit of light and sent it into two ways at once, the results showed that the two destinations must have sent some sort of

communication a lot quicker than that. Both destinations registered the arrival of a wave pattern, but only one at a time, the arrival of a particle. Whenever one destination showed a particle coming through, the other didn't, and *vice versa*. So, if that was the smallest unit of light possible, how did either destination know whether to register the particle or not -- especially since they both registered the same wave pattern at the same strength?

Scientists were in a tizzy! Different people came up with different explanations.

The Copenhagen people came up with one that became the basis for a new philosophy, called *Existentialism*. That's the idea that nothing's real anyway, so the fact we're trying to measure it shows we're asking all the wrong questions.

Someone else, named Bohm, came up with the idea of *hyperspace*, a fourth dimension that's not subject to time nor distance.

But the theory that seemed to confirm what I'd been through, was the *many worlds* interpretation. According to that, the fact that there was a wave pattern shown at each destination, means that the particle did indeed go both ways. However, the moment that the decision had to be made regarding who would register the particle, the universe split into two. In one universe, the particle went *one* way, but in the parallel universe, you would have seen the exact same group of scientists observing the particle going the *other way*. In other words, every time there's a chance of something happening one way or another, a new parallel universe splits off to accommodate it.

The application to this theory also applies to things larger than electrons, such as human decisions. This universe, then, must have split off from mine the moment I broke up with Mimi, and started going out with Erin.

A large chunk of the scientific world assumed that if that

were so, there would be no way to test it, because we can never detect the existence of another universe apart from our own. Therefore, a lot of scientists considered it a non-theory.

However, my experience confirmed Mick's idea that the theory can, indeed, be tested, for the simple reason that both the *many worlds* interpretation and the *hyperspace* idea are *both* true. Other universes are accessible to us through hyperspace. It's simply a matter of developing the means.

Mick's idea, however, was not to construct a fancy wave splitting machine, nor something out of *Dr. Who*, but to simply go through a hole that would have opened up anyway, and using another of his theories to find our way back.

The Bermuda Triangle was just the place to find such a hole.

His theory of getting back? Anything that's found its way into a parallel universe should naturally create a hole that would enable it to return into its own universe.

That wouldn't work for me, because the moment I entered this one, a copy of me entered my original universe. I've been equally displaced, so I can't get back the usual way.

However, if we were able to find another means, such as the Bermuda Triangle, we could probably force our way into other ones until we finally found my original universe. That could take a lot of time, because there's probably a different universe for every misbehaving electron that has ever existed.

But it was worth a try.

While we were making preparations for our travel, I happened to come across some of his notes. One bit caught my eye:

The Seven Points of Quantum Geometry

One point defines a location.

Two points not occupying the same location define a straight

line.

Three points, one not occupying the line formed by the other two, define a plane

Four points, one not occupying the plane formed by the other three, indicate space. Each additional point within space modifies the shape formed by the points in space. This is where traditional Euclidean Geometry ends.

Five points, one not occupying space as indicated by the other four, determines time/direction. Each additional point within that time direction indicates decisions, or movement within time.

Six points, one not occupying the same time/direction as the other five, indicate the realm of possibility. Every additional point contributes towards defining what would have been had a decision been made at some previous point in the time/direction field.

Seven points, one not occupying the realm of possibility, indicate infinity. Some may chose to name it hyperspace. It is this realm that enables all possibilities to exist at one and the same time.

Chapter 3

Mick had an aunt living in Bermuda. She had plenty of spare rooms, and kept one for Mick whenever he dropped in.

A shed out in the back was permanently occupied by another of Mick's projects: not a time machine, as I would have expected, but simply a spherical flying machine.

It's easier than one might expect, Mick explained to me. It really amounted to a helicopter with the blades shaped so that they spun inside the shell of the sphere, drawing the air through the holes at the top, forcing it out the other end. The secret was in maintaining balance, which a helicopter normally does via a second propeller stuck to its tail. I won't go into how it did that. The thing wasn't completed yet, but he had a small scale working model that ran with a remote control hand set.

The reason it had to be spherical was so as to maintain stability -- so parts wouldn't break off -- while being spun about in a time-whirlpool, such as we hoped to find in the Bermuda Triangle. Most of the spherical body consisted of Styrofoam, coated with acrylic resin. There was a windscreen built into the front, and two seats that faced that. The controls and instruments were standard for any flying machine.

Up to now, the only thing holding up Mick's experiments with parallel universes was finding a craft that would fly through the whirlpools without breaking into pieces. To say I had shown up just in time, wouldn't be quite right either. He could have done what we were setting out to do a long time ago. But for the boost I provided by showing up and confirming some of his theories, the thing would have sat in the shed for another few years.

A few days were spent in doing the finishing touches to the heli-sphere. I mostly sat and watched him work, sometimes helping hold something down, or lifting something into place.

Then, came the test run. Mick had his helicopters licence,

and he had got the hang of controlling the model, so flying the full scale version was only a matter of getting used to it. Needless to say, I stayed on the ground on his first few tries.

Then, it was time to plan. The likelihood of a time-hole appearing over the Bermuda Triangle had a lot to do with the alignment of the planets, and solar flares, as well as weather conditions. There was always just enough of the latter to convince the sceptics that planes and boats were lost strictly due to weather. I'm sure I would have thought so myself before this.

Finally, we began our search for the whirlpools.

I suppose, for the hapless victims of the time-warps, it's a matter of the hole finding them, be it their first time out. Doing it the other way around, they proved elusive. I soon lost count of how many trips we made, how much we spent in fuel, on repairs, how many times we had to wait for hole-hunting conditions, solar flares, sun spots, and what not. I took my turns at controlling the craft, and became quite good at it.

It was fun at first, but it soon became a bore. I think we were both beginning to convince ourselves that the Bermuda Triangle was every bit as mythical as the Loch Ness Monster and Bigfoot.

We were on what would probably have been our last trip -- or second to last -- and suddenly, there it was.

It was pouring down rain, lightening was striking not far away, and there was what we would have probably mistaken for a tornado, the end of the funnel pointing straight at us. Raindrops and pieces of cloud were going into a circular motion as they approached it.

If we had any second thoughts, the hole had already gained the upper hand. We found ourselves speeding towards the centre of it at a speed we were sure was unsafe even for our sphere. We were spinning faster than any carnival ride I'd ever been on. The instruments showed it.

It was dark for a few seconds, and suddenly we were bathed in sunlight. The world and the sun were both spinning around and around.

Mick had designed the sphere with flaps which he gradually extended to slow down our spin. Next was the problem of our being in free fall. The engine had stopped, and he couldn't get it to start.

'This calls for the parachute,' he said, pulling a lever.

It was one of those parachutes that act like the wings of a hang glider. Mick could steer the whole contraption as we descended.

Now that we were under control, we could see that we were in what appeared to be the eye of a hurricane. Miles away, on either side, streamline clouds visibly moved in a giant circle around us. Before us there was a large island, shaped like a crescent which looked as though it had been shaped by the contour of the hurricane eye. It was rocky and mountainous in the wider section towards the middle, and the rest of it was covered partly by jungle, partly by grain fields and orchards, but with what appeared to be a town on the tip facing us.

There, we saw an air-strip. Mick steered us towards that.

We landed somewhat short of the airstrip, but in a grassy area. We rolled over and over before we came to a stop. Then, we got out.

I was glad to be on hard ground again.

We were standing in middle of a grassy meadow, a forest to one side of us, some buildings in the distance on the other, and behind us a ways, the ocean. Mick thought it was one of the Bermudas. He couldn't place which one.

Someone was coming towards us.

'Welcome to Neverland,' he said abruptly and unsmilingly as he approached. I couldn't place his accent.

'Where, again?' asked Mick.

'Neverland.'

'How did it get a name like that?'

'I wouldn't know. Follow me.'

We followed him to the nearby group of buildings.

It looked like a simple settlement, a few wooden two and three storey houses grouped along a dirt road.

He led us to one with a sign, 'Neverland Administration.'

There, we met a heavily moustachioed man who seemed a bit more friendly.

'New arrivals, what! Welcome! Jones is my name. Stanley Jones. Chief administrator of Neverland, I am. That was Fredrick, who escorted you here. You must be the ones who parachuted in just now, are you?'

'Yes,' said Mick. We introduced ourselves to him.

'You're lucky to have survived, you are.'

'Tell me about this place.'

'Most of us here arrived the same way as you, through what some call, the Bermuda Triangle. You should probably know that you are now lost to the world from which you started out. People will go out in search of you, but will fail to find you. You'll be given up for dead, although some may guess the truth. Where I came from they had stories about this place, but I didn't believe them at the time. But, welcome, make yourselves at home. What is that thing you've arrived in?'

Mick answered. 'It's a craft I designed especially to survive entry into this place.'

'You came in search of this place -- *on purpose*?'

'Yes. I'm trying to confirm some theories I have regarding parallel universes.'

'You'll certainly find a lot to study here, though I doubt you'll ever re-enter your home world to tell about it. Most don't survive entry. Boats tend to be sucked underwater, only planes occasionally stay in one piece and are able to glide in. Most who have survived this far aren't inclined to risk a return trip. Very small chance you'll even arrive in the same world you

came from. Some of the first ones who did survive, built the airstrip to accommodate any aircraft that didn't break up in the wormholes, and managed to stabilise.'

'How did this place come by the name, "Neverland"?'

'I don't know if you had it in your world, but there was a children's tale in mine about a boy, Peter Pan, who never grew up, because he lived in a magical island of Neverland.'

'Named for the fairy tail.'

'Yes, indeed. Not all come from worlds where that story got popularised. As I said, you'll have plenty of case histories for your study of parallel universes, parallel societies and histories, right here. Unfortunately, your funding institution will never benefit from your findings. I suggest you check into the local inn, where you can rest and spend a few days considering your options. You'll find that just across the street. You can store your contraption in the hanger at the airstrip, if you wish.'

We started to go.

'One word of advice,' he said in a warning tone. 'History isn't an exact science on this island. You'll meet people from worlds where history is as unlike yours as you could possibly imagine. You'll also find they prefer theirs to yours, so take it easy. More than one idealist has lost their life trying to sort out other people's perceptions.'

We were finally off. We headed for the hotel across the street.

Mick said, just loud enough for me to hear, 'So far, I've been right. If my theory holds, we should prove Mr. Jones wrong by finding our way back.'

Chapter 4

'In my young days,' said Ludvig, 'I was convinced that had the Fuhrer survived till the end of the war, he would have ushered in a far better world. Since coming here, I realise what a great service the British Secret Service did in assassinating him before he could carry out his ludicrous plans to invade Russia. Of course, in those days, I was a loyal Nazi, like the rest of them. In the years since, the Nazi doctrine died a slow death, and all the supposed enemies of the Aryan race have gone quietly back to whatever skulduggery they were supposedly engaged in before the Third Reich started.'

'The Jews, you mean?' asked Mick.

'Yes. They, the Gypsies, all the others that they kept in the camps ... -- How do you like the beer here? As fortune would have it, one of the first survivors to reach this island was a Bavarian biermiester. It was simply a matter of finding a local wild grain approximating hops, and he was in business...'

'But the Jews,' said another man near us, the American pilot, 'weren't they -- well -- exterminated?'

'There was some talk of plans to that effect. I heard it was often on the discussion table. Some said that had the Fuhrer survived, he would have enacted what they called the "final solution", but I doubted that. Only after coming here, did I realise he was indeed serious about it. Now, back when I was young and Nazism was still alive, I even regretted that it didn't happen, but the more Jews I came to know later, the more I realised that all the anti-Jewish talk was all simply something to instil fear and rally national unity.'

'So, in your world, there's still a large Jewish community in Germany, Poland and other parts of Europe?' asked a bearded man.

'Oh, yes. Hamburg, Frankfurt, Berlin, Warsaw, whole sections of the city, large business districts run by them, just as

in the pre-war years. Now, look at Friedrich over there.'

The four of us looked discretely.

Ludvig was talking in a whisper now. 'In his world, on account of the fact that U.S. never entered the war, there's not a single Jew alive. No synagogues, no nation of Israel. Don't go talking to him about this, but by the sound of it, in his world, people aren't human any more -- robots, the lot of them. Bionic implants.'

'So, Israel still exists in your world then?' said the pilot.

'About half of the European Jewish population emigrated to Palestine -- all those that couldn't recover their assets. They finally were able to declare independence, around 1968, I think. Yiddish is their national language.'

'Yiddish?' the bearded man queried. 'In our world it's Hebrew.'

'Probably depending on how many came from Europe, where they spoke Yiddish, I guess,' commented Mick.

'But how do they get along with their Muslim neighbours?' asked the pilot.

'Syria, Iraq, Iran, Lybia, the last strongholds of Nazism. More anti-Semitism there than the Republic of England!'

Mick and I had finished our lunch, so we excused ourselves, promising to continue the conversation later. We stepped out of the pub.

The place looked like a cowboy town one sees in the pictures. All the buildings were of crudely milled planks, shops had hand painted signs and lined the two sides of the dirt road that led from the pier to the airstrip. Scattered elsewhere were what looked like residences. Electric wires were strung along the road, and a pair led off into the distance, probably to a generator somewhere.

Every metal or mechanical device on the island was somehow put together, or reshaped from salvaged aircraft

parts, or pieces of ships.

I had only one thought, to get out of here and find our way to our own worlds. Mick had that motivation, plus the one that had brought us here to begin with. He wanted to find out as much as he could about the various worlds, and what could have split them off from one another. I realised that my curiosity tended to go in that direction as well.

Part of our time was spent in the hanger, repairing the heli-sphere; some at the pub and wherever we could find people to talk to.

Mr. Jones was right about the various versions of world history we heard. For Ludvig and others, Germany had won World War II; for others, the American states had been split into many independent warring states ever since Abraham Lincoln lost the Civil War; others were from a world half destroyed by nuclear war -- a Cold War turned hot; or from a Soviet controlled West.

Other reasons for Germany winning the war included Hitler acquiring the bomb before U.S., and nuking New York; and, according to one local expert, failures on the part of the British Secret Service to acquire the enigma machine, which should have helped them break Nazi code. So their failures lost them the war in one world, whereas in Ludvig's it was by too much success.

Some came from a world where Hitler never made it as a public figure, but the war was started by a less radical type. In some of those scenarios, Israel never became a state, probably because there was no need for it.

People from the splintered American states arrived in aeroplanes equipped with ceiling straps enabling passengers to stand in the aisle if there were no more seats. Safety was a low priority, as well as basic human rights.

Jones was right again, in that each one we heard thought their world was the right version, and that history would have

led to a hell on earth had it turned out any other way -- as every other version seemed to prove to them. The only reason there weren't any violent feuds was, no one version of history could muster enough support.

Mick took careful notes of each version of history he could learn. I copied his notes, mainly because I saw ideas for exciting alternative history novels, should I make it back to my world.

I also followed Mick's advice in collecting artifacts from all the worlds that approximated our own. His belief was that they could enable us to create our own time holes.

There was a knock on our hotel room door. It was Jones.

'You say you're studying alternative worlds? I thought I'd show you our museum.'

We got ourselves ready and followed him down the street to a shuttered and locked building.

'Here it is. We don't often have visitors, so we keep all our archaeological findings safe in here. But there's one or two things here that should be of interest to you.'

He switched on the lights, and we could see several tables laden with artifacts and notations. He took us to the corner of the room. There was a large rectangular tablet covered with some sort of inscription.

'Greek?' I queried.

'Yes. One of our local Greek expert has done a translation of it, which you'll find here.' He showed us a paper that had been stapled to the table top. 'Apparently, they had a settlement here that died out after about a hundred years. Everything you see on this side are artefacts from their settlement. On that side, are items that look as though they came from some Aztec civilisation that discovered the power of flight. So far, we haven't found anyone to decipher their inscriptions, so we're still in the dark there.'

We settled down to reading the translation. It was in three parts, apparently inscribed at different times:

We, the settlers from Carthage, do give thanks to the gods for preserving our lives in enabling us to land safely in our flying machine. We name this island, Apollo, after the god that led us this far, having embarked in the thirtieth year of Phillip II, grandson of Alexander the Great of Macedonia. We arrived here some days later and know not if we can ever return thither.

I, Zenos, son of Philemon, arrived here on the island of Apollo, after surviving a dreadful storm in the fifteenth year of Antiochus III, of the Alexandrian dynasty. I am thankful both for the hospitality shown to me, and for the people's faith in me in electing me as their governor. Compared to where I came from, this island is a paradise. Indeed, I suspect it is the paradise of the gods, for they have prevented the evil smelling air from our world from penetrating the skies above this island. I do not miss the land of my birth, but prefer to live the rest of my days here.

Let it be known to all who may yet live, the fate of the planet of our birth. The evil Emperor of the West, let his name forever be forgotten, in his bid to have revenge against the Emperor of the East, has set off a weapon of immensely evil effect in the valley of Migiddo, in the country of Israel. The entire coastline of the Great Sea all the way to the Pillar of Hercules has been engulfed in an intense fire, which sent a ball, brighter than the sun, up into the heavens. This was apparently the fulfilment of some of the Jewish prophecies. I didn't see it with my own eyes, but those who did, now suffer blindness. The air has been contaminated so that I doubt that any life in that world will survive. We despaired of our own lives as we were driven by

the fierce wind across the great waters, but appear to have been blessed by the God of Israel by allowing us to enter a fierce storm that brought us to this island. It has been some 115 years since the above inscription by Zenos, son of Philemon, and 323 years since the arrival of the first settlers from Carthage, or 239, year of our Lord.

'Armageddon!' sighed Mick.

'Armageddon,' confirmed Jones. 'Several more versions of Armageddon can be heard from other survivors here. They all have reasons to believe their Armageddon was the one prophesied in Scripture. Gives one a whole new perspective on things, doesn't it!'

Jones kindly allowed us to make a rubbing of the inscription. We copied the translation by hand.

Chapter 5

What had looked to me, on our arrival, like the eye of a hurricane, seemed to be a permanent state. We also noted that the sea current also moved in the same direction as the distant clouds. The island was, indeed shaped by the current and wind direction. Occasionally the area over the 'eye' clouded over, and at the centre there appeared a funnel pointing downwards into the sea. On other days, there appeared a waterspout protruding upward from the sea at that point. Jones told us that the funnel from the sky sometimes brought aircraft, either intact or broken in pieces, whereas the waterspout spit out pieces of ships. Sometimes a whirlpool formed at that point.

Mick tried for a long time to repair the heli-sphere. The rotor blade had been damaged, and there were no parts from any locally salvaged aircraft that could be used to fix it. It began to look as though we would be there longer than we had hoped.

Then, Mick had another idea. He decided to convert our sphere into a submersible boat -- not quite a submarine, but a light weight craft that would always bob up to the surface. He reshaped the bottom into the shape of a cone, in case we should be dropped into the water from high up, replaced the retractable flap on that side with a heavier piece of metal that could act as a keel, keeping us right side up; and redesigned the engine so that it would drive a propeller next to the rudder. Our plan was to sail out to the whirlpool whenever it formed.

Mick had ideas as to how to make our own time holes. They wouldn't work on Neverland, as the pull from the big one was too strong for that. Our only hope was to get back to one of the other worlds. For that, we had a collection of artefacts from various worlds that would enable us to begin the journey home.

For now, our goal was to make for the whirlpool and allow ourselves to get sucked in. After a few months living in

Neverland, Mick had learned to recognise the weather patterns that predicted a whirlpool.

We had everything we needed, the conditions were right, so we set off. Mr. Jones, Ludvig and some of the others were there to see us off.

The craft wasn't built for speed, only for surviving any hard knocks we might take on crossing into another world. Mick had put extra padding about the seats, especially around our back, our neck and our head so we would survive any high impact.

It took a few hours, and soon we found ourselves being drawn into a circular current. Even then, Mick steered the craft so that we'd move steadily towards the centre, instead of spending an eternity drifting along the outer rim.

Finally, we could see the vortex. Again, it was a point of no return.

We held our breaths, and in we went.

Things went black. Our eyes had been adjusted to sunlight, but conditions at our destination were dark and stormy.

All we could see were the instruments, and their erratic behaviour confirmed our feeling that we were spinning wildly.

After a few minutes of that, the light and colours gave the impression we were flying through the air, and the tremendous thump seemed to indicate we had hit the surface of the water. I'm sure that if there was any less padding, we would have broken our necks. As it was, we were a bit bruised.

When we finally stopped spinning, we could barely make out a waterspout some distance away. We had probably fallen from half way up.

Mick steered the craft away from the waterspout, and used the instruments to navigate in a direction he thought the nearest island would be. The high waves were still a challenge, but at least we had survived.

The sea gradually began to calm down, the sky cleared, and

we could see we were approaching land.

It looked uninhabited. Mick was sure it should have been one of the more populated islands in our own world.

'Probably just as well,' he said. 'We can safely stash the heli-sphere here, and try to create a hole and come back for it later.'

He picked up a stone, placed a label on it, and placed it in his bag with his other artefacts. I did the same.

We camped out there for several days, experimenting with various methods Mick had thought up. I won't go into all the details, but we finally were able to create a hole.

The process involved some concentration, maybe a bit of self hypnosis, while using an artefact from the destination world as the focal point. After some concentration, we began to move the object in a circular direction -- clockwise usually worked the best -- keeping that up for about a minute. A small whirlpool appeared, but it wasn't big enough to let us in. It went away after a few seconds.

We did that several times, and found that by making it go around at a faster speed, the hole got bigger and lasted longer.

Our final answer to that was to tie a string to the object, concentrate on it while dangling it in a pendulum motion, and then swing it around and around like a sling. A big hole appeared.

We both had on our backpacks, so we stepped through.

We tumbled out onto one of Bermuda's more popular beaches. A group of bathers were standing there gawking at us, open mouthed.

'Top of the morning!' said Mick, as though we had simply stepped off a ferry.

We walked into town. From there, we found our way back to his aunt's house. It was, indeed, the same world we had departed from.

Then, I caught the next available flight to London

Chapter 6

Something about the dark alley where my adventures began drew me back to it. It was probably the fact that it was usually desolate. Anyone who could possibly see me appear or disappear would probably be too drunk to be believed, or would be frightened off if they were likely to rob me.

I made a try. I used a relic from a time I knew to be near ours, a hole appeared, and I stepped through.

It was about the time of day I'd normally be walking home from work, so I went around the corner and waited at a point which I knew I wouldn't have looked, and waited.

The time came, and true to myself, there I came. I followed myself at a discrete distance, and saw me step up to the door and go in.

What I needed to know was, who was my wife in this world? How could I find out?

An idea: I walked down towards the newsagent to a phone box. I called our number and my other self answered.

'May I please speak to the lady of the house?' I said, disguising my voice.

'I'm sorry, we don't take unsolicited calls.'

Of course! Exactly what I'd say.

I stepped out of the phone box.

'Sean! What are you doing here?'

It was Mimi.

'Oh, hi love,' I said. 'Just thought I'd pop down to the newsagent and pick up the Times. I'll meet you back at the house.'

'You look terrible! What happened to you?'

'I'll tell you about it when I get back in, Luv.'

I managed to shake her off, and waited around the corner until she reached the house.

I hate to think what went on when she saw my other self.

I took out the relic I had used, labelled it 'Mimi #1'. Then I

went back to the alley and tried it with another one.

The first few tries brought up worlds where I was married to Mimi. After a while, I got one where I was married to Erin. After that, it alternated.

I checked the newspaper headlines at the newsagent and found they were always the same.

Then, I ran out of relics.

I found a bed for the night at Miss Murphy's Bed and Breakfast, not far from the house. I booked in under the name of Bertie O'Hara.

While trying to get to sleep, the thought occurred to me, what if I tried two relics at once?

The next day, after my other me should have arrived at the office, I tried it with two. I could tell that got me into yet a different version of our world.

This time, I phoned the house, and Erin answered.

'May I please speak with Sean, please?'

'He's gone to work. Can I have him call you back?'

'No.' I hung up.

I checked the newspapers, picked up a relic, labelled it, and tried again.

All day, I kept it up, sometimes getting Mimi at home, usually, Erin; but always Sean at work.

Another night at Miss Murphy's B and B.

If there was, indeed, a different world for every photon that took a wrong turn, this would take for ever. What could I do?

I just kept it up.

The newspaper headlines were usually the same. Now and then, there was a variation. I always took note of it. Sometimes, I bought a copy to take and compare. But still, it was either Sean and Erin's, or Sean and Mimi's world.

On the third day of it Erin answered me abruptly, 'He doesn't live here any more,' and slammed the phone down.

I immediately set off for the house.

She certainly didn't sound happy over the phone. Was she angry at me?

I knocked.

Erin opened, took one look at me, and said, 'Well! You certainly have the nerve don't you! Have you no shame?'

'I can explain everything,' I started.

'Hah! Explain it to the press! You don't know what kind of hell I've been through with all this!'

She slammed the door.

What did my other self do?

I habitually walked down to the newsagent.

Worse had come to worst. My other self, who had married Mimi, had gone and ruined it. But was it like me to do that? Would I have done something so embarrassing?

I looked at a newspaper. It had a different headline than one I had seen earlier, so I picked it up.

I passed by the paperbacks and a title caught my eye. The author had the same name as me!

I picked it up. It was a title I had thought once would make a good story, but since I had given up writing, I didn't do anything with it.

I looked at the back.

There, was *me*!

I purchased the book and the newspaper.

'Not Sean O'Riley, are you?' said the newsagent.

'Oh -- er -- no. Bertie is my name.'

'You look just like Sean O'Riley, the author of that book. Did you know, he used to live on this street?'

'Is that so!'

As I walked out, I read the blurb on the back, the 'about the author' bit. I was happily married, had a dog and a cat, and liked to play with computers. Me.

My next stop was the booksellers.

There, I found several books by myself, including the one

that apparently launched my writing career -- one I actually remembered writing -- my historical novel.

It had never been accepted in my world, so I had just kept working on it, doing more research on the period, making corrections, rewriting, adding more as my reading brought me more up-to-date, kept sending off to publishers and agents, and finally stuck it in back of the bottom drawer of my desk.

I bought a copy of it and took it to the B and B.

People everywhere commented that I looked like the author.

I had my supper at the nearby pub and settled down to reading the historical novel.

It was one of my earlier versions. The more I read, the more inaccuracies I found. I leafed over to a part I remembered having rewritten, and realised it was the original badly researched narrative. It was based on popular opinion regarding that period, not what really happened according to experts.

This was the version I was trying to publish a year after Erin and I married. We had a cat then. I was serious about getting it published, and was sending the synopsis to various publishers that did that sort of work.

I had tried a few agents; not that many though. I thought going straight to the publisher would be the answer.

Later, after more research, I was glad it didn't get published then, because of the wealth of information I had found that required that some sections be rewritten.

This must have been published during that earlier period. It wasn't a big seller, but apparently it opened doors for me so the other one I bought at the newsagent made the New York top ten list. The jacket said, 'Number one best seller.'

After a while, I got tired of reading my own work, and settled down to reading the newspaper.

That's when I got my shock.

Chapter 7

When I got past the front page, my name and face began popping up everywhere in association with someone named Miss Kelly. It wasn't one of my novels that was the subject of interest, but her memoirs, a kiss and tell story, by the sound of it. A scandal, in fact.

The Sean of this universe was being accused of harassing his personal secretary until he had her in bed with him.

The more I read, the more uncomfortable I felt in this world, where my name had obviously been dragged through the mud. Now, I understood Erin's reaction to my appearing on her doorstep.

I stepped out to find another newsagent, and there was the book. I picked it up, took a few of the tabloids, and took them to the store clerk.

'Anyone tell you you're the splitt'n image of Sean O'Riley?'

'Oh -- yes, people tell me that all the time.'

I paid for it and went to a discrete location, made a time hole, stepped into it, and checked into the same room I had in the other time.

I had left my things in the room in the other universe, so I simply made another hole in the room, and stepped through and fetched them, and burrowed back to the room in the other time.

Then, I began reading.

The more I read, the more horrified I became. It was as though my innermost secrets were being aired out in public. The things I read were what I had had fantasies about ever since secondary school days. In fact, in my final year at university, I came very close to carrying out some of the same acts with a freshman.

But I never actually did it.

I'd never do it, I told myself. I'm grown up now. People

looked up to me.

One of the articles in the tabloids also caught my eye. It was about my relationship with Mimi, and later, with Erin. According to the story, I'd been in bed with one, then the other, and then, like the sex fiend Miss Kelly showed me up to be, I had them both in bed at once.

The fact was, I had never had sex before marrying Erin -- at least not with either Erin or Mimi. I might have crossed the line with a classmate much earlier, back in Junior High, but there was nothing about that. I had met that girl again later, and she wasn't the type who would give out anything like that just for the glamour.

So, some of what was being reported was wrong.

Reading the rest of the material, I thought I could discern a line between what was true and what probably didn't happen.

I couldn't rest. I couldn't even go back to searching for my own time. Something inside me had to get to the bottom of it, to seek justice.

I wanted to meet my other self.

But I also had another problem. I was running out of money. It didn't feel right to use my present credit cards. I'd be pilfering my other self's bank account.

By chance, I found a gold wedding band someone had accidentally dropped along the street. I picked it up and immediately got an idea. I popped around the corner, used one of my relics to make a time hole, came back and found the exact same ring in the same place. I repeated the exercise with all my relics until I had a handful of the same ring. Then I tried it with two and three relics at a time, including some of the rings, until I had about as many gold rings as I could carry.

At least, whoever had dropped the ring wasn't affected by any of the things that had changed my life.

I returned one of the rings to the police station in the world

where I had the room, so I couldn't be accused of stealing. The others, I took to various pawn shops and jewellers in the same world until I had accumulated a considerable sum. I now had enough to keep me going for the time being. I prepaid a month's rent at Miss Murphy's B and B in the two worlds I was straddling. That's where I would slip in and out of Author Sean's world.

Then, I embarked on a project.

I decided I would need to grow a beard and start wearing glasses or something in order to go unrecognised in Author Sean's world. I got some clothes that were as unlike myself as I could think of, got a haircut in a style I hate, and started to go without shaving.

All the while my beard was growing, I went about collecting data on the author Sean. I found out where he lived, where he usually hung out -- though, with the bad publicity he had been getting, he hadn't been doing much hanging out.

I bought a digital voice recorder, a notebook, and any other gadget that would make me look like a journalist. With my crew cut, goatee, shades, black ankle-length overcoat, and an earring, I looked like anyone but Sean O'Riley. I couldn't recognise myself in the mirror, so I was sure Author Sean wouldn't either. I was Bertie O'Hara.

Then, I had to come up with a way of presenting myself in a way I would accept. It took a lot of self reflection.

I kept asking myself, 'Would I go for that?' 'Would it turn me off?' I had to approach myself in the right way, and gain my confidence. Despite the fact I was a journalist, I would have to convey the feeling that I could see past the myths, and wanted at the real truth, however unglamorous.

Maybe I wouldn't be a journalist, but an aspiring author. A journalist would put me off if I were in the position my other self was.

I compiled a list of questions worded in a way I was sure the other Sean would be happy to answer. They would have to do with my past, during university, my relationship with Mimi and Erin. I would have to sound intuitive regarding the real truth behind it all.

I got all my material together and started hanging about in the right places so I could approach him.

There was a pub down the street from Author Sean's high class flat where he sometimes went for meals and to get off by himself. He usually sat in a corner where no one would notice him. He always had his driver drop him off at the back door, which one of the barkeeps would open for him on cue. That way, he managed to avoid journalists.

It's exactly the set-up I would have arranged, so I was quick to spot it.

I stood by the back door and waited for his arrival.

His car drove up and he got out. I was standing by the door, pretending not to notice, until he got to the door.

'Good evening, Mr. O'Riley. I wonder if I could have a word with you.' I appreciate someone who speaks to me respectfully.

'Yes?' He paused in front of the door.

'I'm an author myself. I appreciate what you're going through and all, and -- er...'

He had his hand on the opened door, ready to bolt inside should the conversation go the wrong way. I continued:

'... and I can spot a lie in the papers right off.'

'What makes you think they're lies?'

'Well -- being in bed with two women at a time -- over the top. I've read your stuff. You're not like that. Some of the rest, maybe a grain of truth.'

'So, what do you want?'

'Being a writer, myself, I'd like to get your angle on a few things. I love your books. I really do.'

'Then why don't you join me. I'll buy you a drink.'
I was in.

'So, what sort of writing do you do?' the other me asked.

What could I tell him? All the ideas I had thought would make a good novel, he had already written.

Suddenly I had an idea.

'I thought I'd change history a bit. Let's say, early in the war, before he had the chance to invade Russia, Hitler was assassinated. But, instead of having the effect of stopping the war, his more level headed generals aborted the plans to invade Eastward, and did things one step at a time, until they finally won the war. Plans for the "Final Solution" never got carried out. Nazism died a slow death.'

'An alternative history. I don't do that sort of story myself, not being into Science Fiction, but the setting could work. Do you have a plot?'

I thought some more.

'It would follow the life of a young man named Ludvig. He's born just after the close of the war, grows up as a loyal Nazi, always wonders what would have happened had Hitler lived to see out his plans -- as things don't all work out as expected. Jews move back to their own neighbourhoods, and he gets to know a few of them. He realises they're good people. It's sort of like a -- you know -- a growing up, coming of age story.'

'It's an idea. Have you spent much time in Germany?'

'Not really.'

'It would be helpful to take a holiday there. Visit some of the places where the story is set, learn their history. You understand German, I'm sure.'

I wrote some of it down to give the impression I was really there to glean these suggestions.

'How did you first break into the writing market?'

'Someone put me on to an agent by the name of Seamus

O'Henry. He was quite good, had lots of contacts in the publishing world. It took him a year to get my first one going.'

I remembered Seamus O'Henry! Someone had given me his details. I thought of calling him but I decided to do it on my own. I remember wadding it up and throwing it at the bin.

'So, you find that working with an agent works better than selling your own work?'

'I wasn't in favour it at first. I actually crinkled it up and threw it at the bin. I missed ...'

I remembered that too! It bounced out again. A while later I threw it back.

'... much later, I found it in the far corner of the room where the cat had swatted it. I decided to give him a call.'

The *cat!*

'It's the best decision I ever made.'

Two worlds diverged because of a cat!

I still wanted to find out what made him commit the indiscretion with Miss Kelly. I managed to lead the conversation towards what happened at university, his friendship with Roary and the girls.

I could have been prying too hard. He began to appear uncomfortable, but he endured.

As far as I could tell, his history with Mimi and Erin were identical to mine. There was nothing in his past that seemed to predispose him to such a scandal. So, what was it that drove him to sexually harass Miss Kelly in such a way? I started asking about that.

When his second novel made the best sellers list, he decided it was time to hire a secretary to mind his business affairs -- one who could also check spelling and grammar.

'... when one is successful and famous, it's easy to forget ones vulnerability. One gets the illusion one is invincible. One is always "right". I guess I learned that the hard way.'

Despite his candid remarks, he definitely seemed

uncomfortable with me. I thought I detected a sigh of relief as I got up to leave.

To tell the truth, I was also finding him loathsome in a peculiar way.

The headline on the front page of *The Sun* caught my eye, an exclusive photo-interview with Miss Kelly. It promised nude poses.

Against better judgement, I picked up a copy and took it to the room.

The photo of Miss Kelly looked exactly like the type most likely to seduce me. She reminded me very much of the freshman I knew in university. The nude shots had my heart beating wildly.

But the whole context was making my stomach turn. I was being haunted by the ghost of myself. All the while that I had been happily married to Erin, being the model businessman, member of the board of deacons at church, speaking out against this very thing, there was the devil lurking at the back of my subconscious, looking for the right opportunity.

The only difference between myself and the Author Sean was, he became successful.

The more I looked at the girl in the papers, the more convinced I was that had she come to me looking for a job, I would have hired her immediately with the same intent in mind.

Erin had often accused me of being a male chauvinist. Suddenly I realised she was right. I always saw women as a tool to fulfil my desires. My failure to see cute petite girls as people led to my other self using Kelly as a toy.

Chapter 8

Now it was back to the business of getting home.

Going through the time holes so often, I began to notice things about them. Some seemed to branch out in one or two directions, even if I was being drawn straight through.

On one occasion, I tried reaching out to one as I passed. The suction drew me in, and I went to a totally different world again

It was more different from my world than the others. Erin and I didn't appear to be living in the same house.

After some investigating, I found the me of this world married to someone I didn't even know.

I tried this a few more times. It brought yet more variations, including me as a member of the working class, and one world where I apparently didn't exist at all.

I used the relic from the world where I still had a room paid for, and went back.

I had walked almost up to the door when I got a shock.

There was me, dressed and groomed the way I was before I began preparing to contact the Author Sean. I was walking out holding the book by Miss Kelly, probably on the way to the pub.

He didn't recognise me of course, any more than did the Author Sean.

I went on to the newsagent and looked at the dates on the newspapers. With my popping in and out of alternative holes, I had gone back in time by about a month!

Now, I had to find a different place to stay. I wouldn't do to complicate things by waylaying my earlier self in any way.

I'd check in to the same B and B in another universe.

As I started out, another idea occurred to me. Why not repeat what I had just done until I was back to the time my adventures started? That way, I could slip back into ordinary

life without anyone knowing I was gone.

So, I did.

I checked out each world I came to, collected relics from all of them to add to my collection.

Finally, I checked into the B and B about a week before my adventures began.

It still wasn't my home world. How many attempts would it take?

I took a walk to the house. The local Sean was at the office. I saw Erin leave the house for the hairdressers.

We passed each other. She didn't recognise me, the way I was groomed. I walked to the door.

I still had the house keys in my pocket. I couldn't resist.

I unlocked the door and went in.

This was Sean's and Erin's house. There was the painting of the four of us. There was me, wearing the medallion, not Roary.

The medallion!

Why hadn't I thought of it?

What's the one thing that I had that the other Sean didn't? We *weren't* equally displaced. I had the medallion! A time relic!

I turned around, went out the door, and back to the B and B.

I collect all the things and headed for the alley. There, I used the medallion to make the time hole.

I still had a week to go before it would all begin, so I checked into Miss Murphy's B and B yet again.

I had shaved, and I had on a new suit which looked like the one I wore that first day. I waited not far from the end of the alley, in a discrete location.

It was time. I waited. Sure enough, there was me, looking somewhat disoriented, coming out of the alley.

I'd disorient him some more.

I approached him. 'Hello, Sean. You're probably wondering

what that was back there. It was a time-space aberration which could have a rather life changing effect on you, but here, I'll fix you back.'

He just looked at me.

'Now, you'd better do exactly what I say. I'll make a wormhole for you to get back into your own time, but I want you to stop at the pub for half an hour. It's important you do that. You've got the mince beef with you, right? Now, when you get home, just tell Mimi that you went out to get the mince beef like she wanted. You got that?'

I took him back into the alley, handed him a packet containing his passport and PDA that I had borrowed, and made the time hole for him.

'Remember, give it half an hour.'

'Right,' he said.

I pushed him in. The hole disappeared.

I walked the rest of my usual rout to the house.

I took my key and let myself in.

'I'm home, luv!'

Everything should be exactly as I left it before it all happened ...

'Sean!'

...except the haircut.

'What do you think?'

'I love it!'

I was afraid she would.

Part Two

Chapter 9

That should have been the happy ending, but I'm afraid there's more.

By now, the reader ought to know that there are two of us writing this. Part One was written by Sean the Time Traveller. Part Two is written by me, whom he aptly referred to as Author Sean.

I vividly remember the interview with the 'aspiring author'. His perceptions were right. I was getting edgy. I think he reminded me too much of myself, which he really was, of course. A part of me suspected he was a journalist of some tabloid, trying to get the cutting edge scoop on my private life. However, I had been learning that the worst thing I could do would be to try to cover things up, so I did my best to be civil and candid.

It really was a sigh of relief that he heard as he left.

Weeks went by, and nothing showed up in the rags that had his mark on it, so that was another relief.

Then, one day, I was in my flat. I was walking from the kitchenette to my computer table with a cup of espresso I had just brewed, when an unearthly experience made me drop it and get the black stains all over my white carpet.

It was a vertical whirlpool such as the other Sean has already described to you.

Suddenly, before me, was the 'aspiring author' I had had the drink with. He had shaved his beard, but his hair was the same style, and he wore the same trench coat. It struck me just then, how remarkably like me he looked.

'Mr. O'Riley,' he said in the same tone he had introduced himself with before. 'Remember me -- I'm the bloke who had the drink with you down at the pub a few weeks ago. Thought

I'd pop by and give you this. If I told you who I really was, you wouldn't believe me, so this should explain it a bit. Anyway, I'll pop in again in a week or two.'

He handed me a paper file and a CD and disappeared back into the whirlpool.

So, there I was standing in middle of the room holding a paper file and CD, staring into the blank air, and coffee all over the carpet.

I finally took them to the table and started reading. The file contained a print-out of his experiences. I was amazed.

One of the CDs was his better researched edition of the historical novel that had launched my career. Also included on it was the documentation for the corrections. I must say, I was impressed.

True to his word, the time traveller Sean came by again.

I sat him down in the lounge, made him an espresso without bothering to ask what he wanted in it (my taste in coffee hadn't changed despite being able to afford more of it). I also brought a pastry which I knew would be his favourite.

'So, you and I are two versions of the same person.'

'That's right.'

'If I hadn't seen you pop in and out of the vertical whirlpool, I'd never have believed you.'

'I know.'

'That was a good disguise you wore to the pub, and you knew how to get my attention.'

'Yeah -- I guess.'

'I don't know which one of us to congratulate.'

We paused and sipped our coffee.

'I brought this.' He slapped a CD on the coffee table.

'Your novel about Ludvig?'

'Yeah. Can't get anyone to look at it.'

'Try Seamus O'Henry?'

'I did, but he's not into that.'

'Try taking him some of my other manuscripts.'

'I tried him on the first one, but he said his workload was full.'

'Tell him Douglas sent you?'

'He and Douglas have parted ways.'

'That's right, they have.'

'I'm wondering if you could try this one on your publisher here?'

'I could try. I'll give it a read through. I'm sure they'd take it off me. I could leave the advance here in this room in cash and you could pop in through the whirlpool and pick it up. Same with royalties.'

'That would be great.'

He took my second one, the best seller, with him to see if that would sell in his world. I looked through his manuscript, did a bit of editing myself, and passed it on to my editor.

The publisher liked it.

Miss Kelly was still pushing her book, and saying new things about me; but she had run out of any truthful things to say.

Then, suddenly one day, she seemed to suffer a memory lapse. The first sign of it was her announcement that she would sue *The Sun* for printing nude pictures of her which she never authorised, nor for that matter, ever posed for. When asked about her relationship with me, she said she'd never heard of Sean O'Riley. Whoever had printed all those things, she didn't know, but they were all lies. She had never worked for me. She could verify that as she had worked at three different jobs during the time the papers claimed she worked for me.

When the press interviewed the people she said she'd worked for, they said they'd never had any such employee.

I started to wonder.

Time traveller Sean began visiting about once every fortnight. He was now renting the same flat as mine in his universe, which had been vacant. On his first visit, the estate agent had loaned him the key so he could look at the place.

'How does Erin like it?' I asked.

He sighed. 'She can't take me any more. I've changed too much with all the time travel.'

I was disappointed. My Erin had begun communicating with me again. There was hope here.

'Any luck with the manuscripts?'

'No one will even look at them.'

'You know, the first one, where you did all the extra research; they're going to make a revised edition out of it.'

'That's cool!'

'You can have the royalties to that as well.'

'Thank you.'

'Have you heard the news here about Miss Kelly suddenly denying she ever worked for me?'

'Oh, her!' He made a wicked laugh, but didn't say anything.

On yet another visit:

'I'm going to marry Erin again.'

'Marry her?' I looked at him in surprise. 'I thought you were just separated!'

'I've found a universe where Erin and I only knew each other in school, but never married.'

'Moving to her universe then? What about the Sean there?'

'He went off to the Amazon.'

'Did he really!' That had been an ambition once. I/we had backed out at the last minute, but it would have changed the course of our life. 'But what if he shows up again?'

'He's not been heard from in a long time. I checked all the sources, and he'd gone missing -- presumed dead, so I simply showed up, gave them a tall story, so now I fit right in.'

Ingenious!

'I see. I wish you all the luck, then.'

A few visits later, Erin was getting fed up with him. However, he had located another Erin in a universe we hadn't been born. It looked as though they were hitting it off.

I'm afraid that, knowing there was an unlimited supply of Erins in the cosmos, he lacked the incentive to work at maintaining a relationship with the one he had.

In the mean time, my Erin and I were making progress.

'I've done what we've always dreamed of doing.'

'What?'

'Guess.'

'We've had lots of dreams.'

'H.G.Wells, *The Time Machine*.'

'You didn't!'

'Yes, I did.'

'You went back and located Adolf Hitler as a little boy, and you killed him?'

'Yep.'

'But it'll only create one more alternative universe!'

'True, but at least I can say I've done it.'

'But considering the fact he hadn't done anything yet -- only a kid --'

'C'mon! Adolf Hitler! Who's going to condemn me?'

'I guess -- but why couldn't you just go back and try to get to know the kid, Adolf, and -- you know -- be a "big brother", or a father figure to him or something -- see what affect that has on history?'

He looked at me as though I had missed the point.

We drank our coffee.

Something had been on my mind. 'Sean, you know this affair with Miss Kelly and her memory loss. Does that have

anything to do with you?'

He looked at me with a broad grin. 'It's got you and Erin back together, hasn't it?'

'I suppose so, but I would really feel better if you put the two Miss Kelly's back in their right place.'

'C'mon!'

'Please.'

He agreed.

From then on, I could see changes in him every time he came. The same thing that had happened to me was affecting him. Absolute power was corrupting him.

I was having the same feelings as he had when he first heard about my indiscretions with Miss Kelly. I could see a dark corner of myself lurking, peeping out, every time he boasted about his latest antics.

I'm sure he knew I disapproved of them. He told me anyway, because he had no one else to boast to, and I think he also delighted in teasing my naturally self-righteous nature. I can see that tendency in myself as well.

The original Miss Kelly of this universe returned, but she kept quiet after that.

On this day, I came close to throwing him out. He had Miss Kelly with him -- the one from the other world. She was in love with him, as well as enamoured with life as a time traveller.

They sat in the lounge.

'Jurassic Park is now a reality!' Sean said as soon as we had our coffee.

I looked at him, expecting the worst.

'I finally managed to go to the Jurassic era, and, chanced on some eggs. I've brought them back, and I've hatched them. One of our worlds is now overrun with tyrannosaurus rexes.'

'I would say you're playing with fire!'

'Only made another alternative universe. The dinosaurs won't be making time holes, will they!'

'But most people can't make time holes either. They're stuck in that universe with no escape!'

'They've got copies in every other universe, for goodness sake. I've only created one more copy, haven't I!'

'Paper photocopies don't have a psyche and nerve endings -- human copies *do*. You're playing God. You started by murdering Adolf Hitler, and now you've turned out worse than him! I don't like this.'

They laughed it off, and we changed the subject.

I was glad when they finally left.

Erin was almost ready to move in with me. One thing I didn't want was the other Sean showing up while she was there. It was time to put a stop to it anyway.

The time traveller had left one of his relics behind on a previous visit. I tried my hand at making a time hole. According to his memoirs, it involved concentration, while swinging the relic around clockwise on the end of a string.

I was able to make it work.

I didn't go through the hole. I just practised doing it.

Sean and Miss Kelly paid another visit.

I served the coffee and sat, listening quietly, waiting for the potion to take effect.

He was in middle of describing yet another antic.

'So, he's there in the one world, waiting for his family to show up at the church for a prayer meeting. I get him through the time hole into the other world where his funeral is about to begin, but the people aren't there yet. But I've taken his body out of the coffin, and placed it on the alter of the church in the other world. So, I tell him to get into the empty coffin -- we're going to play a joke on his family. He thinks they're going to

show up for a prayer meeting and see him lying in a coffin and and they'll all laugh it off. So I go back to the other world -- I got all this on video, by the way -- and there's his family who have just arrived for the prayer meeting, looking at his embalmed body laid out on the altar. His mother-in-law is shouting at the body, "This joke has gone far enough! You can get up now! Do you hear me? Up with ya or you'll really be a dead man!" In the other world the family's gathered about the coffin -- and -- and ...' He had dropped off.

I turned to Miss Kelly. 'Do you really think all this time jumping is right?'

She laughed timidly. 'I guess not.'

'It isn't. Do you know how to make a time hole?'

'No.'

'I'm going to make one for you, back into your own world. I want you to go there, and never come back.'

I was talking with utmost seriousness, and she was nodding back at me like an erring high school girl in the head teacher's office.

I recognised the watch she was wearing from when the other Miss Kelly first began working for me. I asked to borrow it, tied a string to it, and swung it around.

The hole opened. I handed her the watch.

'In you go.'

I gave her a push. The hole closed.

Then, I took Sean's medallion, and made a hole into his original world.

He had long moved out of the flat that coincided with mine, so it was bare. Once I got him there, I stripped him naked. The only thing he had left was the medallion. He had nothing with which to make any more time holes.

I searched the flat to make sure.

He'd be in for a good sleep before waking up and finding himself trapped in his home universe.

I noticed it was unusually quiet. I can usually hear the traffic, and a few planes flying over head from my place.

There were other strange sounds, though. The floor started to vibrate with a *thump, thump, thump*.

I went to the window and looked out.

The street below was absolutely empty. I leaned out the window and stretched my neck. At the far end of the street I saw -- I couldn't believe it -- a giant spotted *dinosaur*!

It saw me. There was no time to deliberate. I had to make an instant decision and hurry back.

So, now the other Sean is there, defenceless, with the dinosaurs.

Of course I've had misgivings about it. I still wake up screaming at night. But I'm convinced, it had to be done. He had made his world what it was, so it was only justice that he finish up there.

There was one more item of business. I didn't trust myself any more than I could trust the other Sean. That was, after all, *me* wasn't it! Whatever he was capable of, I certainly am.

For the next few hours, back in my flat in my own world, I took each and every one of the other Sean's relics, made a small hole with it, and threw it back into its own world. Everything had to go, the relics, individual contents of his pockets, the clothes, even the CDs he brought me, and the paper file -- everything that came from any world but this one. I didn't trust myself with anything whatsoever that would tempt me with that sort of power. That belongs only to God.

I hope the trousers ended up with him.

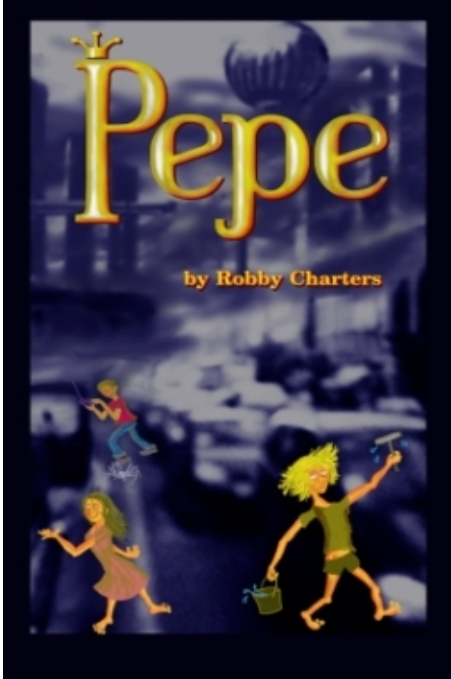
Erin's with me now. She's read this manuscript. She doesn't believe a word of it, but that's okay with me.

We're happy together now.

The more I think of it, the more I realise how much we take

for granted.

I'm just glad to be living in my home country, in my home universe, the city of London, in the land of Britain, which my forefathers, the Irish Hordes made for us when they drove out the Norman invaders in the year 1077.



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