

HOW I LOST ALL HOPE

and then set out to find it

a novel by

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For Mom and Dad,
with gratitude that they
always did the best they could
possibly do.

ONE

Grey. Metallic. Two inches to a side. The box posed on the edge of the lectern pretending to be real, and in that pretense I saw the whole of my salvation.

Not that I believed salvation was actually possible.

In matter of fact, the box looked as much out of place in a philosophy lecture hall as I myself felt. From seven rows up in the gallery I couldn't see its details, only that it had a red push-button on top. But its potential . . . well, that very much belonged here, as such potentials are strictly a matter for the philosophical.

The Professor paced slowly behind the lectern. Afternoon sun spilling through the high windows irradiated his grey-white crewcut. "I am quite serious," he said, his slight Scottish accent almost corrupted by the bass in it. "I do not claim to understand, I only state that it functions." His eyebrows raised in his "I dare you to dispute me" look. As usual, no one did.

He wasn't acting as much as teaching, although I'm never quite sure. He was heading for a point, and I had learned twenty-plus years ago when I sat here as an undergraduate that, when Doctor Phillip Kendrick heads for a point, it can be a fantastic voyage, if you'll just wait patiently.

"There is doubt on your faces," he continued, standing now at the oak railing that separated the lecture floor from the forty-six graduate students. "Or is it a suspicion that your professor is a bit more irrational than usual today?" The obligatory, if shallow, laughter did not erase the hint of truth I felt might be in that statement.

"I assure you," he said, holding up his right hand as if to testify, "that I am completely sane, and completely sincere. What you see before you," he turned and took up the box again, "is a device for traveling through time."

When he'd first said it there had been a surprised stillness in the room. This time the reaction was more like a tolerant parent listening to

a child's wild story, waiting for the nonsensical punch line.

The Professor slapped the box down on the lectern again. "Very well," he said in a rush, "if it's proof you want, proof I'll give you. I'll push this button and disappear before your eyes, gone to another era!" The Professor stared straight at us, eyes narrowed, looking to judge the thoughts behind each face. As he stared, his index finger hovered defiantly over the small red button on the grey metallic box. His eyes locked on mine and a cold wind shot down my spine. Of course I knew this was an object lesson. Of course I knew he wouldn't disappear. Of course I knew there was no such thing as time travel. Yet the fiery-cold look in his eyes blew the confidence straight out of my soul and I teetered on the edge of belief.

Suddenly he released his stare and let out a laugh that echoed off the oak paneling. He pulled his hand away from the box, walked back to the center of the room. "No, I'll not be disappearing today," he said. "If I did, you'd all think it a splendid excuse to cut class."

We joined his laughter, relieved that his little game was over. We were wrong.

"I am still quite serious," he said. "But a debate about the possibilities of time travel is not what I planned for today. Rather, a question." He paced again, left arm behind his back, right hand stroking a salt-and-pepper beard. When I was nineteen and knew everything, The Professor had seemed old to me. Now he seemed remarkably young, though he was flirting with retirement. Time hasn't changed him, but it has fought me. Lately I've felt down for the count.

"Presupposing time travel were possible," The Professor continued, "and presupposing you were fortunate enough to have access to a time travel device, my question to you is this: for what purpose would you use it?"

Now we could relax. We were again on sound, theoretical ground and could grapple with some sound, meaningless questions. A young man at the far end of the gallery called out, "I'd travel forward six years and get my PhD!"

The professor laughed with us, but then said, "Sorry, not in the rules. You may only travel back in time, not forward."

"I'd go back and get a different haircut." It was the blonde in the third row, Anne. A nurse I think. I'd had a cup of coffee with her one break and exchanged two-minute biographies. We all laughed now,

everyone apparently sharing my opinion that her new hairstyle was so-last-year.

The one-liners continued, with everyone trying to top everyone else. Of the extroverts, that is. The rest of us just sat and eavesdropped. “I’d go back and invest in Google,” said a balding man up front. “I’d go back to registration day and drop this class!” That from a young lady directly above me on the next row.

But an overweight man in his fifties, across the aisle and two rows down, bagged the trophy when he said, “I’d go back to the day before I met my wife and lock myself in the bathroom.”

The convulsive laughter that followed carried us over the crest of the hill we’d been climbing, and we felt content. We were ready to be serious. Which was good because, as the laughter died to snickering, The Professor said, “Now seriously, ladies and gentlemen, where would you go if you could travel anywhere in time you’d like?”

A few moments of silence followed, a few moments for me to reflect on the question, to notice again the hardness of the wooden seats, to doodle frowny faces on my note pad because I had no intention of giving an answer. Finally, the extroverts began doing their work.

Anne, the nurse: “I guess I’d fill my bags with all the vaccine I could carry and go back to every plague that’s ever cursed a people.” Sounded good to me. The first young man, Steve: “I’d go back and stop every tragedy from nine-eleven back to Pearl Harbor.” Good answer. “I’d go back and save the Kennedys and Martin Luther King.” It was a young African-American man in the front row.

But once again it was the overweight man in his mid-fifties, across the aisle and two rows down, who closed the discussion when he quietly, almost inaudibly, and terribly sincerely said, “I’d go back to the day before I met my wife and lock myself in the bathroom.”

I could hear the creaking of the oak paneling in the silence that followed. We were embarrassed – that piercing, angry, enveloping embarrassment a group feels when someone has shared something too personal in public. At that moment, Professor Kendrick stepped in.

“You’ve all given perfectly charming answers,” he said. “And most of them quite noble. But I rather suspect,” he continued, drawing himself up and locking his eyes on ours once more, “that you are all lying.” This had the intended effect on my curiosity. “All, that is, but Mr. Franklin, here,” he added, pointing out the unhappy husband.

“Because I believe,” The Professor continued, pacing, hands locked behind his back, eyes locked on our souls, “I believe that each and every one of you would do no such noble thing.” His voice began to rise like a camp-meeting preacher, hands marking his accusations with grand sweeps. “I believe that each and every one of you, given the opportunity to go back to any time in history, given the opportunity to heal entire civilizations, to alter tragic moments, to observe the wonders of the historical world,” he paused, and continued in a near-whisper, “would turn away from every such opportunity to go back into your own past, and change that which you wish you had never done.”

And there it was. The point. The place to which he had been guiding us all hour. Once again The Professor had spun us around on our own pretensions then hit us square between the eyes with a piercing truth. And it was, for me at least, most definitely truth. He had quite unknowingly slashed through all that I pretend to be and bared the core of my soul, where are kept the secret regrets I hold. I wondered for a moment if the blood would show through my polo.

I willed the memories to stay where I had neatly tucked them, but they defied me. As they slid across my mind in frightful clarity I wished the grey metallic box really were a time-traveling device. I wanted to stand up, run to the front of that classroom, and push the button. I wanted to go back in time and erase what I wish had never happened.

The Professor picked up the box and, for a moment, for one horrifying, insane moment, I thought he had heard my private misery and was handing me the box. Instead, he simply held it up, rotating it slowly.

“So, ladies and gentlemen, what will it be? What private miseries are you keeping?” My heart lurched at those words – *bad* he been listening in? “How would you change your lives, your histories, your actions, if indeed I could send you back?”

He was into his lecture then, and would speak for another forty-five minutes. Our seminar was Topics in Philosophy and served no other purpose for me than to fulfill some credits for my master’s degree. Which is about the only thing that could get me to sit on these hard wooden seats on a beautiful August afternoon when I could be doing anything else. Even being a teacher, summer school had never much appealed to me.

As always, serious debate erupted and, as always, we came away having no idea what The Professor personally believed. His job was to

make us think, not give us answers.

I caught only part of the discussion, though. My mind kept returning to that night when it had happened, the night of my regret. The scene played over and over, like sucking on dark chocolate and never getting past the bitter taste. And over and over I played with the idea of what I might do to change that night, if I really could go back.

The slap of seat bottoms springing vertical made me realize I had dazed through the last ten minutes of class. Slowly, deliberately, still deep in thought, I returned the utensils of education to my briefcase: leather-bound notebook enclosing a yellow legal pad covered in nothing but frowny faces; a tablet computer I haven't a clue how to use – a gift from Maggie, my wife, when I started working toward my degree – and the soft-cover version of the philosophy anthology, the yellow “USED” sticker on the spine a fine complement to my mood.

By the time I was ready to leave only two students remained talking to The Professor. I waited quietly behind them. Mine was a personal question, not for the hearing of strangers.

When the two had gone, The Professor looked at me for a moment, silent. “Thomas,” he said without emotion, as if he had sifted through a stack of names and finally found the correct one. “You have a question?”

“Yes, Professor. I guess it's kind of a philosophical one.” I felt foolish now.

The Professor smiled. “That works out well, since this is a philosophy class. What is it Thomas?”

“It goes back to our earlier discussion on time travel.” What was I doing? “If one really could return to one's own past,” even my sentences were mocking me now, “could one really effect any changes that would change one's future?” I felt the flush of embarrassment in my cheeks. I sounded like a love sonnet re-written in proper grammar.

“I guess that depends on what one had done in one's past that one felt needed changing.”

He was toying with me. And I knew it. And I laughed. And so did he. All of which helped me relax.

I shouldn't need to relax around The Professor; I've known him for decades, been to his home a dozen times. Strike that. I've been to his house, I'm not sure I've ever been to his home. Either way, I shouldn't feel as intimidated as I do around him.

Still smiling, The Professor surveyed me with a casual curiosity.

"You're troubled, Thomas," he said, more a statement than a guess. "And you're looking for relief. Been looking a long time, I should say."

Half of me wanted to yell "Yes!" while the other half wanted to deny it. I should be used to this by now, the way The Professor instantly dissects a person, then lays the pieces out for discussion. But I'm not used to it, and I had to fight my own defense mechanisms to admit he was right.

"That's pretty close to the truth," I said. My defense mechanisms hadn't surrendered unconditionally. "I guess I'm searching for an answer that I'm not sure even exists."

"But if it does exist, it does so in the past, is that it?"

I nodded. I wanted to scream out, "Of course that's it!" I wanted to tell him all about it and beg him to help me. Nevertheless, I only nodded.

The Professor thought for a moment, his fingers rubbing the brass lock on his ancient leather attache'. He took a deep breath, then let it out sharply. "I'm not sure I can help you," he said. Sympathy filled his voice, sympathy with a touch of reality.

I nodded again, and let my eyes drop from his. "I wasn't really asking for help," I lied, then met his eyes again, "just pondering a philosophical question."

"I mean, Thomas, that I don't think anyone can help you except you. Only you can explore your past, and only you can make it fit in with your future."

"I guess that was my real question," I said with just a touch of self-pity. "How can I go back to what was and make it what I'd like it to be?"

His smile spread into a sympathetic grin and he pointed at the small grey box. "Push the button," he said.

I laughed a little, then sighed. "If only it were that easy."

He just kept looking at me. "Maybe it is," he said softly. There was a pause, then he finished latching his case and gathered his overcoat. "I must be going now, Thomas, my dinner will be waiting." He stopped and looked at me to make sure I understood he was sincere. "I truly wish I could give you some answers."

I thanked him, then he climbed the elongated stairway to the exit in back. I wish you could give me some answers too, I thought. Then I decided, again, there really was no answer for the past. Maybe I just needed to work on the future and make the best of it.

"Yup, Tom old boy," I said aloud to the empty room, "you've got to

quit dreaming and get back to real life.” With that I gathered my things, gave the red button on the grey metallic box a playful tap, and climbed the stairs to the exit.

The History and Philosophy building on the campus of Akishna State University has both dignity and charm. Five stories tall plus a bell tower, rusty brick exterior, and oak paneled interior, it holds the line between antiquated and antique. Time was in this building. More time than I myself had seen. It enveloped anyone who entered, surrounding them not with history, but with today in the light of yesterday. It was a presence that demanded recognition.

Maybe it was this presence that wouldn't allow me to turn away from the past just yet. Despite the order I'd given myself back in Room 103, my thoughts kept returning to times past as my steps echoed down the marble of the Great Hall. Nor did those thoughts leave me alone once I was out the main entry and down the gauntlet of concrete lions.

Orange and brown and yellow maple leaves, dry and crackly under my feet, echoed my bitterness as I headed up the sidewalk. Time is unstoppable, they were telling the depths of my concentration. You cannot change what has been cast in time.

I continued along the route as I had a thousand times before. Five blocks west, two blocks south, to a quiet, two-story, three-bedroom home where time once took a nasty turn. Or rather, it was my life that had taken a nasty turn. Time is only the preservative.

A deep breath of crisp air; maybe I can force the gloom away. I tried to take in the world around me, to realize life is bigger than one incident two years past. I noticed with delight that they'd finally started remodeling the facade of the old Administration Building. I guess time can be fooled for a while, if you use enough mortar.

Another block gone by and I quickened my step – the wind was beginning to tickle. I really must beat this depression, I told myself. I've a family to go home to, and they don't need to endure another evening of melancholy.

I stopped at the next intersection and waited for traffic to clear. Mine is not the worst problem in the world, I suppose, though it might win a prize for tenacity. But when a problem is yours alone, when it climbs on your shoulder and rides you everywhere, when it waits for you to wake up in the morning and tucks you in at night, then I think you're justified in

seeing it a little out of perspective.

A restored '48 Buick passed and I hurried across the intersection wishing someone could restore me as easily. I claim to be Christian, and I suppose in the popular sense of things I am, though I'm also one who incessantly doubts the popular sense of things. I tried praying about the past. Even offered a reward for its capture. If there is a God, he doesn't take bribes.

I glanced ahead: one more block, a left turn, then I'd be out of this razor wind. The long shadow tripping off my feet meant the sun was on my back, but I didn't feel any warmth from it. I was passing Wendell's Drugs and moved closer to the building, hoping for a little relief. It didn't come.

Always waiting for crab to be on sale, I stole a quick glance at the Chadwith's Market reader board. Potatoes were on for seven cents and pot roast for fifty-one cents a pound. No crab dinner this week, but Maggie might want some potatoes at that price. I tried calling her but had no service on my cell, something that happens five times out of ten, it seems. Of course, I've felt out of service ten times out of ten for the last two years.

I sucked my head back down inside the collar of my knit polo and pushed on.

Actually, I hadn't thought about it most of the day. The past, that is. I'd been busy reading Kant for today's class. Then The Professor had brought out his little box and unlocked the vault in my mind. Not his fault, of course. But if I can't change the past, I wish I could at least forget about it. Forgive and forget, they say. Humanly impossible.

Two girls ran past me, college students, no doubt. Trying to get someplace out of the wind, although with wool skirts down to their ankles they were probably warmer than I in my thin slacks.

Enough complaining, I told myself. Tonight's dinner will not be . . .

Skirts down to their ankles? Pot roast at fifty-one cents a pound? A '48 Buick? Fall leaves and a cold wind?

I stopped abruptly and looked around. I could see only six cars, but every one of them was pre-1950. The street sign said this was the corner of Fourth and Pine but my sanity argued: where's the 7-Eleven? Since when did the Starbucks become a pool hall? And what happened to the other half of Chadwith's building?

Irrational images began tumbling through my head, images of H.G.

Wells, Alfred Einstein, and The Professor's small metal box with the innocent red button. I pulled out my cell phone; still "No Service."

Seconds later I entered the first of what I later dubbed The Five Reactionary Stages Upon Discovering You've Unexpectedly Gone Back In Time. Standing in the middle of the sidewalk, in a brisk autumn wind, briefcase in hand, headed home for dinner, I had one overwhelming, irresistible desire.

"Newspaper!" I gasped aloud. "I need a newspaper?"

In Hollywood at least, the sure-fire test for determining the date is to look at a copy of today's daily. It's as if we've entrusted the newspaper publishers of the world with the job of keeping our days in order. And not one of those sketchy online things – a real paper with real ink. I stumbled back to Wendell's Discount Drug Emporium – which, now that I looked, was not Wendell's Discount Drug Emporium at all but Wendell's Family Pharmacy – to buy a paper.

I expected the quiet "whoosh" of the automatic doors, but slick aluminum had been replaced by bulky wood. I pulled on the brass door handle and entered the medicinal warmth of the pharmacy. I stood there for a moment, looking at shelves of medicines and bandages and crutches, and felt a little nauseous. It was a pharmacy. A real pharmacy. No sporting goods section, no greeting card section, no automotive section. No housewares or electronics or toys. Not even a cosmetic counter. I've probably been to Wendell's more than the pharmacist, but this was not Wendell's. The counter wasn't even in the right place.

"Can I help you?" It was a man I didn't recognize, standing behind the cash register. Pretending to be the pharmacist, no doubt. Probably a drug addict. I'd walked into the middle of an armed robbery, I was sure. I didn't let that grandfatherly face and gentle smile fool me.

"I just came in for a paper," I said, still suspicious. I handed him my credit card. He looked at it like I'd handed him a dead fish.

"What's this for?" he asked.

"To pay for the . . ." I pulled it back and searched my pockets. He took my quarter and gave me twenty-two cents change.

Without turning my back on the pharmacist imposter, I edged over to the newsstand and picked up the top paper. Then I entered the second of the Five Reactionary Stages Upon Discovering You've Unexpectedly Gone Back In Time. The date was September 8th, 1948. I promptly fainted.

Men don't like to say they've fainted. "I blacked out" is the accepted terminology for modern man. But what I did on that hard pharmacy floor was faint. My blood pressure plummeted, my skin went cold, my head went light, the world went dark, and I went down like a swooning teenage girl in . . . well . . . in 1948.

A few moments later I thought Maggie was cleaning the kitchen floors, but woke to find the stranger – all right, I'll admit he was the pharmacist – holding a broken tube of ammonia under my nose.

"You fainted," he said.

"Blacked out," I corrected.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Just fine," I answered.

Stage Three of the Five Stages is to ask the nearest person what year this is, whereupon they think you're an escaped asylum patient and call the police, whereupon you end up in a chase scene through dark alleys running for your life. Having seen enough movies like this to know what was coming, I jumped right over Stage Three and went directly to Stage Four.

"So, what do you think of the president?" I asked the pharmacist as he helped me into a straight-backed chair. If he thought that a strange question from a man who had just fainted – uh, blacked out – he certainly didn't show it.

"Truman's not a bad old boy."

Truman. Harry S. 33rd president of the United States. More to the point, current president of the United States. What in the name of little grey boxes was going on here?

"What do you think?" the pharmacist asked.

"About what?"

"Truman."

"Oh," I said. Then after a pause, "Not a bad old boy."

The pharmacist – Wendell was his name – asked if I'd be okay and I said sure, and that I just wanted to sit and read my paper for a few minutes. He said that was fine and left me alone. I wish he hadn't done that. The more I read, the more panic I felt.

"Truman To Take Trip West - Expects Second Honeymoon with Congress," the headline said. So he really was president. The Republicans were planning a "short, hard hitting campaign with alert watching for any Truman blunders."

The Marshall Plan was in effect. Stalin met with Western leaders over the Berlin problem and the airlift. The congressional Un-American Activities Committee was vowing to “stop the radicals, and stop them now!” Grapes were fifteen cents a pound.

Frantic, I ripped through the paper. The want ads showed separate columns for “Male Help Wanted” and “Female Help Wanted.” A six-pack of Coke cost twenty-five cents. Even Dagwood’s comic took a jab at me. He was complaining because Alexander wanted two dollars to take his girlfriend on a date. Two lousy dollars.

I lowered the paper, let go the last of my disbelief, and entered Stage Five. “I’ve got to get back!” I whispered.

The sky was black as I bolted from the pharmacy. I hadn’t noticed the old-fashioned streetlights before – they were just lighting up. The wind was really whipping, and now made sense, it being September and all. But it was coming from behind. I was headed back to the campus.

I waited impatiently for traffic – a ‘37 Nash Ambassador, a ‘43 Ford pickup, and something called a Crosley. What few men were out all wore fedoras. A Bell Telephone billboard bragged that long distance calls could now go through in about two minutes, most of them while-you-wait. Traffic cleared and I ran.

Finally, the campus. Almost home. By now it didn’t surprise me to discover the Administration Building wasn’t being remodeled. It was just being built.

Just like the day after my wedding when it suddenly struck me that “I’m married!” terror latched onto my ribcage as it fully struck me that “I’m in 1948!”

I ran past the concrete lions, up the brick stairway, and through the door. My steps echoed down the marble of the Great Hall. I threw open the doors to Room 103 and scrambled for the light switch. The noisy fluorescents groaned in protest, but cast their greenish tinge across the room, and I sighed.

The grey metallic box, two inches to a side, with a red pushbutton on top, still sat on the lectern.

And it was real.

Slowly now, afraid to go forward but afraid not to, eyes fixed solidly on the demon that had commandeered my life, I stepped down the stairs toward the front of the room. I stood staring at it and saw for the first time a switch next to the red button. The switch was leaning toward the

word “Backward.”

I couldn't believe that any part of this was possible. Now back inside the confines of the familiar, I wasn't sure any of it was real.

But, no, it wasn't familiar after all. As I looked around I saw how new and fresh everything was. Fresh paint on the stucco walls, fresh varnish on the oak railings and trim, fresh . . . ambience. This wasn't the place I knew. It was something odd, something foreign. So I flipped the switch toward the word “Forward.”

Then I pushed the button.

Instantly, I knew. Instantly everything in the room grew old, dusty, used. Now it was familiar.

I crumpled into a chair, breathing hard – an effort of my body to rid itself of adrenalin no doubt. My mind was spinning, hands shaking, skin soaked in sweat. How could this possibly be?

Ten minutes or a day later – oddly I had no concept of time – anger replaced shock. I gently placed the box in my briefcase, making sure I didn't accidentally push the button, then took the stairs two at a time.

Professor Kendrick lives three blocks from the campus, in the opposite direction from my house. I stormed the three blocks in two minutes, as hot under the collar as the August breeze at my back. Without pausing or even slowing down I marched up the steps to his Victorian porch and punched the button on the doorframe. The door opened and The Professor stood behind the screen, half a smile on his face.

“Well, Thomas,” he said without the least bit of surprise. “It’s about time.”