Casey (age 29)

1975-1993

You grew up in Oklahoma, flat wide-open country, identical fields of grain as far as the eye can see. But the fact that you could see the horizon in any direction didn't make the world any less mysterious to you. You loved learning about the lives of microscopic bacteria, or the complex societies of bees, or the ways songbirds taught and varied their tunes. You were equally interested in the ways machines and electricity worked. But most of all, you were fascinated by the stars.

Your mother loved them as well. You remember as a child her telling you tales of the constellations, the myths of how they were great creatures and warriors. Later you realized only half of the stories were real, the other from your mother's vivid imagination and natural gift at storytelling. But you were interested in them in a different way -- the fact that they were a window to the *past* completely captured you. And not just one past, many different pasts, this star's light from four years ago, and this other's from four hundred million. If only there was a telescope strong enough to watch a foreign planet, you'd be able to have a window into the daily life of ancient aliens.

Your father was less fanciful but no less encouraging of you. He was a mechanical engineer, and loved taking things apart. The shed was always full of parts of old radios, televisions, and other random electronics. The two of you spent countless hours out back 'working' (fiddling!) with parts. His mantra was that if you just kept at it, you could always get something to work again, you just needed the right *part.*

You were an enthusiastic child, equally happy to invent imaginary worlds with your mother or build things with your father -- but you didn't have any skill at making friends your age. Looking back with the help of hindsight, you can say that it's just that the kids around were just too different from you. At the time though, it was a series of mystifying missteps, where you would seem to be getting along great with someone, you'd tell them all about some new exciting idea you had, and the next thing you knew they wouldn't be interested in playing with you at recess. You never *quite* got completely discouraged from trying, but you had long periods of time where you were very, very lonely.

Thankfully, between libraries and the early internet you were able to find plenty of subjects you could immerse yourself into. Both of your parents encouraged your fondness for reading. Limited only by your own interest, you dove into science fiction and science textbooks with equal enthusiasm.

You don't remember how old you were when you had the idea, but it stuck with you ever since and defined your life. *What if we could travel in time?*

You started consuming every book that you could find on the matter -- no longer a generalist, you specialized in physics in particular. Space and time were intricately linked together, and it didn't make sense that the *directionality* was a hard limit. You thought cosmic strings probably came into play in some way although it was years before you would really figure out how.

You weren't shy about telling your theory to all of the kids at your high school. You still were young enough to be surprised that they weren't interested. Actually, some part of you is still confused that they weren't interested. Who *wouldn't* want to travel in time?

Your parents were supportive to you in all things, including the consuming passion you had for time travel. You think perhaps at first they thought it was a phase, but when it continued on, they did not try to set you on a new one. Your mother especially loved engaging with you on various different theories on how it could work and what you would do with it.

1993-1997

You applied to several different technical colleges, and you had your pick of whichever one you wanted. You chose to go far from home, all the way to MIT. You were excited about the new start, hoping to meet a whole fresh set of people, surely getting to engage your brain with like-minded thinkers!

You remember your first day really clearly -- the thrill in having a *roommate* -- here was someone you would clearly bond with, would share four years together with. You recall excitedly explaining to them your theory before they even sat their bags down. You could see by their face that you were coming on too strongly, that they thought you were a nut. After that you found it difficult to say more than a few words around them. You'd come into your room, and if they were there you'd go right back out again. So college started out just as lonely as high school had been.

Until you met Alex. Second semester, in your Intro Chemistry class, the professor had the horrible idea of having people pick their own lab partners, like it was gym class. You hung back and were ready to be picked last, trying to not let the embarrassment of the knowledge show too much on your face. But to your surprise, one of your classmates made eye contact, smiled, and walked right across the room and asked if you wanted to be partners. They turned out to be someone from your floor as well. You couldn't believe your luck!

The two of you turned out to be great lab partners. You often had an intuition about possible ways to tackle a problem, and they were very meticulous. If things didn't go according to plan, you were more than willing to try again and again and again -- and they were great at thinking through what you should iterate on next. They were really sharp, not just about ideas but also about people and social situations, able to navigate them in a way that you never were. And you turned out to really enjoy each other's company. They had read a lot of the same science fiction

books that you grew up on. Their favorite movies were also ones that you loved. You shared a sense of humor. Time went by easily when the two of you were together.

Your parents had been very different people, your mother warm and imaginative and your father thorough and externally focused, but the two of them were clearly well suited to each other. You remember reading Aristophanes views on Love in Plato's Symposium and having it really stick with you. Aristophanes talked about how when people were created they were dual-souls, some two men, some two women, and some half-man, half-woman. When their natural forms were split in two, each half went around looking for it's other half until they could find each other and put their arms around one another and embrace. It always reminded you of your parents, they had that kind of consuming love. And you were sure that person was out there for you too.

When you met Alex, you knew it was them. Alex was …. Is still? … your soulmate.

It didn't hurt that they were the first person, other than your parents, that didn't treat your idea of inventing time travel as an impossible flight of fancy or a crazed delusion. When you told them that you were sure that time travel could be made real, they just nodded, like they had expected you to say so. And then changed the subject. But at least they didn't treat you like you were a nut. They were thoughtful, tactful, and reserved. They also were emotionally aware, but not overly emotional. And most of all, when you were with them, things just felt more *right.*

For a while, it seemed like your relationship with Alex was just going to be one of friendship. You spent many evenings together, 'studying' until very late at night -- really a mixture of schoolwork and free-ranging conversations from sci fi shows through the latest science news to the nature of reality. You remember one very fondly where they introduced you to what is *still* your favorite band, Black Cat Groove, playing song after amazing song. But no matter how fun the evening, no matter how engaging the conversation, no matter how closely the two of you sat next to each other on their floor, you always ended up awkwardly going back to your dorm room at the end of the night. You were pretty sure they just didn't have any feelings for you, and you were grateful enough just to have found your best friend.

Things went on like this for a couple of months, and then there was one day when you and Alex went to a nearby diner. As you sat over your breakfast-in-the-afternoon, they started having an interesting taxonomy conversation with you around different types of love, platonic vs romantic, and also breaking apart romance from sexuality. All of a sudden you realized they were trying to have a *relationship* conversation with you, and you blurted out that you thought that the two of you were soulmates, and…that was apparently the right thing to say, for once. They took your hand, and the two of you did *not* go back to your separate dorm rooms that night.

Having Alex as a romantic partner is the best thing that ever happened to you. They complete you. The rest of college flew by with them at your side. They had other hobbies, made friends in the science fiction club and such, and you didn't resent or envy their time with other people -- it was pleasant to be pulled along into a wider social circle -- but you didn't really need anyone in your life besides them.

Your understanding of time travel, and the way in which it could be possible, really solidified during college. Alex was a fantastic partner for having theoretical conversations about the nature of time travel, they were absolutely willing to listen to your latest models and equations, where the conversation would inevitably turn late at night. The two of you both majored in physics together, so shared many classes -- but Alex decided to stick with more traditional research areas. You thought it was a shame -- think of how much more the two of you could accomplish if you were *both* tackling the problem together! There was no better sounding board than Alex for all of your ideas.

Things reached a turning point in your senior year. Both of you were talking about grad schools, and underneath that was the looming question of your relationship. You absolutely refused to believe there was any other answer to this puzzle other than that you and Alex would continue dating and would crystalize your partnership together by going to the same grad school and breaking new physics ground with the invention of time travel. Or on the *off-off chance* that it wasn't possible after all, writing down the rock solid equations showing that to be the case. But in all worlds, you knew you needed Alex by your side.

And so you said so. Both in actions, and in words, many times. You cooked them dinner, and talked about how great it would be to keep cooking together and working on puzzles. You helped pick up library books for them and then mentioned off hand how lucky the two of you were going to be when you wanted the same side reading research materials. You pointed out that they didn't seem to be finding their current thesis work nearly as compelling as the conversations the two of you had together about yours. Nothing convinced them -- until you told them that you couldn't do this without them. Because it was true. Not emotionally -- they were your life partner, and you weren't going to let that go. Not practically -- they were far better at deadlines and managing external demands and at dealing with the social network piece that was necessary in getting grants and research money. But most importantly, not intellectually either. After all, it was them, not you, that solved one of the essential equations. You think you literally said both "eureka!" out loud and "so you're applying to school with me now right?" in that same set of excited sentences. And they laughed and kissed you, and that was that.

1997-2002

Those grad school years were really good years. The two of you matured together as people, and after living together for four years, you got married on April 17, 2001. You had many, many discussions about whether time travel could change the past or not. Part of your fascination with it was your certainty that it could. Determinism did not make scientific sense, there was plenty of proof in quantum physics of randomness and the inability to observe-without-changing. Also it did not make visceral, experiential sense. You'd had plenty of times in your life where you were at a crossroads decision point and could have gone either way. Like what you had for breakfast this morning. But perhaps most importantly, determinism wasn't *interesting.* It did not capture

your fancy to imagine that we were all cogs in some machine outside of time marching to orders prewritten at the beginning of the Universe. It was immeasurably more interesting to imagine that not just the present but the past as well was mutable. Endless possibility!

The two of you had related but distinct dissertation topics. Alex convinced you of the practicality of obfuscating the time travel research a bit. So yours was about a theoretical aspect of time travel, and theirs was about a related aspect of string theory. Together you hammered out the details of how you thought practical time travel could work. The theory you came up with was that time travel required a connection between two people who were both alive at the time when any time-jump initiated. The connection would be created as part of the initiation of the time-travel process. Each would serve as an anchor in time and space for the other. When one person jumped through time, they would appear near the spatial location of the other person at the destination time point. That meant that the traveler could only visit times within the lifetime of the anchor, though you hypothesized that it should be equally possible to travel to future times at which the anchor was still alive. However much subjective time the traveler spent in the past, that same interval would pass between their present-day departure time and their return. They would return to the same physical location from which they had departed. By the symmetry of the equations governing the traveler/anchor connection, time travel trips had to happen in pairs, with each person serving once as traveler and once as anchor, but there didn't have to be any particular relationship between the destination times.

Somehow, despite the many ways in which you and Alex had aligned goals and drives, they generally argued the world was deterministic. It was one of your most frequent debates, the argument lines ingrained between you, like sandstone carved with the tide lines.

The two of you agreed that the best way to try to run this experiment into whether the past was being changed or not was to each write down everything without telling each other once you had the machine up and running and were visiting the past. Both of you would write down each visit, immediately after it happened, and additionally write down any 'past' memories of the other person in your life. Neither of you would read the others' notes, and you wouldn't talk to each other about any of these experiences until the Machine got through all the dates and completed its cycle.This was going to be a long running experiment of a lifetime!

2002-2004 (and a whole bunch of different times in the past)

Finally came the time when you were ready to put theory into practice. On the day you were ready to turn on the time machine (December 2, 2002) you were filled with anticipation! You had each agreed to pick some dates to put in. They could only be within your own lifetimes, as one of you had to be the anchor for the other in each visit. You had initially wanted to pick all of the dates together, but Alex talked you around to the excitement and mystery of *not* knowing every date that was going to happen. So you decided to pick some dates that seemed numerologically fun or interesting, like 9-4-94 and 5-9-95. The one date the two of you picked together was your

20th wedding anniversary, the only *future* date that you put in. You had no idea if it actually would be possible to travel to the future, but you both agreed that it sounded incredibly cool and so you talked Alex into trying. “Ok, ok” they said, “but you can’t ask me to tell you about how the future comes out,” and you promised that you wouldn’t ask about flying cars or what stocks to place a bet on.

Alex pushed the button to initiate the time travel process, and you turned the dial and -- in that moment, you had the awful realization that one of your calculations was *off*. You had thought that the two of you would be able to swap, which one of you traveled and which one was the anchor. But in that moment you realized that once you tuned the dial it would remain fixed. Only one of you was ever going to be able to travel in time.

You wish you could say that you ran a quick thought experiment in your head and decided it would be safer for Alex to be the anchor, or even that it would make the science part of this lifelong experiment work better. But if you’re honest with yourself, it’s that you *wanted* to see what it was like to travel in time so badly. You tuned the anchor to Alex, and you became the Time Traveler.

The guilt comes to you at odd times still. Certainly things like the weariness in Alex’s eyes when you come home from a long trip reinforce the unfairness of your situation. But sometimes when you are just taking a walk, you catch yourself thinking how much Alex would have enjoyed traveling, and then you feel guilty for your choice. Or when you are falling asleep and your mind drifts to the delight at getting to have seen this younger version of Alex, and then you think of how they will never get that same joy. But -- all of that would come later. In that first moment, your immediate guilt was quickly forgotten in the wonder of it all.

The experience itself felt like a white *whooshing* tunnel, as if you’d been fired backwards in a rocketship and were now floating in white-hallway-space for just an instant, before the world resolved itself around you again. You were in the bedroom of an apartment, a small, messy, very brightly painted bedroom. A tween looked up from their desk where they were poring over a book and exclaimed with delight. “You’re here!”

You knew intellectually that this was Alex, since all of your calculations made it clear you’d be drawn to the anchor. You also knew this must be Alex since you’d seen pictures of them at this age. But you were completely unprepared for the strange gyrations your heart made when this tween smiled at you.

Alex brought the book over to you and immediately started peppering you with questions about physics and time travel. You were taken completely aback. How did they already know? You stammered a few answers, and then reached a hand to hold on to their notebook to get a better look at the drawing and -- your hand passed right through the book. You were incorporeal!

Alex gave you an exasperated sigh and repositioned the notebook so that you could see it better, allowing their arm to pass entirely through yours. Their complete nonchalance at your lack of solidity was *also* surprising. Clearly you must have had similar interactions before.
The next two hours or so were spent in a blur of conversation. Alex kept alternating between having familiar and dear-to-you expressions and gestures, and seeming like a completely different, well, kid. Their voice for one did not remind you at all of Alex's voice, and they had more enthusiasm than you were used to getting from Alex. What they wanted more than anything was to ask questions about time travel itself, and secondarily about their future life. You knew well enough that present Alex would not want past Alex to hear much about the state of their life so you stayed quiet on that point, but you did explain a few of the time travel fundamentals to Alex, who absorbed them readily and made copious notes.

Then you felt a *pull*, and about five minutes later had the same *wooshing backwards* experience and woke up on the floor of your house, wrapped in a blanket, with the time travel machine next to you and your spouse looking at you with concern. You sat up with some difficulty, it being strange to feel heavy again. They had a bowl of soup already made and offered you tylenol as well.

"I saw you! In the past!"

Alex nodded and gave you a quick hug. You realized in that moment they must have known, must remember seeing you. You wondered if they had *always* remembered that and had kept it from you, or if they *only now* remembered it because you had changed the past, but the future retroactively bounced back like a rubber band and changed their memories to keep from paradox. You looked at them very curiously and started to ask that question, and then realized they wouldn't be able to know the difference. Wow, even more fascinating!

You did also remember to break it to Alex that they were always going to be the anchor, but they took the news in stride. That gave you another momentary twinge of guilt, along with pride that you married the right person, you admire their resilience in the face of disappointment.

The time travel machine had another surprise in store for the two of you, and that was that you *didn't get to determine when you would travel*. You would get a few minutes of warning if you were lucky, but that was it. Enough to quickly lie down on the floor so you didn't split your head open. But no warning as to what day or hour it would happen.

Alex had reworked a lot of the equations in light of the new data by the time you came back. The two of you together wrote it all out when you were sure it was right:

1) The time traveler traveled only in consciousness, and returned to their body, even if its location changed while they were 'gone.'

2) The time travel relationship was asymmetric: one traveler and one anchor. Those roles could not be reset until the machine's cycle was complete.

3) The time travel cycle would run until all of the dates you'd entered into the Machine had been visited. You hypothesized that the dates you had entered for Alex as the time traveler would simply be ignored. But the only way to know that for sure was to gather the data.

4) You couldn't predict the order in which the traveler would visit the destination dates.

5) The time traveler would not be able to choose when to depart for each trip and there was no way to predict the departure times.

6) The "an hour traveling equals an hour absent from real time" relationship should still hold.

7) While traveling, the time-traveler could move as far as a mile away from the anchor; beyond that, the connection would be too weak and the traveler would (probably) return to their present.

8) You couldn't tell what would happen if you turned the machine off before the cycle was complete.

Alex set up every room in the house with a comfortable place for you to be -- the kitchen got an addition of a sofa, the study a comfortable bean bag chair, etc. You both talked it over and agreed you should stop driving, and stop going out in public without them (what if you fell unconscious at the grocery store? That would be bad), and really that it would be best if you mostly stayed in the house. But that definitely was a small price to pay for the fascination of time travel.

Over the next weeks and months, you had several visits with Alex. They were always roughly the same age, some variety of tween or young teenager. Sometimes you showed up in their room, sometimes out in the park where they liked to go, and once you even followed them onto the subway (that was awkward! You had to really work to not *overlap* anyone else). It was fantastic to get to know this younger version of your spouse. They had a lot of the traits you appreciated in Alex, like the sharp mind and the love of thought experiments. But they were more enthusiastic and curious than Alex, a little more like you. You taught them a fair amount of physics -- nothing they couldn't have learned in school later, but they seemed to love to learn it from you. And you recommended some of your favorite movies and books to them. Sometimes they would roll their eyes at your recommendations and say that you had *already talked about that one*, but you were always able to think of the next series to recommend or sci fi property to help expand their intellectual horizons.

It was loads of fun. And also being done For Science! You wrote long flowing journal entries afterwards of your visits, trying to capture every detail. Sometimes you would try to explain something that came up to spouse-Alex, but they always shut you down. So you wrote more,

both what happened factually, and your meta-thoughts on how you felt about that, and your meta-meta-thoughts about what that probably meant about the nature of Time.

Then there was the visit that you showed up and Alex shrieked with joy, and then burst into tears. They had some loud music playing in the background just to add to the general confusion of what was going on. *"Hey, I'm glad to see you too, but, what's wrong?"*

"I thought you were never coming back", Alex choked out. Your heart went out to them. They looked so lost.

You gave them your best friendly smile and held out your hands. Alex tried to hug you and passed right through you as always, which made them even more upset. You tried your best at reassurance. *"I didn't know it had been so long for you. I'm sorry. I probably shouldn't tell you this, but I don't really get to pick when I show up. But listen, even if I have to go away for a long time, you know we're going to see each other again someday, so we can invent time travel together. Otherwise, how would I even be here in the first place?"*

"You're a *time traveler?*" They stared at you in shock.

You were slightly taken aback. *"You know I am,"* And then a pause as you realized by their expression that no, no, they clearly did *not* know. Uhoh. *"Shit, you really don't know. . .yet."*

You're *really* not sure what you said next. This was definitely not supposed to happen, this was outside of the experimental bounds, Alex … current spouse-Alex … was going to be so mad at you. And then there was this child-Alex staring at you with big eyes that were demanding some sort of, *any* sort of explanation. You panicked a bit.

They asked a million questions. You were really, really nervous about answering any of them, but you realized you had to say something, so you babbled about how the two of you were definitely going to meet at MIT in the future, and yes, inventing time travel, that was going to be a thing that happened, and also that you were going to visit, definitely visit more times, they didn't need to worry, you'd be back. You tried to stress that they really really shouldn't tell anyone about time travel or about you because no one would believe them, and if they DID believe them, it might change the timeline and how could you predict how that went?

"So, when you travel back in time, you can change things and make them come out different than they did before?" they asked.

"Yes," you answered, but then corrected yourself. "*I mean, probably. That's my theory, but I don't know for sure. But, you see, if it is true, then we need to be very careful so we don't accidentally make changes we don't want to make. Understand?"*

"Obviously," they said. "I've seen Back to the Future." And you had to laugh at that.

When you came back to the present, you tried to tell Alex about what had happened. After all, this was an important piece of data. Maybe you should consult your notebooks even. But Alex shut you out entirely, refusing to listen and leaving the house in case you tried to tell them anyway. You wrote in your journal for hours that night. But it wasn't the *same* as having the sounding board of Alex to bounce ideas off of. You read over what you wrote and the logic seemed circular. You got frustrated, and it made you wish you could go back to when you and Alex were collaborating. The secrecy of this experiment was making you not feel like real scientific partners anymore.

The next time you visited, Alex was six.

More specifically, the next time you visited, you found yourself on a (thankfully empty) playground, where one kid was swinging. They stopped cold at your appearance out of thin air.

You *knew better* than to tell Alex about time travel then. You didn't really have a speech planned for meeting little kid Alex though. *"I, um…..do you know who I am?"*

Alex's eyes were big saucers.*"Rumplestiltskin?"*

You shook your head. *"No, that's somebody else. You've really never seen me before?"*

Giant saucer-eyed Alex answered, *"No."*

And so you had to think on your feet. You were pretty proud of what you came up with! You didn't really explain anything about yourself, just distracted Alex with tricks like "look I can walk through the swingset." They were utterly delighted by your insubstantial nature. It did not get old for them. And the way their initial alarm turned into pure delight and play made the hour just glide by. You returned to the 'present' time (if that is even the right way to conceive of it) somewhat high on the fun that had been. You wished you could explain to your spouse that it was such a joy to play with the child version of them, but you didn't want to make them angry and leave again, so you stayed quiet about it.

In the weeks afterwards you kept thinking about how fun it had been to play with kid-Alex, and you decided to learn some magic tricks for the next visit. You spent hours watching internet videos of 'guess the card' tricks and practicing how to palm a coin and make it appear from anywhere. Your spouse was not particularly interested in your new hobby -- whenever you would show them a trick, you got the impression they'd seen a better version of it, and so they weren't the most enthusiastic audience for amateur magic tricks. But you still persisted at it and you were encouraged that you could tell you were getting better at it and looked forward to showing the tricks to young-Alex.

August, 2004

You were in your kitchen when the next visit happened. The same *wooshing* as always, and suddenly you were in a dark space. As your eyes adjusted you could see beakers and test tubes and hear two voices talking outside. One of them was Alex but the other was some stranger. You didn't want to surprise them, so you waited in the closet until you heard both voices leave. You emerged into a large, corporate-looking laboratory. A quick glance and you figured this was some sort of biochemistry research laboratory, a more thorough look at the equipment and you thought it was probably some sort of cancer research.

You went out into the hallway to follow Alex, but you weren't sure which hallway they had gone down. You tried one direction, and then the other, but you didn't spot them. You did however clearly see that you were in the corporate headquarters of Merck Research Laboratories by the signs posted on the bulletin board. Some gears slowly clicked into place in your head. *Hadn't there been a big fire at Merck?* You remembered your chemistry professor at college talking about it, he did a whole "Why Lab Safety Protocols Are Important" bit. You did some quick math -- the fire had happened on the 4th of July two years before you came to college. Alex had looked to be about high school age. You started looking around for a calendar and finally found one posted with some employee birthdays. This fire was going to happen in just three days.

Alex shouldn't be working here -- they could get hurt in that fire. You decided to go tell Alex to quit this job, and you left the building to tell them so. But it didn't take you long to realize you had no idea where this building was in relation to Alex's house, Alex was nowhere in sight, and you really *didn't* want to be trying to incorporeally navigate the city, especially when you couldn't do basic things like hand anyone money. Anyway you knew you had to stay within a square mile or so, so if you picked the wrong direction you'd just discorporate sooner (or at least, that's what your calculations told you, you'd never tried it).

You could feel your mind racing. You were pretty sure this was a change from your original timeline -- at the very least, Alex had never mentioned to you that they had worked for Merck, and why would they have had a pharma internship the summer before their senior year if they were going to major in physics? More importantly, -- if you couldn't find them to warn them they should stay away from their workplace for a couple of days, how could you stop them from being hurt?

You were mostly just thinking-on-your-feet when you walked into the biggest office and said you were Alex's science teacher and Alex was also working on a research project with you over the summer and you were worried about their ability to finish it because of this job. But those words did turn out to be the right ones to say. This was indeed Alex's boss, and he took your concerns very seriously. You stressed that you wouldn't want Alex's confidence to be hurt, and he made it clear that while he was going to let Alex go he would do so in a way that didn't imply that it was due to their skills. You found yourself immensely relieved as you left his office. You had prevented Alex from being hurt. And ALSO, you had both pretty solid evidence that the past was in flux, and that you could change it.

As you disincorporated and returned to your ‘current’ time, you remember thinking about how strange it was to have spent an entire visit not actually interacting with Alex. You woke up to current-spouse-Alex and again wanted to describe to them how you’d helped set the timeline *straight* again, and how this was even more proof that time was very fungible. You also wanted to brainstorm with them about why the timeline had changed, whether any of your actions from past visits could have triggered it. But you knew better than to try to have those conversations with Alex, and so you just wrote page after page after page in your journal.

You were frankly relieved when the next travel happened, to be away from the brittleness that had seemed to grow between the two of you. You found yourself in an auditorium for the Science Olympiad. Alex was presenting their team’s research. They did such a great job articulating the research problem and the conclusions their team had come to, with some beautiful diagrams and solid data. They reminded you of Alex from your early college days, and you found yourself completely absorbed!

Afterwards you went to the side door of the auditorium, trying to catch their eye to let them know you were here. You wanted to give them the praise they definitely deserved for that great presentation, and you also wanted to ask them a few clarifying questions, and, you just wanted to see them. You kept trying to get their attention, but too much was going on and they just didn’t see you.

Then out of the blue, they stormed out of the auditorium and fled down the hall and locked themselves into a single-occupancy bathroom. You followed, concerned and confused.

“Is something wrong?”, you asked, wondering if this was some leftover nerves from the presentation and ready to offer encouragement.

“You can’t just drop into the middle of my life, in front of people, and expect me to come running when you whistle! I’m not your dog! I’m a real person and I have a real life and you don’t get to screw it up just because you think you know what I’m supposed to do in the future! You don’t own me!” Alex exploded at you.

You were dumbstruck in horror. Is that what they really thought you were trying to do? You tried to think of a reply, but they continued:

“I don’t ever want to see you again! Don’t ever come back!” . They slammed the bathroom door and ran down the hallway. You watched their retreating back, completely unsure what to do next.

You eventually just sat down on a bench to think. Why were they so angry? Was it because you caused them to lose their biotech job? Did they know that was you, and had that just happened? Or was this a long-simmering anger? Maybe they had also been just as angry with you on your previous visit, but you didn’t have the opportunity to speak with them so you didn’t find out then?

Certainly they were happy to see you in middle school, but that was several years ago for them. So maybe they'd been angry at you for years?

And then additionally -- was this a divergent or a convergent timeline? Did this blowup happen because you changed the past when you got them let go from their biotech job? Or had this always happened?

And finally, what should you do now? Not visit? Well, that wasn't really possible. But you could travel to the past and then choose to just walk the other direction and not engage with them so they wouldn't know you were there. But would future-them actually want that or was this just stress and nerves from today? And what about visits to come where they're actually younger and you haven't had this conversation yet?

It was too much. And the person you really wanted to talk about it with was Alex, and you knew you couldn't.

The next couple of weeks after returning were rough. You couldn't really ask Alex if they remembered that conversation, since that was *verboten*. You did occasionally say things like, *"You don't think I'm bad for you, do you"*, and got exasperated sighs in return. Alex was *not interested* in helping you emotionally process your past travel. And so you just, *didn't*. You had the same thoughts again and again, trying to decide if the next time you traveled you *should* or *shouldn't* just avoid engaging entirely with Alex.

It turned out the decision really was taken entirely out of your hands.

You found yourself standing outside in a park at night, with a nice warm breeze. You looked over to a bench and saw Alex kissing someone!

"What are you doing?" you heard yourself ask, which was of course exactly what you were thinking.

Alex looked up in surprise. They blinked at you, "Um. What does it look like I'm doing?"

Their partner turned and looked at you in surprise now too. You've never been great at telling what age Alex was, but they looked like a young teenager to you, and their partner was definitely older. Was this guy taking advantage of them? Your first thought was to tell Alex they shouldn't be making out with *anyone*, and definitely not someone older than them, they should be studying and giving cool science olympiad speeches. You managed to not say all of that though.

"Are you OK?" you couldn't see Alex's face very well in the dark.

Now the partner turned to them, *"Who's this?"*

You reflexively held out your hand for him to shake it, “I’m Casey, a friend.” before you realized that oh yeah, that was a bad plan. You managed to snatch your hand away before he actually tried to touch you and realize you were incorporeal though. Now your thoughts were spiraling around what a close call that was.

The partner looked confused and then angry. *“Yeah, well, so am I.”* He snaked his arm around Alex. Alex snuggled into him and gave you a challenging look.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” your voice sounded to you like you were pleading with Alex a little bit. This didn’t really look like a great idea. *“Maybe you should wait till you're older. Or with someone who has more long term potential. Or at least in someplace more private?”*

Now they both looked angry with you and everyone started talking at the same time. Alex said something about not being able to count on you being around, and the partner repeated the words ‘long term potential’ incredulously and you couldn’t help but continue to explain that obviously there was a time and place for everything but maybe not *this* time or *this* place. And then you had the feeling that you were about to dissolve so you quickly walked off.

You woke up on your living room couch feeling awful. Well that interaction went about as badly as it could.

You spent about a day or two avoiding Alex. It just felt….awkward to be around them. You had too many conflicting thoughts. You wanted to ask questions about their memory, to know who this other partner was, and how they ended up together, and then what happened. You were curious about this partner -- did they *date?* Just that one date, or for a while? Was he like you or not like you at all? And then another part of you didn’t want to know any of those details.

Most of all, you wanted to know if that had really happened in the regular timeline or not. If it had happened, why hadn’t they told you? You tried to construct a model of Alex in your head both ways. In one they were the Alex who had dated this other partner and never told you -- maybe because this other person was so important to them and they didn’t want to threaten you, or maybe they didn’t want you to feel badly that they had other experiences and you hadn’t. Neither of those thoughts felt great to you.

On the other hand, if you had changed the timeline, then you’d introduced this new partner to their life. Which, obviously, they still ended up with you instead. But did that mean that it was possible for you to introduce a change to their life where they *didn’t* pick you, and instead kept dating random-older-person? If so, was it possible for you to actually erase the time travel timeline that you lived in? Would you come back some day and Alex would be your lab partner that you never married, or even worse, would you come back and they just wouldn’t be here at all? It seemed terribly impossible to think about.

For the first time, you didn’t want to travel when you felt the feeling come on.

You appeared in a small cabin, a one room building with a sink and a fridge and a loft to sleep on but not much else. You'd never seen this place before. Alex was curled up in a ball on the couch. They couldn't've been more than nine years old and they looked completely miserable.

"Hey, what's wrong?" you wanted to give them a big hug and make them feel better, so instead you just hovered near them. They lifted their head to look at you, and had obviously been crying. But when they saw you, they seemed to relax a tiny bit.

"Mom didn't come back." At that simple statement, their eyes filled with tears again.

You nodded and slowly coaxed the story out of them. Apparently their mother had left the day before to drive into the city, leaving Alex alone in this cabin. Alex hadn't seen or heard from her since. You knew Alex's mom, and this particular episode from the past had never come up. But you wouldn't exactly call it out of character. Alex's mom had substance abuse problems and even though she was clean in your present, she still was incredibly unreliable.

Alex had been afraid and hadn't been able to sleep. They told you various details about strange sounds, which you mimicked back to them to lighten the mood a little bit. By the end the two of you were sitting on the couch next to each other and they had calmed down and stopped crying. You kept overlapping accidentally, your shoulder going through their shoulder, or your arm going through their knee. They found that funny as well and finally asked you about it.

"Think of me like a hologram, like on Quantum Leap, wait, um, or Star Trek?" They hadn't seen either of them and you briefly wished you were in their house, so you could show them some Star Trek right then, you were sure that would help them feel better. *"Ok! Let's just say it's magic."* you finally settled on. *"So you are gonna have to be my hands and feet!"* you said brightly.

They seemed a little more at ease, but they were still obviously very worried. *"What if mom never comes back?"*

"She will." you assured them.

"Do you promise?" they asked, their eyes big.

You thought about it for a second. Well, Alex's mom is alive and well out in California, so clearly they both survived this incident. Although the timeline isn't inevitable, so maybe it was more like a 90% probability. Still, it felt like the most important thing was comforting Alex in the moment. *"I promise."* you replied.

"Will you stay until she gets back?" they asked.

"I'll stay as long as I can."

And then you started contingency planning for what would happen if/when you disappeared and they were left alone. You didn't say that part out loud, but you wanted to take stock of exactly what this place was like and what resources were available. You had them take you on a little tour of the property. There wasn't much to it, a pond, some woods, a toilet (that flushed with a bucket of pond water). There was a refrigerator that seemed to run on propane, and a gas stove as well. There wasn't a phone, and there wasn't another car, not that it would have necessarily been a great idea anyway to try to describe driving to a nine year old. They were really stuck here, for a bit at least.

You took stock of the food situation, and that at least was good. There seemed to be plenty of boxed and canned food. You talked them through putting a pot of water on the stove, waiting for it to boil, dumping some noodles in, and setting a timer for when it was done. The next meal you made the slightly more complicated tuna noodle casserole, baked in the oven. The next day you decided to try out cookie making, with a recipe they found in Joy of Cooking. You spent that day with them eating cookies and teaching them gin rummy. You couldn't hold your cards of course, but they carefully set up a pillow so that you could see your hand and they couldn't, and you would point at which card you wanted to play.

Alex was washing the dishes from lunch on the fourth day -- the longest visit you'd ever had, the only one longer than a few hours -- when you realized you were about to disappear. You bent down so you could look Alex in the eyes and reached out to take them by the shoulders, except of course your hands passed through them like always.

"I have to go now," you said, seriously. *"You're going to be okay, and your mom will be okay, and you'll both make it home."*

They started to cry anyway. *"I don't want you to go."*

Oh no, now you felt like you were going to tear up too. You needed to be the adult for them though. *"I don't want to go, either. I wish I could stay, but I can't. But even when I'm not with you, I'll always be your friend and I'll always be thinking about you. Nothing's ever going to change that, I promise. You just have to hang in there. Can you do that for me?"*

They nodded. Their very serious expression was the last thing you saw as you dissipated.

March 10, 2004

And then suddenly you were back in your body, lying on your own bed. It took a few moments to register that you really were back in 'normal time' again. But when you did, the first thing you saw was Alex's beautiful face. You were so grateful that they were OK now, that someone had come back and found them at that cabin. You felt such an upwelling of love for them! They'd

been so brave as a kid. You hadn't had to deal with anything like that. You reached out to give them the comforting embrace you'd wanted to give them all weekend.

And instead, they took a step back, avoiding your touch. *"I can't do this."*

You dropped your arms lamely at your side and frowned, confused. Maybe there was something in the past they wanted to not change? But that wasn't going to be easy to figure out. And you still just really wanted to hug them. *"There's no way to stop the time travel process until the Machine's cycle completes."*

"I mean, I can't live with you anymore."

You stared at them, dumbstruck. For once, instead of your mind racing through a million possibilities, all of the different permutations and potentials, you saw none. You barely heard the rest of their words. You could see by their posture and their tone that they meant it. It was over. The end. They were leaving. There may be the past but there was no more future.

You wanted to argue with them, that this was a bad decision. Or to convince them that everything was going to be fine. To make them laugh and say this was a bad joke. Where was that self that had just helped younger Alex? But you couldn't do anything but stare in horror at the finality in Alex's words. They had made their decision.

They left you the house, and the furniture, and all the collected belongings of a life together. Honestly, you're not sure they took more than a suitcase or two. But they left you nothing. Without them there, all the rest didn't matter.

March 2004 - August 2004

You spent … hours? Days? Listlessly and aimlessly puttering about the house. You couldn't muster the energy to read or to cook or to watch TV. You certainly didn't have the desire to write in the journal. You did see Alex again, when they arranged for you to see a doctor to get an emergency alert bracelet for when you inevitably would collapse on a time travel episode. The doctor ran some tests, which of course turned up nothing, and eventually diagnosed you with "unidentified seizure disorder". You halfway wanted to explain right then and there about time travel. But mostly you were just distracted by how great it was to see Alex, and how terrible at the same time. The formality in their words, keeping everything to 'business'. The distance between you felt like a solid thing. When they dropped you off at home after the appointment, you went inside and cried.

When you started to feel the *tug* of time travel, you were relieved. Something different, anything. You managed to quickly sit down on the floor and then you found yourself….in a dimly lit large beginning-to-get-crowded smokey club. You glanced around the place, but it didn't look familiar.

You walked over closer to the stage, careful to not overlap people as you went. Then you spied the marquee listing who was playing tonight -- it was Black Cat Groove!

Oh wow, you'd never seen them before. The timing was never right, they hadn't toured near you and you'd always vaguely regretted that. You found yourself surprised at how excited you were to see the show.

You started looking around for Alex. Maybe they were here with their mom? That would be awkward. After scanning the room you spotted them, over by the bar. Your heart leapt -- this was the oldest you'd seen them on a visit, they were actually an adult, although probably in college still. You immediately started making your way across the room to them. Halfway towards them, they looked up at you, smiled, and gave you a big wave.

"Hey Casey! I should have known you got tickets too." they said with a continued large grin. You almost said, "no ticket needed when time traveling" but instead you were still reeling about how amazing it was to see Alex actually happy to see you, so you just kind of nodded.

Alex glanced around the room and waved you over to some seats on a bench. *"So have you ever seen them before?"*

You shook your head. *"No, but I can't wait to hear how they do Fishing for Fishies live!"* The two of you started chatting, first about the band, and then about school. Several things became quickly clear to you. The first was that Alex had come to this concert alone but was grateful to have a companion now. The second was that this was their freshman year of college. And the third was that Alex did not realize you were on a time travel visit. They thought you were their freshman dorm-mate.

You….didn't really consider disabusing them of this notion. It was so, so nice to just get to sit near them (carefully not overlapping of course) and hear them talk about college. You remembered enough details that the conversation didn't veer off into weirdness. And once the music started, you couldn't really talk anyway. You probably spent as much time watching them as you did the band though. And, miracle of miracles, you didn't even start to fade until well after the concert ended. You talked outside the club until you felt the *pull* of return, and then you bid them a hasty goodnight.

When you woke up on your kitchen floor, you found yourself crying uncontrollably again.

The next day, you decided you needed to pull yourself together. The future wasn't fixed, and the past wasn't either. *If I can keep going back to the past, what can I change to make it so that Alex is here when I return?* That became your driving motivation. You began poring over your time travel journal. You even looked around the house to see if Alex had left their journal behind or had taken notes on anything, but no such luck. Surely there must be some clue though, some interaction that would lead things to be different now.

The next time you went back, you decided to break one of the rules of time travel. You were with a young teenage Alex again, in their messy room full of sci fi books and science magazines. *"We're going to go to a concert together you know"* you said. They demanded to know what the band was, and you told them all about Black Cat Groove, how the band had started in California but they were going to do an East Coast tour, and the two of you were going to go together to the club and watch the concert and it was going to be tons of fun. There! You had told Alex *something* about the future.

It didn't turn out to be the *right* detail, since when you found yourself back in your own time you were still alone. But still, you were sure there was something you could do. You just had to figure it out.

There started to be a rhythm to life. You would spend the days madly reading and writing, trying to get to the bottom of the puzzle of how to put your relationship back together. Then periodically you would be whisked to the past. Alex would be some variety of preeteen or child, mostly in the younger elementary kid range. You would entertain them for a while, and then you'd be back in the empty house. It was *nice* to get the chance to escape, and be with Alex for a while. You genuinely enjoyed their laughter and their questions. Their cheer and enthusiasm at seeing you always lifted your own mood. But being with the kiddo version of Alex was just nowhere near as fulfilling as having the adult conversations that you used to have with your spouse. For the first time, you started to resent the time travel episodes a little bit. You needed to get your *real* life back on track, and to do that you needed to stay in the present.

There was one visit that really stood out. You had appeared in Alex's bedroom in the young-teenage years again, and they immediately burst into tears. When they composed themselves again, they wanted to explain to you exactly what was going on. You listened attentively. They talked about a friend they had made, a new girl at the school and how they had clicked immediately. They talked about how amazing it was that there was someone always excited to see them, that would come and sit with them every lunch break, that shared the same interest in books. Alex explained how at first they were certain that the friendship was one sided, but then it was clear that she was just as invested in the friendship with Alex as Alex was with her. That this was the first time in Alex's life that they had someone that was a 'best friend'.

You listened in wonder. Alex had never mentioned this girl before. Was this a new addition to the timeline? Some….alternate soul mate? Or had some circumstance driven the two of them apart? The way Alex talked about the girl it was clear that their feelings ran very deeply.

Alex went on to tell the recent conundrum that was causing them such indecision. They had gone and seen a movie with this friend, and the friend had reached out and taken their hand. Alex knew this was a signal of attraction but was completely unsure what to do next and had, after the movie, just left in awkward silence. Well, that certainly sounded familiar to you, you could *absolutely* imagine doing the same thing.

You nodded as Alex finished the story. *"Thanks for telling me."*

“But what should I do?” Alex asked, their eyes boring into you.

Oh no, you thought. I can’t possibly give *romantic* advice. For about ten different reasons. *“Oh, you don’t want my advice, I don’t know anything about relationship stuff. You’re the one who’s good at that. . .um, when you’re a grown-up, I mean.”*

“But I don’t know about it now,” they pointed out. *“Anyway, you already know how it all turns out, so you know what I need to do, you can just tell me.”*

You blinked at them. You sure did know how it turned out and that was *definitely* not what you were going to talk about right now. There was no possible way that it could be helpful to tell teenage Alex that you were their spouse and also that they would choose to leave you in ten years because of time travel. You fell back on your previously well-worn line when you needed to get Alex to stop asking you questions: *“You know I can’t reveal the future to you like that, it’s bad time-travel hygiene.”*

They looked crestfallen. They clearly really had needed a sounding board, and now they wanted your advice, as an adult. You watched their face go through a dozen different micro-emotions, anger, disappointment, worry, fear. They ended with a sad resignation.

That was just too much for you. *“Look, here’s what I can tell you, okay?”* you started.

And you found yourself explaining about Aristophanes and dual-souls. How he’d written about people being split in half, and you were certain on some level that was true, not literally of course. But that there were people that were just *right* together, that had complementary traits. And that often you could notice this when you first met, by the ease of conversation and shared interests and a thousand little things that added up to being good companions. And that when you found someone like that? You should embrace it and keep them with you, because it was rare and precious and beautiful. And whatever it is you needed to do to repair the relationship if you had caused some issue with it -- like walking away in silence after seeing a movie -- you should just go and do that thing because it really, really mattered.

Alex soaked up your explanation. It clearly resonated with them. You realized also you should explain some other things.

“Also -- you can have lots of different types of attraction. There’s sexual attraction, and there’s romantic attraction, and there’s also platonic love. They can all be rolled together into your feelings for one person, or not. You can be just sexually attracted to someone, or romantically attracted, or neither. But whichever way it is, you could still be soul mates.”

It….felt weird to tell Alex that someone else in the world could be their soul mate, when you knew that you were. But, it also felt like the right piece of advice at that moment. You felt like you needed to give your genuine, honest advice, even if it meant they would end up loving

someone else. They asked various questions about different types of attraction, clearly trying to nail down their own feelings, and you answered as best you could. When it was finally time for you to fade, you could see that Alex was much more at ease.

"Wish I could hug you", they said, as you were dissipating.

"Me too." you said, and of course they couldn't know how very much you meant it.

Back at home, in current time, you wrote about the episode, but you also spent a lot of time thinking about it. Alex *was* the most important person in your life, that was a given. But….did they know that? You weren't sure.

"I would give up time travel for you," you found yourself writing in the journal. It was true.

August 20, 2004 (and……April 17, 2021)

This time travel onset was very sudden. You find yourself in an unfamiliar living room, but decorated in a familiar style. In the corner there is a surprisingly sleek and skinny laptop. Sitting at the table reading on a flat handheld screen, is Alex.

There is a tiny wisp of grey in their hair.

Oh my goodness, you realize all of a sudden. This is the *future*. This is our twentieth wedding anniversary!

You've no idea what their current disposition towards you is, whether the two of you ever get back together or whether you've both spent the last many years alone. You've no idea if you eventually told them various things you've kept secret over the years -- or if you never had the opportunity to. But here you are, face to face with your adult spouse for the first time in months.

You have so many things you want to talk to them about:

- You *really* want to know what happens in the future between the two of you -- what the next fifteen years hold for you both.
- The experiment is finally over, at least from Alex's perspective! Admittedly, since you visit dates in a random order, there's no particular reason to think that this is your last jump. But there's no longer any danger of changing Alex's future. So that probably means you can talk through all of the events that happened so far.
    - You've always wondered why they were so upset at the science olympiad.
    - You're excited to tell Alex that you are pretty sure you changed the past with their summer job.

    - You're surprised they had two early relationships that they'd never told you about. You're curious what happened next with Laura, and with….well, you never did learn the name of that guy you walked in on Alex with. Did Alex date either or both of them? For how long? And then….how did that inform their relationship with you?
    - You have so much empathy towards them around their mom abandoning them -- what a secret to hold on to for so long. You're grateful to now understand that piece of their story.
- You didn't exactly get the chance to tell Alex that it was the *time traveling* version of you that went to that Black Cat Groove concert with them. You'd feel a little guilty keeping it secret and not telling them now *(or maybe they already know because you'll tell them in the future?)*
- On the other hand you feel *very* guilty about choosing to be the one that gets to time travel and leaving them as the anchor. You're really not sure how to have that conversation.
- Most of all though: you still feel like Alex truly is your soul mate and you want your future *(their past! What fun role reversal)* to be with them. You want to repair the relationship and maybe this conversation can help give you some of the keys to make that happen.

You want to say everything to them all at once. This is the visit you've been waiting for.

Casey's Time-Travel Notes

Some players have found it useful to organize the information about Casey's time travel jumps for quick reference. The table below is one possible tool that you can use if it is helpful to you.

Visit sequence	Date (if known)	Alex's age	Location	Content Notes
